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six lessons of suicide bombers

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over the past quarter century, researchers have learned much about the motivations of suicide bombers, the rationales of the organizations that support them, their modus operandi, the precipitants of suicide attacks, and the effects of counterterrorism on insurgent behavior. much of what they have learned is at odds with conventional wisdom and the thinking of policy-makers who guide counterterrorist strategy. understanding the world from the assailant's point of view supports developing a workable strategy for minimizing suicide attacks.

In October 1983, Shi'a militants attacked the military barracks of American and French troops in Beirut, killing nearly 300 people. Today the number of suicide attacks worldwide has passed 1,000, with almost all the attacks concentrated in just nine countries: Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Israel, Turkey, India (Kashmir), Russia (Chechnya), Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Israel, for example, experienced a wave of suicide attacks in the mid-1990s when Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) sought to undermine peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. A far deadlier wave of attacks began in Israel in October 2000 after all hope of a negotiated settlement collapsed. Altogether, between 1993 and 2005, 158 suicide attacks took place in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, killing more than 800 people and injuring more than 4,600.

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paper draws on that research, but I focus mainly on the Israeli/Palestinian case to draw six lessons from the carnage wrought by suicide bombers. In brief, I argue that (1) suicide bombers are not crazy, (2) nor are they motivated principally by religious zeal. It is possible to discern (3) a strategic logic and (4) a social logic underlying their actions. Targeted states typically react by repressing organizations that mount suicide attacks, but (5) this repression often makes matters worse. (6) Only by first taking an imaginative leap and understanding the world from the assailant's point of view can we hope to develop a workable strategy for minimizing suicide attacks. Let us examine each of these lessons in turn.

lesson 1: suicide bombers are not crazy

Lance Corporal Eddie DiFranco was the only survivor of the 1983 suicide attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut who saw the face of the bomber. DiFranco was on watch when he noticed the attacker speeding his truck full of explosives toward the main building on the marine base. "He looked right at me [and] smiled," DiFranco later recalled.

Was the bomber insane? Some Western observers thought so. Several psychologists

characterized the Beirut bombers as "unstable individuals with a death wish." Government and media sources made similar assertions in the immediate aftermath of the suicide attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Yet these claims were purely speculative. Subsequent interviews with prospective suicide bombers and reconstructions of the biographies of successful suicide attackers revealed few psychological abnormalities. In fact, after examining many hundreds of cases for evidence of depression, psychosis, past suicide attempts, and so on, Robert Pape discovered only a single person who could be classified as having a psychological problem (a Chechen woman who may have been mentally retarded).

On reflection, it is not difficult to understand why virtually all suicide bombers are psychologically stable. The organizers of suicide attacks do not want to jeopardize their missions by recruiting unreliable people. A research report prepared for the Danish government a few years ago noted, "Recruits who display signs of pathological behaviour are automatically weeded out for reasons of organizational security." It may be that some psychologically unstable people want to become suicide bombers, but insurgent organizations strongly prefer their cannons fixed.

lesson 2: it's mainly about politics, not religion

In May 1972, three Japanese men in business suits boarded a flight from Paris to Tel Aviv. They were members of the Japanese Red Army, an affiliate of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Eager to help their Palestinian comrades liberate Israel from Jewish rule, they had packed their carry-on bags with machine guns and hand grenades. After disembarking at Lod Airport near Tel Aviv, they began an armed assault on everyone in sight. When the dust settled, 26 people lay dead, nearly half of them

Puerto Rican Catholics on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Israeli guards killed one of the attackers. A second blew himself up, thus becoming the first suicide bomber in modern Middle Eastern history. The Israelis captured the third assailant, Kozo Okamoto.

Okamoto languished in an Israeli prison until the mid-1980s, when he was handed over to Palestinian militants in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley in a prisoner exchange. Then, in 2000, something unexpected happened. Okamoto apparently abandoned or at least ignored his secular faith in the theories of Bakunin and Trotsky, and converted to Islam. For Okamoto, politics came first, then religion.

A similar evolution occurs in the lives of many people. Any political conflict makes people look for ways to explain the dispute and imagine a strategy for resolving it; they adopt or formulate an ideology. If the conflict is deep and the ideology proves inadequate, people modify the ideology or reject it for an alternative. Religious themes often tinge political ideologies, and the importance of the religious component may increase if analyses and strategies based on secular reasoning fail. When religious elements predominate, they may intensify the conflict.

For example, the Palestinians have turned to one ideology after another to explain their loss of land to Jewish settlers and military forces and to formulate a plan for regaining territorial control. Especially after 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser took office in Egypt, many Palestinians turned to Pan-Arabism, the belief that the Arab countries would unify and force Israel to cede territory. But wars failed to dislodge the Israelis. Particularly after the Six-Day War in 1967, many Palestinians turned to nationalism, which placed the responsibility for regaining control of lost territory on the Palestinians themselves. Others became Marxists, identifying wage-workers (and, in some cases, peasants) as the engines of

national liberation. The Palestinians used plane hijackings to draw the world's attention to their cause, launched wave upon wave of guerilla attacks against Israel, and in the 1990s entered into negotiations to create a sovereign Palestinian homeland.

Yet Islamic fundamentalism had been growing in popularity among Palestinians since the late 1980s—ironically, without opposition from the Israeli authorities, who saw it as a conservative counterweight to Palestinian nationalism. When negotiations with Israel to establish a Palestinian state broke down in 2000, many Palestinians saw the secularist approach as bankrupt and turned to Islamic fundamentalism for political answers.

In January 2006, the Islamic fundamentalist party, Hamas, was democratically elected to form

the Palestinian government, winning 44 percent of the popular vote and 56 percent of the parliamentary seats. In this case, as in many others, secular politics came first. When secularism failed, notions of “martyrdom” and “holy war” gained in importance.

This does not mean that most modern suicide bombers are deeply religious, either among the Palestinians or other groups. Among the 83 percent of suicide attackers worldwide between 1980 and 2003 for whom Robert Pape found data on ideological background, only a minority—43 percent—were identifiably religious. In Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza between 1981 and 2003, fewer than half of suicide bombers had discernible religious inclinations. In its origins and at its core, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not religiously inspired, and suicide bombing, despite its frequent religious trappings, is fundamentally the expression of a territorial dispute. In this conflict, many members of the dominant group—Jewish Israelis—use religion as a central marker

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of identity. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many Palestinian militants also view the struggle in starkly religious terms.

The same holds for contemporary Iraq. As Mohammed Hafez has recently shown, 443 suicide missions took place in Iraq between March 2003 and February 2006. Seventy-one percent of the identifiable attackers belonged to al-Qaeda in Iraq. To be sure, they justified their actions in religious terms. Members of al-Qaeda in Iraq view the Shi'a who control the Iraqi state as apostates. They want to establish fundamentalist, Sunni-controlled states in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. Suicide attacks against

the Iraqi regime and its American and British supporters are seen as a means to that end.

But it is only within a particular political context

that these ambitions first arose. After all, suicide attacks began with the American and British invasion of Iraq and the installation of a Shi'a-controlled regime. And it is only under certain political conditions that these ambitions are acted upon. Thus, Hafez's analysis shows that suicide bombings spike (1) in retaliation for big counterinsurgency operations and (2) as a strategic response to institutional developments which suggest that Shi'a-controlled Iraq is about to become more stable. So although communal identity has come to be religiously demarcated in Iraq, this does not mean that religion per se initiated suicide bombing or that it drives the outbreak of suicide bombing campaigns.

lesson 3: sometimes it's strategic

Suicide bombing often has a political logic. In many cases, it is used as a tactic of last resort undertaken by the weak to help them restore control over territory they perceive as theirs. This political logic is clear in statements routinely

released by leaders of organizations that launch suicide attacks. Characteristically, the first communiqué issued by Hamas in 1987 stated that martyrdom is the appropriate response to occupation, and the 1988 Hamas charter says that jihad is the duty of every Muslim whose territory is invaded by an enemy.

The political logic of suicide bombing is also evident when suicide bombings occur in clusters as part of an organized campaign, often timed to maximize strategic gains. A classic example is the campaign launched by Hamas and the PIJ in the mid-1990s. Fearing that a settlement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would prevent the Palestinians from gaining control over all of Israel, Hamas and the PIJ aimed to scuttle peace negotiations by unleashing a small army of suicide bombers.

Notwithstanding the strategic basis of many suicide attacks, we cannot conclude that strategic reasoning governs them all. More often than not, suicide bombing campaigns fail to achieve their territorial aims. Campaigns may occur without apparent strategic justification, as did the campaign that erupted in Israel after negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority broke down in 2000. A social logic often overlays the political logic of suicide bombing.

lesson 4: sometimes it's retaliatory

#revenge

On October 4, 2003, a 29-year-old lawyer entered Maxim restaurant in Haifa and detonated her belt of plastic explosives. In addition to taking her own life, Hanadi Jaradat killed 20 people and wounded dozens of others. When her relatives were later interviewed in the Arab press, they explained her motives as follows: "She carried out the attack in revenge for the killing of her brother and her cousin [to whom she had been engaged] by the Israeli security forces and in revenge for all the crimes Israel is perpetrating in the West Bank by killing

Palestinians and expropriating their land." Strategic calculation did not inform Jaradat's attack. Research I conducted with Bader Araj shows that, like a majority of Palestinian suicide bombers between 2000 and 2005, Jaradat was motivated by the desire for revenge and retaliation.

Before people act, they sometimes weigh the costs and benefits of different courses of action and choose the one that appears to cost the least and offer the most benefits. But people are not calculating machines. Sometimes they just don't add up. Among other emotions, feelings of anger and humiliation can trump rational strategic calculation in human affairs. Economists have conducted experiments called "the ultimatum game," in which the experimenter places two people in a room, gives one of them \$20, and tells the recipient that she must give some of the money—as much or as little as she wants—to the other person. If the other person refuses the offer, neither gets to keep any money. Significantly, in four out of five cases, the other person refuses to accept the money if she is offered less than \$5. Although she will gain materially if she accepts any offer, she is highly likely to turn down a low offer so as to punish her partner for stinginess. This outcome suggests that emotions can easily override the rational desire for material gain. (Researchers at the University of Zürich have recently demonstrated the physiological basis of this override function by using MRI brain scans on people playing the ultimatum game.) At the political level, research I conducted with Bader Araj on the events precipitating suicide bombings, the motivations of suicide bombers, and the rationales of the organizations that support suicide bombings shows that Palestinian suicide missions are in most cases prompted less by strategic cost-benefit calculations than by such human emotions as revenge and retaliation. The existence of these deeply human emotions also helps to explain why attempts to suppress

insurgency, repression, and perceptions by party		
	HAMAS/PIJ	FATAH/other
Number of successful suicide attackers, 2000–2005	85	48
Number of attempted state assassinations, 2000–2005	124	82
Percentage of leaders never willing to recognize Israel	100%	10%
How has Israel's assassination policy affected the ability of your organization to conduct suicide bombing operations?	Increased 33%	Increased 9%
	Not affected 42%	Not affected 5%
	Decreased 25%	Decreased 86%
In comparison with other tactics used by your organization, how costly has suicide bombing been in terms of the human and material resources used, damage to your organization, etc.?	As or less costly 53%	As or less costly 11%
	More costly 20%	More costly 86%
	Don't know 27%	Don't know 4%
<i>The first two rows of data in this table were calculated from a systematic analysis of newspapers the New York Times, ha-Areiz, al-Quds and al-Arabij by Robert Brym and Bader Araj. The remainder of the data are based on a survey of 45 Palestinian insurgent leaders conducted by Bader Araj in the West Bank and Gaza during the spring and summer of 2006.</i>		

suicide bombing campaigns sometimes do not have the predicted results.

lesson 5: repression is a boomerang

Major General Doron Almog commanded the Israel Defense Forces Southern Command from 2000 to 2003. He tells the story of how, in early 2003, a wealthy Palestinian merchant in Gaza received a phone call from an Israeli agent. The caller said that the merchant's son was preparing a suicide mission, and that if he went through with it, the family home would be demolished, Israel would sever all commercial ties with the family, and its members would never be allowed to visit Israel again. The merchant prevailed upon his son to reconsider, and the attack was averted.

Exactly how many suicide bombers have been similarly deterred is unknown. We do know that of the nearly 600 suicide missions launched in Israel and its occupied territories between 2000 and 2005, fewer than 25 percent succeeded in reaching their targets. Israeli counterterrorist efforts thwarted three-quarters of them using violent means. In addition, Israel preempted an incalculable number of attacks by assassinating militants involved in planning them. More than 200 Israeli assassination attempts took place between 2000 and 2005, 80 percent of which succeeded in killing their main target, sometimes with considerable "collateral damage."

Common sense suggests that repression should dampen insurgency by increasing its cost. By this logic, when state organizations eliminate the people who plan suicide bombings, destroy their

bomb-making facilities, intercept their agents, and punish the people who support them, they erode the insurgents' capabilities for mounting suicide attacks. But this commonsense approach to counterinsurgency overlooks two complicating factors. First, harsh repression may reinforce radical opposition and even intensify it. Second, insurgents may turn to alternative and perhaps more lethal methods to achieve their aims.

Consider the Palestinian case (see "insurgency, repression, and perceptions by party"). Bader Araj and I were able to identify the organizational affiliation of 133 Palestinian suicide bombers between September 2000 and July 2005. Eighty-five of them (64 percent) were affiliated with the Islamic fundamentalist groups Hamas and the PIJ, while the rest were affiliated with secular Palestinian groups such as Fatah. Not surprisingly, given this distribution, Israeli repression was harshest against the Islamic fundamentalists, who were the targets of 124 Israeli assassination attempts (more than 60 percent of the total).

Yet after nearly five years of harsh Israeli repression—involving not just the assassination of leaders but also numerous arrests, raids on bomb-making facilities, the demolition of houses belonging to family members of suicide bombers, and so on—Hamas and PIJ leaders remained adamant in their resolve and much more radical than Palestinian secularist leaders. When 45 insurgent leaders representing all major Palestinian factions were interviewed in depth in the summer of 2006, 100 percent of those associated with Hamas and PIJ (compared to just 10 percent of secularist leaders) said they would never be willing to recognize the legitimacy of the state of Israel. That is, the notion of Israel as a Jewish state was still entirely unacceptable to each and every one of them. When asked how Israel's

assassination policy had affected the ability of their organization to conduct suicide bombing operations, 42 percent of Hamas and PIJ respondents said that the policy had had no effect, while one-third said the policy had increased their organization's capabilities (the corresponding figures for secularist leaders were 5 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

And when asked how costly suicide bombing had been in terms of human and organizational resources, organizational damage, and so on, 53 percent of Hamas and PIJ leaders (compared to just 11 percent of secularist leaders) said that suicide bombing was less costly or at least

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no more costly than the alternatives. Responses to such questions probably tell us more about the persistent resolve of the Islamic fundamentalists than their actual

capabilities. And that is just the point. Harsh Israeli repression over an extended period apparently reinforced the anti-Israel sentiments of Islamic fundamentalists.

Some counterterrorist experts say that motivations count for little if capabilities are destroyed. And they would be right if it were not for the substitutability of methods: increase the cost of one method of attack, and highly motivated insurgents typically substitute another. So, for example, Israel's late prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, ordered troops to "break the bones" of Palestinians who engaged in mass demonstrations, rock throwing, and other nonlethal forms of protest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Palestinians responded with more-violent attacks, including suicide missions. Similarly, after Israel began to crack down ruthlessly on suicide bombing operations in 2002, rocket attacks against Israeli civilians sharply increased in frequency. In general, severe repression can work for a while, but a sufficiently determined mass opposition can

always design new tactics to surmount new obstacles, especially if its existence as a group is visibly threatened (and unless, of course, the mass opposition is exterminated in its entirety). One kind of "success" usually breeds another kind of "failure" if the motivation of insurgents is high.

lesson 6: empathize with your enemy

In October 2003, Israeli Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon explicitly recognized this conundrum when he stated that Israel's tactics against the Palestinians had become too repressive and were stirring up potentially uncontrollable levels of hatred and terrorism. "In our tactical decisions, we are operating contrary to our strategic interests," he told reporters. Ya'alon went on to claim that the Israeli government was unwilling to make concessions that could bolster the authority of moderate Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, and he expressed the fear that by continuing its policy of harsh repression, Israel would bring about the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, the silencing of Palestinian moderates, and the popularization of more radical voices like that of Hamas. The head of the General Security Service (Shabak), the defense minister, and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon opposed Ya'alon. Consequently, his term as chief of staff was not renewed, and his military career ended in 2005. A year later, all of Ya'alon's predictions proved accurate.

Ya'alon was no dove. From the time he became chief of staff in July 2002, he had been in charge of ruthlessly putting down the Palestinian uprising. He had authorized assassinations, house demolitions, and all the rest. But 15 months into the job, Ya'alon had learned much from his experience, and it seems that what he learned above all else was to empathize with the enemy—not to have warm and fuzzy feelings about the Palestinians, but to see things

from their point of view in order to improve his ability to further Israel's chief strategic interest, namely, to live in peace with its neighbors.

As odd as it may sound at first, and as difficult as it may be to apply in practice, exercising empathy with one's enemy is the key to an effective counterterrorist strategy. Seeing the enemy's point of view increases one's understanding of the minimum conditions that would allow the enemy to put down arms. An empathic understanding of the enemy discourages counterproductive actions such as excessive repression, and it encourages tactical moves that further one's strategic aims. As Ya'alon suggested, in the Israeli case such tactical moves might include (1) offering meaningful rewards—for instance, releasing hundreds of millions of Palestinian tax dollars held in escrow by Israel, freeing selected Palestinians from Israeli prisons, and shutting down remote and costly Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank—in exchange for the renunciation of suicide bombing, and (2) attributing the deal to the intercession of moderate Palestinian forces so as to buttress their popularity and authority. (From this point of view, Israel framed its unilateral 2005 withdrawal from Gaza poorly because most Palestinians saw it as a concession foisted on Israel by Hamas.) Once higher levels of trust and stability are established by such counterterrorist tactics, they can serve as the foundation for negotiations leading to a permanent settlement. Radical elements would inevitably try to jeopardize negotiations, as they have in the past, but Israel resisted the temptation to shut down peace talks during the suicide bombing campaign of the mid-1990s, and it could do so again. Empathizing with the enemy would also help prevent the breakdown of negotiations, as happened in 2000; a clear sense of the minimally acceptable conditions for peace can come only from an empathic understanding of the enemy.

conclusion

Political conflict over territory is the main reason for suicide bombing, although religious justifications for suicide missions are likely to become more important when secular ideologies fail to bring about desired results. Suicide bombing may also occur for strategic or retaliatory reasons—to further insurgent aims or in response to repressive state actions.

Cases vary in the degree to which suicide bombers are motivated by (1) political or religious and (2) strategic or retaliatory aims. For example, research to date suggests that suicide bombing is more retaliatory in Israel than in Iraq, and more religiously motivated in Iraq than in Israel. But in any case, repression (short of a policy approaching genocide) cannot solve the territorial disputes that lie at the root of suicide bombing campaigns. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, wrote a few years ago in the *New York Times*, "To win the war on terrorism, one must . . . begin a political effort that focuses on the conditions that brought about [the terrorists'] emergence." These are wise words that Israel—and the United States in its own "war on terror"—would do well to heed.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Hany Abu-Hassad. *Paradise Now*.

This movie sketches the circumstances that shape the lives of two Palestinian suicide bombers, showing that they are a lot like us and that if we found ourselves in similar circumstances, we might turn out to be a lot like them. (Nominated for the 2005 Oscar for best foreign-language film.)

Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj. 2006. "Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada." *Social Forces* 84: 1965–82.

Explains suicide bombing as the outcome of structured interactions among conflicting and cooperating parties and organizations.

Mohammed M. Hafez. 2006. "Suicide Terrorism in Iraq: A Preliminary Assessment of the Quantitative Data and Documentary Evidence." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29: 591–619.

The first systematic analysis of suicide bombing in Iraq demonstrates the strategic and retaliatory aims of the assailants.

Errol Morris. *The Fog of War*.

Robert McNamara's extraordinarily frank assessment of his career as secretary of defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. This film is a profound introduction to strategic thinking and a valuable lesson on how to learn from one's mistakes. His first lesson: empathize with your enemy. (Winner of the 2003 Oscar for best documentary.)

Robert A. Pape. 2005. *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House.

In support of the view that suicide bombing takes place mainly for rational, strategic reasons, Pape analyzes all suicide attacks worldwide from 1980 to 2003.

Christopher Reuter. 2004. *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*. Translated by H. Ragg-Kirkby. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

A succinct overview of the past 25 years of suicide attacks.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do the facts and findings reported in this article conflict with our usual cultural understanding of terrorists and suicide bombers?

2. Why don't terrorist organizations recruit "crazy" people for suicide attacks, according to this article?
3. Many countries refuse to negotiate with terrorists, stating that negotiation validates terrorism as a form of international relations. Based on this article, do you think policies like this reduce the "boomerang effect" or make matters worse? Explain your answer.
4. Activity: Pretend you are the head of an anti-terrorism advisory board for the United Nations. Using Brym's six lessons, devise a strategic action plan for combating and reducing instances of suicide bombing.