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Suicide Terrorism: Motivations beyond Religion and the Role of Collectivism

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Introduction

Suicide terrorism is a serious and complex form of warfare that has been increasing in use among what Western media portray as non-state or state-sponsored terrorist organizations. We have witnessed a large upsurge in the number, scope, and frequency of bombing attacks worldwide over the past few decades (Moghadam, 2008). The number of suicide attempts and the number of suicide agents (especially women, even in patriarchal societies) escalated dramatically in Africa after the Arab Spring. Nigeria, along with Somalia and Mali are the most dangerous areas in North Africa today. On February 11, 2016, in northeastern Nigeria, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up in a refugee camp, killing at least 58 people and wounding 78 (Associated Press, 2016).

Suicide bombing attacks are particularly dangerous not only because of their potential to inflict mass casualties, but also since they are so difficult to prevent and to predict. Former Indian counter-terrorist chief Bahukutumbi Raman (2003, 2004) has argued that suicide bombers are able to infiltrate both soft and secure targets at will with good success. Audrey Cornin, a Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University, (2003) offers several reasons for suicide attacks; they spawn high casualties, as well as create publicity (notoriety) for the attackers and their cause. “The nature of attack strikes fear into an enemy,” Cornin argues, “and the attacks are effective against superior forces and weapons.” By their ability to pick and choose their target when it will cause the most damage, suicide

bombers give terrorist groups maximal control over their attacks. At the same time, the attacks “stimulate religious and ideological fervor,” intensifying its threat to society (Ganor, 2001). Even the least effective attack can impact and erode public morale. Suicide bombings can result in not only physical damage to individuals, but also “severe psychological damage.” They can spread terror among a broad civilian population (Goodwin, 2006).

What makes someone become a suicide terrorist? By “suicide” it is meant the perpetrator causes their own death in the process of killing or maiming others, and “terrorism” can be defined as an extreme form of violence and force designed to intimidate and to destroy human lives around the world. In the United States, explanations have centered on the three broad themes: 1) poverty; 2) lack of education; and 3) mental illness. The Bush Administration believed that “high levels of unemployment” empower terrorist organizations to recruit and argued that anti-poverty programs in terrorism-prone regions would reduce the incidence of suicide terrorism (Pastor, 2004). However, numerous studies have shown that suicide terrorists are not mentally imbalanced, and they are probably no less educated and poorer than the general population. In his study of Palestinian terrorists, Israeli psychologist Ariel Merari (2004, 2010) found no difference in the “distribution of socioeconomic or educational factors” among the Palestinian people. In their working paper on “Hard Targets” (2005), economist Eli Bermin and political scientist David Laitin have shown how difficult it would be for

terrorists to recruit “an impoverished young man who knows nothing about the ideals of the organization to volunteer for certain death.” Is there a psychological profile that characterizes suicide terrorists? Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Joseph Leyveld has claimed (2001) that suicide bombers have no fundamental psychopathology. Can we understand the mind of a suicide terrorist? What motivates them? This paper examines the phenomenon of suicide bombing and advocates a sociological context for understanding them.

History

Suicide terrorism is not new. Historically, suicide terrorism can be traced to the early Jewish Zealots and their struggle against their Roman conquerors in Biblical times. Also, Shia assassins in the 11th-13th century used suicide terrorism against their Sunni majority factions in early days of Islam. Their bold murders of their rivals often in public places invited instant death to the attackers.

The first suicide bombings of the 20th century involved Japanese *kamikaze* pilots who attacked American planes, ships and military personnel in the Pacific beginning in late 1944. Unlike contemporary suicide bombers, the pilots attacked only military targets. Moreover, pilots were motivated by a desire to die for their country, and they did not exhibit any signs of “clinically abnormal behavior” (Maxwell and Ryan, 1988).

The first large suicide bombing after World War II occurred on 23 October 1983, when a truck laden with explosives rammed into a building serving as a barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 241 American military personnel and wounding another 128 servicemen. Minutes later, another truck bomber struck the French barracks and some 58 paratroopers were killed and 15 were injured. Six Lebanese civilians including children were also killed in the two blasts, not to mention the drivers themselves. A group calling itself “Islamic Jihad,” a front group for Hezbollah (Party of God), backed by Iran and Syria, claimed responsibility for the attacks. These suicide truck bombings showed how shocking and destructive such attacks could be. Months later, the United States and France withdrew their peacekeepers from Beirut, as demanded by the terrorists. Afterwards, Hezbollah launched a series of nearly two dozen suicide attacks directed at the Israeli and Lebanese armies in the 1980s. Palestinian non-state groups, such as Hamas, influenced by Hezbollah’s truck bombings in Lebanon in the early 1980s, used the same tactical methods against Israeli targets. One reason why suicide bombings were adopted is because they were so successful.

In northern Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began using suicide attacks involving concealed explosive belts and vests in late 1980s. Unlike Hezbollah and the Palestinian groups, the LTTE was a secular Marxist group of Hindu nationalists dedicated to creating an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. The Black Tigers and Tigresses, an elite fighting wing of LTTE, is believed

to have been responsible for more suicide attacks than any other terrorist group in history (BBC News, May 2, 2000).

Recently, suicide terrorism has moved from being an insurgency tactic employed in Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Chechnya and Israel to becoming a means to achieve a global *jihad* (holy war). Formed in Pakistan in the late 1980s, Al-Qaeda has employed numerous suicide bombings against civilian and military targets, including the September 11 attacks. Other specific groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have used suicide attacks throughout the world, including the bombing in London in 2005, which killed 52 people and in Bali in 2002, when 202 people were killed. ISIS has carried out atrocious acts of violence in Syria and Iraq over the last several years.

Although existing for centuries, suicide terrorism became a more popular phenomenon after the 1980s. Between 1983 and 2015, nearly five thousand terrorist incidents occurred in nearly 50 countries, resulting in the deaths of more than 45,000 people. Suicide attacks account for a relatively small percentage of these incidents, but they are responsible for more deaths due to terrorism. The rate of all attacks has increased from an estimated three per year in the 1980s to roughly one per day today. Most of those deaths have occurred in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, though thousands of other lives have been lost in Syria, Nigeria, Yemen, Somalia, Russia, and Israel. And as recent events in France, Belgium and

the United States have shown, suicide terrorism will continue to be a major security risk for the imaginable future.

Competing Frameworks

Efficacy and ideology are two prominent frameworks that have been put forth to explain what kinds of groups and personalities adopt suicide terrorism as a tactic and why they do so. The efficacy framework holds that adoption of suicide tactics results from the tactic's utility to accomplish a goal. Proponents of the efficacy argument claim that the resort to this particular tactic is primarily driven by a group's strategic requirements (Hoffman, 2006). Some proponents of this view also contend that suicide attacks are particularly effective against states that are hard to target (Berman & Laitin, 2005). Robert Pape (2005) argues that suicide terrorism is particularly effective against democracies because democratic states are beholden to their constituents and must justify their policies to their audience. Such states are therefore more sensitive to the civilian casualties that suicide bombings tend to inflict.

The ideological framework indeed is a multifaceted one and outlines the roles of belief systems in creating motivation to carry out suicide attacks as well as cultivating support for these attacks among a group's target audience. The religious ideology approach characterizes religion as a medium through which an individual or group legitimizes self-sacrifice with promises of supernatural rewards (Hoffman, 2008).

An additional view of the ideological framework downplays and in many cases denies the influence of religion, pointing to an emergence of nationalistic ideology during an occupation of foreign powers. Pape (2005) argues that resentment of a foreign power creates a high degree of commitment within the community and therefore helps to justify certain tactics that require the sacrifice of a community member.

Many studies and works have been published that challenge the claims of the efficacy and ideology frameworks that attempt to explain this complicated issue. Piazza (2008) and Wade and Reiter (2007) have pointed out that several groups such as the Spanish ETA or Northern Irish IRA faced strong and democratic states but did not resort to suicide tactics (as cited in Braun and Genkin, 2014). Domenico Tosini, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Trento in Italy, argues that the causal link between suicide and religion has been disproved, given that several secular terrorist groups such as the Tamil Tigers have used suicide bombing (2009). Tosini admits that “religious rhetoric” may be a tool for recruitment, and Islamic tradition may be used to justify suicide as martyrdom, but it does not explain fully why individuals choose suicide attacks.

Braun and Genkin (2014) argue that elements of all frameworks hold some truth and emphasize the importance of highlighting deeper, underlying cultural dimensions that influence the “diffusion process” of the adoption of suicide terrorism. They stress that the adoption of suicide terrorism by an organization, as

with any practice, must mesh with a society's values and attitudes in which that organization is operating. "The practice has to be culturally resonant because deeper cultural forces constitute actors and determine the costs of strategies" (Braun and Genkin, 2014). The rest of this paper will therefore focus on societal collectivism and individualism as aspects of cultural resonance, an underlying dimension that helps explain why organizations adopt suicide terrorism tactics.

Societal Collectivism versus Individualism

Society in general shapes everybody from birth. It helps instill certain values in children that are reflective of the place and time in which they live. Because of this tie between society and the individual, the society must play an important part in the employment of suicide terrorism. Community and cultural resonance play key roles in the establishment and legitimization of suicide campaigns; if suicide attacks do not make sense in the context of the society and culture that carry them out, then they would not be as popular as they are with terrorist organizations today. One of the key questions to ask when discussing how a terrorist organization or any other organization wishing to reach some political end adopts suicide terrorism as a tactic is: How and why do suicide attacks make sense?

Due to the fact that society and culture do have such a heavy influence on people's values, it is important to examine certain aspects of the society from which

suicide attackers originate in order to address this act that baffles many, especially Westerners. While there are several characteristics that distinguish one culture from another, probably one of the biggest and most prevalent is the conflict between the individual and the group. Individualist societies value the individual more than the group, and collectivist societies value the power and importance of the group over the individual. In collectivist societies, group membership is usually not chosen but rather is given. The family is usually the first group that provides children with their identity, which then develops over time to include the entire society, creating a deep sense of loyalty from a young age (Davis, 2009). In these cultures, individual opinions and interests are not valued as highly as the opinions and interests of the group as a whole as the group is elevated as the primary actor. The power of this collectivist mentality lies in stark contrast to the individualist mentality in which group loyalty is not as stressed.

One of the most prominent social scientists and scholars on differences in cultural mentality, Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, conducted a study that measured individualism on a scale and explained the significance of living in a collective society. Hofstede found that “Loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations Everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. In collectivist societies offence leads to shame and loss of face” (The Hofstede Centre, 2006).

With these key differences in mind, suicide attacks can be analyzed through the lens of collectivism versus individualism. To help show the correlation between an increased likelihood of carrying out suicide attacks and collectivist societies, one can examine empirical studies on individualism versus collectivism conducted by the Hofstede Centre, which was founded in Helsinki, Finland, in 2012. In their work, Hofstede Centre researchers assign an individualism score to each country from which it collects data, which is obtained through various mediums (surveys, cultural observations, opinion polls); any country that receives a score lower than 50 on a scale from 1 through 100 is considered to be collectivist. When reviewing this data, one can clearly see a relationship between collectivism and suicide terrorism. In fact, “terrorist organizations that originated in countries with a collectivist culture are responsible for nearly 98 percent (2,149 of 2,202) of all suicide attacks from December 1981 through December 2006” (Davis, 2009). There is evidence that collectivism endorses various kinds of “sacrifice” for the group. Agreement with such statements as “People in a group should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the group’s well-being” strongly correlates with high scores on collectivism. (Wagner, 1995).

To make this point more tangible, Saudi Arabia can be used as an example. Historically, Saudi Arabia has been and still is in many ways a tribal culture, which is largely collectivist in nature. The Hofstede Centre has assigned Saudi Arabia an individualist score of 25; meaning if it were to receive a collectivist score, it would

receive a score of 75. When studying the nationalities of attackers in Al-Qaeda, one can see that the overwhelming majority of them originated from Saudi Arabia. This is even more apparent when examining the nationalities of the 19 attackers behind September 11, of whom 15 were from Saudi Arabia (*September 11th Hijackers*, 2014). In Saudi Arabia's case, there appears to be a theoretical link, as "collectivism correlates strongly with the adoption of suicide terrorism" (Braun and Genkin, 2014).

Probably one of the biggest factors behind the reason members of collectivist societies employ suicide attacks is a feeling of altruism and self-sacrifice. In these societies, "individuals who kill themselves rather than allow harm to members of their community gain social prestige and receive encouragement" (Pape, 2005). Several scholars have noted that one thing modern suicide terrorists have in common is they believe they are "sacrificing their lives" for a greater good (Padahzur and Perliger, 2003; Pape, 2003, 2005). Although some dismiss suicide terrorists as psychologically unstable, uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated and frustrated adolescent males, data suggests that not one of these characterizations is completely true (Howard, 2004). Pape, an American political scientist at the University of Chicago, known for his work on the rationale of suicide terrorism (2003, 2005), analyses all suicide terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2001. He argues that the attackers are so dissimilar that "it may not be possible to find a single

profile.” Bruce Hoffman (2003) agrees that “there is no clear profile anymore—not for terrorists and especially not for suicide bombers.”

As members of collectivist societies, they are conditioned from birth to believe that the group is more important than the individual, and it would be expected that many would view their own lives to be less important and worthy of continuing than the lives of the majority. This fundamental world view resonates throughout the community as a whole, and the decision to sacrifice oneself for the group is therefore made more palatable. This in effect greatly reduces or eliminates the cost of organizations utilizing suicide tactics, as societal backlash would be much less intense in collectivist societies. Further bolstering the importance on the group, suicide terrorists commonly carry out their attacks in squads. The prevalence of attacks carried out by groups indicates a sort of altruistic motive. These attackers “achieve a collective purpose, [and carry out] a group mission that serves a cause beyond their own personal death” (Pape, 2005). As Dominic Tosini (2009) argues, suicide bombers have a deep attachment to idealized representations of their communities. When altruism enters the equation, Tosini assesses that it produces a culture of martyrdom. Similarly, Braun and Genkin conducted a preliminary analysis by looking at data collected by the Pew Global Attitude Project. From 2002 to 2010, Pew asked Muslim respondents in twenty-five countries whether suicide attacks against civilians were justified. The project correlated the country collectivism scores with percentage of the population that supported suicide

missions. The result: collectivist countries approved of suicide missions significantly more than individualist ones (Braun and Genkin, 2014). Further studies conducted by Braun and Genkin determined that out of 414 terrorist organizations studied, slightly more than 25 percent of the organizations that scored high on the collectivist scale had adopted suicide tactics, while only about 6 percent of those that scored low on the collectivist scale had. Such empirical studies indicate that collectivist groups are indeed more likely to adopt suicide terrorism.

At this point, one hole in the argument of a correlation between suicide terrorism and collectivism can be identified. It is clear from the data supplied by The Hofstede Centre that many cultures which are collectivist have never employed suicide attacks. Many Latin American countries, for example, are scored even higher on the collectivist scale than Arab countries like Saudi Arabia. Yet there exists no records of suicide terrorism in these countries. Because of this, it is important to note that collectivism alone cannot explain suicide terrorism. But it does seem to be an essential factor or precondition if not predictor of suicide terrorism. Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that Arab countries have higher incidents of suicide attacks solely because they are collectivist societies. Rather, we should view collectivism as being an essential and underlying contributing factor.

Applying Societal Collectivism

The main question remains: What motivates members of collectivist societies to make the use of suicide terrorism seem logical or rational? At this point, the previously mentioned nationalistic ideological framework can be examined through the lens of societal collectivism. Because collectivist societies are strongly loyal to each other and look out for the safety of one another, some type of threat to the group's safety and way of life must be the reason why members of these societies resort to such extreme measures. According to Robert Pape: "Nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common [one] specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland" (Pape, 2005). As he theorizes, a feeling of nationalism and protectionism of the group contributes to pushing individuals over the edge and adopting the open use of suicide terrorism.

In Pape's study, the examination of the variety of terrorist organizations which employ suicide attacks indicates that the fight for self-determination, not religion, is the common thread between all of these groups. In fact, one of the most infamous terrorist organizations of all time is the LTTE, whose platform is to establish a state for the ethnic Tamil population that resides in the Sinhala-dominated government of Sri Lanka, which declared that Buddhism would be the national religion and Sinhala the national language, completely marginalizing the

Tamils. The feeling of nationalism is so strong in the LTTE that it has actually carried out “more suicide attacks than any other groups,” (Pape, 2005).

Such an example of a terrorist organization does not fit into the narrow modern view of terrorists that many people in the West hold. Stereotypically, suicide attackers are conservative Muslims with detonators in their hands and explosive devices strapped to their chests with the sole purpose of doing Allah’s work guiding their actions. Examination of other terrorist organizations, such as the Tamil Black Tigers and Tigresses who have no religious affiliation, begins to render the stereotypical view of a suicide terrorist untenable. Further undermining this viewpoint is reading and listening to manifestos and statements made by major figures in these different terrorist organizations. Their words often reveal a much deeper and very different driving factor behind the actions of the organizations. Rather than speaking exclusively about religion or other ideologies, what mainly comes through in their words is the desire to regain independence from an occupying or other oppressive force that threatens the lives of the community. A classic example of this desire is shown in Hezbollah’s February 16, 1985, “Open Letter” in which the organization publicized its grievances and goals. The following excerpt establishes clearly Hezbollah’s desire to rid its homeland of foreign intervention and regain its right of self-determination:

America [and its allies] . . . [have] attacked us and continue to do so without respite. Their aim is to make us eat dust continually. This is why we are, more and more, in a state of permanent alert in order to repel

aggression and defend our religion, our existence, our dignity. They invaded our country, destroyed our villages, slit the throats of our children, violated our sanctuaries and appointed masters over our people
(Council on Foreign Relations).

The foreign power or occupation, the U.S. in this instance, creates a clear “in” and “out” group. The language used in the letter reflects a deep sense of wanting to protect the interests of the “in” group. The “out” group has in this case cemented and strengthened the collectivist attitude of the group that is perceiving itself to be under attack. While some religious language gives credence to the religious ideological framework, the overwhelming majority of the language revolves around a common threat facing the community. Such language is not limited to Hezbollah, but rather is extremely common among terrorist organizations.

While many terrorist organizations in modern times do share similar religious beliefs to Hezbollah, principally Islamic ones, it is not Islam itself that drives people to wear explosive vests or belts or place bombs in vehicles which they guide into buildings. Studying the timeline of suicide attacks in predominantly Islamic countries helps to demonstrate this point. Iraq, for example, has an incredibly long history with Islam. In fact, Baghdad was one of the most influential cities in the Islamic Empire. Interestingly, suicide terrorism in Iraq did not exist until 2003, which is the year the United States and coalition forces invaded the country. The numbers decreased once the United States began to withdraw troops.

However, they spiked once again with the creation of the modern Islamic State (ISIS), which views the Sunni populations of Iraq and Syria to be unfairly governed and repressed by the Shi'a governments in the two countries. According to Human Rights Watch, the attacks on Shi'as "are primarily motivated by a belief that Shi'a political and religious groups welcomed and cooperated with the U.S. invasion to overthrow the Iraqi government, which was long dominated by Sunni Arabs" (Human Rights Watch, 2005). This in a sense is a type of occupation and oppression that the Islamic State purports to combat, which it does so in part by carrying out suicide attacks through exploiting collectivist attitudes of an audience that would go very far to defend the community against a perceived threat.

Conclusion

Despite public perceptions influenced by modern media coverage in the West, all suicide terrorist incidents in modern times have not been directly caused by religious fundamentalist groups, especially radical Islamist terror organizations. Although many possible causes of suicide terrorism have been discussed here, it is likely that no single reason — in fact, various causes interact — to motivate someone to become a suicide bomber. While religion or religious fanaticism may play a role, it is not the predominant precondition. Individual psychology, psychological abnormality, or personal feelings of desperation or hopelessness do not appear to have played any significant role either. Poverty and a lack of

education have minimal to no scientific support. Revenge against foreign occupiers and nationalist ideology alone also do not sufficiently explain the dilemma of suicide terrorism. However, identification with the group and community and a motivation to sacrifice oneself for “the cause” seem to be major contributing factors. The majority of suicide attacks which have occurred since 2003 have been conducted by Muslims because Islamic lands have suffered the most from foreign intervention, and Muslim societies tend to be traditional-collectivist in mindset. Therefore, a combination of many different factors, which in many cases includes a high level of societal collectivism as an underlying cultural precondition, may explain why so many suicide attacks have been carried out by Muslims in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is imperative to understand these underlying factors and motivations in order to create a policy that will effectively address the issue and not simply perpetuate the same patterns that the world has witnessed since the early 1980s.

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