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# Terrorism: Motivation and Theory

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive feedback and Neema Noori, Ph.D. for inspiring me to pursue this research topic.

## TERRORISM: MOTIVATION AND THEORY

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### INTRODUCTION

The following paper attempts to determine motivations behind terrorism from the perspectives of Rational Choice Theory and Social Solidarity Theory. It explains difficulties in agreeing on a common definition of terrorism among different scholars and reviews some of the possible demographic, psychological and social dynamic causes of terrorism, ultimately concluding that understanding motivation for terrorist acts cannot be determined uni-dimensionally and that different levels of terrorist organizations are best understood using different theories. Individual suicide bombers' motivations can be best explained by Social Solidarity Theory, while sponsoring organizations' motives are best explained by Rational Choice Theory.

According to Olivier Roy (2006), the original al-Qaida members were of predominantly Saudi Arabian and Egyptian origin. Thus, these countries are significantly represented in the paper, to the extent that the example of mechanical solidarity included below is based on Saudi Arabian history. The paper examines suicide terrorism, although it also explores other forms of terrorism. Although this paper examines a pre-Islamic State era of terrorism, some journalists report that the boundaries of the IS "caliphate" are diminishing and requiring it to u-turn into an insurgency and competitor to al-Qaida (Marcus, 2017). Thus, these perspectives still contribute to the understanding of the motivations for past and contemporary terrorism.

### SUICIDE TERRORISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

In reviewing the literature concerning terrorism and Rational Choice Theory, one finds that rational choice is much more accepted in the political science than sociological discipline, perhaps due in part to RCT's origin in economic theory. Early classical theorists outlined sociology by differentiating it from economic theory. Currently, some theorists are still resistant to the "colonization" of sociology by RCT (which they call exchange theory [Scott, 2000]), although this may be slowly changing (Hedström & Stern, 2008).

Since an individual characterized by one person as a terrorist will be characterized by another as a freedom fighter (Bates, 2011; Qirko, 2009; Shughart, 2011), martyr, revolutionary, insurgent, or common criminal (Shughart, 2011), no definition is unanimously recognized (Atran, 2003; Karoui, 2010; Post, et al, 2009). However, definitions provided by many scholars (Atran, 2003; Karoui, 2010; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Pape, 2005; Post, et al, 2009) closely echoed

the Office of the Coordinator, US Department of State definition of terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (Shughart, 2011, p.127). As seen below, the theories that these theorists provide support this definition with the exception that most imply the attempt to influence multiple audiences instead of just one audience.

In Rational Choice Theory, individuals are seen to be active, rational agents that determine the best course of action given certain rewards and costs. Many theorists believe that terrorism can be explained through the lens of RCT. Shughart believes that terrorists calculate risks and make choices in order to gain the greatest benefit for the least cost in “money, munitions and manpower” (2011, p.127). They also shift tactics when states enact countermeasures against them. Atran (2003) states that the cost of outfitting a Palestinian suicide bomber is \$150, of which transportation to the site is the most expensive item. This cost gains the sponsor organization increased public support and more prospective bombers. Bryan Caplan (2006) counters this assertion, also citing Rational Choice. He believes that the sponsoring organizations have a large motivation to overstate their influence and willingness to utilize suicide terrorism. and questions why there are not more bombings given the claims of plentiful recruits and money to outfit them. Caplan cites the example of two terrorist organizations engaged in a morbid rivalry in which they tried to outdo each other in the number and destructiveness of suicide bombings yet completed only five effective attacks per month. Caplan classifies terrorists into three categories: sympathizers (approve of but do not enact terrorism), active terrorists (actual members of an organization), and suicidal terrorists (who actually self-murder for their belief). While he believes that there are many free riders that gain benefits without incurring cost in this scenario, he points out that suicide bombing claims 4 to 13 times as many lives as traditional terrorism and is thus a more effective and destructive form of terrorism.

But what is the ultimate aim of terrorists? Kydd and Walter (2006) believe that terrorism amounts to a costly form of signaling to two crucial audiences—foreign states that they wish to sway and members of their own community that they wish to gain backing from or whom they wish to dominate. According to Kydd and Walter, this signaling serves five purposes: attrition (to persuade the enemy that they will outlast them), intimidation (persuade their population that they can dominate them without fear of reprisal by the government), provocation (to incite the enemy to respond violently, which radicalizes the population and convinces them to support the terrorists), spoiling (undermine any group that tries to make peace with the enemy), and outbidding (convince their population that they are best able to battle the enemy rather than alternative groups). Post, et al (2009) cite Alex Schmid’s *Political Terrorism* (1983) in which he differentiates

between the target of violence and of attention. He subdivides targets of attention into 3 groups: 1) the target of terror, same as target of violence; 2) the target of coercion, that group directly threatened by the terrorists; and 3) the target of influence, Western countries or other groups that are the ultimate audience of the act. Schmid also states that terrorism is symbolic, since it aims to challenge a state or other power that it is unable to overthrow.

Robert Pape believes that “terrorism has two broad purposes: to gain supporters and to coerce opponents” (2005, p.8). He separates it into 3 categories. The main purposes of acts of “Demonstrative Terrorism” are to gain publicity for recruitment purposes, to draw attention of moderates in the opposition and to draw attention of third parties that might serve to influence the opposition. Examples of this category are hijacking and hostage taking. The purposes of “Destructive Terrorism” are coercion and possible gain of support, although this can backfire due to the increased devastation of the acts. The most violent and risky form is “Suicide Terrorism.” In this category, coercion is attempted even at the risk of increased backlash from the opposition or loss of any possibility of sympathy from neutral parties. The attacker does not expect to survive the act. Pape states that this is not a new phenomenon, although previously attacks were more suicide missions than suicide terrorism. He details attacks by the Jewish Zealots in the first-century AD (see also: Atran, 2003; Stack, 2004), the Shi’ite sect of Ismaili Assassins (hashashins, see also: Atran, 2003) in the eleventh-and twelfth-century, and the Japanese Kamikazes of World War II. Like suicide attackers, the young, educated kamikazes (“divine wind”) volunteered for the task when they realized that orthodox combat would end in conquest (Atran, 2003; Bloom, 2005). Unlike suicide terrorists, kamikazes only attacked military targets and were driven to sacrifice for their country (Momayezi & Momayezi, 2017). Kamikazes were one of the reasons that Americans supported use of the atomic bomb (Atran, 2003). Qirko (2009) points out that kamikazes were deeply influenced by Bushido, the Samurai code of ethical regulation based on Japanese Shinto belief (Hexham, 1993).

While Bushido may help to explain the motivation of kamikazes, the motivation of suicide terrorists is less clear. Qirko does not believe that suicide attackers will only be understood by “scrutinizing their spiritual-intellectual world, the ideologies that have molded them, and the myths they grew up in” (2009, p.292). Efficacy and ideology are two competing frameworks proposed by some researchers (Momayezi & Momayezi, 2017). In contrast to an ideological framework, Pape (2005) believes that religion, while serving as an effective recruitment tool, is not the ultimate motivation. He points out that suicide attacks by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a Marxist-Leninist group of Hindu descent with members that are steadfastly anti-religion, make up almost twenty-five percent of

the suicide attacks between 1980 and 2003. Qirko (2009) states that the percentage of secular attacks was half.

In terms of demographic information, Moaddel and Karabenick (2008) surveyed citizens of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to determine their level of religious fundamentalism in relation to other variables. They found it to be high for respondents that relied on religious authorities for religious information, Islamic orthodoxy, fatalistic attitudes and feelings of insecurity, while being inversely related to television viewership frequency. While Moaddel and Karabenick expected university education would contribute to openness of mind toward members of other faiths, they found that religious fundamentalism was not affected significantly by university education (2008).

Momayezi and Momayezi (2017) have pointed out that many analyses have focused on poverty, lack of education, and mental illness, but Pape states that suicide attackers are not “poor, uneducated, immature religious zealots or social losers” (2005, p.216). They are usually well educated, socially integrated individuals from both religious and secular backgrounds (see also: Atran, 2003; Karoui, 2010; Khalid & Olsson, 2006; Post, et al, 2009; Qirko, 2009; Sutton & Vertigans, 2005).

Standard psychological theories of suicide seem to lack as well. Pape (2005) states that what he calls psychological autopsy—analyzing the background, psychological well-being and suicide-proneness of attackers after the fact—tends to yield little. Qirko (2009) cites an Islamic Jihad member as saying that any person that shows a tendency toward suicide is not allowed to become a martyr. He also points out the lack of explanation in Social Learning Theory as to why terror organization members from communities not favorable to martyrdom carry out suicide attacks and those from pro-martyrdom communities may not. Indeed, Qirko (2009) does not believe that any psychological or social dynamic explains the cause and that it is merely a politico-strategic choice of a group.

Pape (2005) believes that a three-step process can explain suicide terrorism—examining the strategic logic of terrorism, the social logic of suicide terrorism and the individual logic of suicide terrorism. While many scholars have questioned Pape’s assumptions of strategic logic, his questions of social and individual logic of suicide terrorism link to Durkheim’s work on Social Solidarity and suicide, covered below (1893; 1897).

*What is the strategic logic of terrorism?*

Characteristic of the efficacy framework (Momayezi & Momayezi, 2017), Pape’s (2005) strategic logic of terrorism posits that if the group did not believe that terrorism satisfied its agenda, they would not carry it out. He believes that the organization’s agenda can be explained as a terrorist response to foreign occupation by modern democracies and as an attempt to coerce these democracies to withdraw forces from what terrorists consider their homeland. However, in a

paper presented at the “A Culture of Death: On Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism” conference in May of 2005, Bloom states that Pape’s model glosses over local partisan undercurrents. She believes that there are multiple and sometimes-conflicting objectives of suicide attack, including against an occupier, against alternative groups (outbidding), and against any other group that tries to make peace with the enemy (spoiling) (2005).

It could be argued that Pape’s emphasis here is his category of “Suicide Terrorism” and that his other categories of “Demonstrative” and “Destructive Terrorism” are better able to explain domestic concerns of terrorist organization. Bloom (2005) also believes that Pape’s model doesn’t take into account religious and other groups concerned with more than territory and their use of suicide attacks. She states that his focus on democracies cannot be confirmed since authoritarian governments don’t allow opposition groups that would engage in suicide attacks, citing the example of the Muslim Brotherhood’s rally against the Syrian Ba’athist regime and the government’s elimination of them and their supporters. Bloom also questions Pape’s characterization of 1980s Sri Lanka, Israel in the Occupied Territories and Russians in Chechnya as democratic.

Pape (2005) also applies his strategic logic of terrorism model to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida. Although American troops were not occupiers in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden wanted them withdrawn and wanted an end to American influence in the region. Two years after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, US troops left Saudi Arabia for Iraq (Kydd & Walter, 2006). However, al-Qaida stated that the US will continue to be a target until all troops are withdrawn from the Persian Gulf region and the US discontinues its backing of Israel and governments such as the Saudi Royal Family and (at the time) Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan (Abrahms, 2006).

Over the last few decades, according to Pape (2005), organizations have learned the value of terrorism in convincing American and French military forces to withdraw from Lebanon in 1983; in convincing Israeli forces to leave Lebanon in 1985; and in convincing Israeli forces to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995. He believes that after beginning suicide terrorism, these organizations made more gains in these instances than they had before. However, Abrahms (2006) conducted a study with findings that ran counter to Pape’s. In the study, Abrahms investigated the success of groups labeled by the U.S. Department of State as terrorists, and thus avoiding criticism such as that levelled at Pape for effectively biasing his study toward terrorist triumphs and falsely raising the success rate of terrorists (see also: Ashworth, 2008; 2008b; Pape, 2008). Abrahms (2006) found that Pape’s study focused on only eleven terrorist campaigns, ten of which targeted the same three countries— Israel, Sri Lanka, and Turkey (six against Israel alone). Also, Pape does not focus on whether the campaigns accomplished their principal goals. He considers the 1994

limited withdrawals of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and West Bank as two distinct terrorist successes, during which time there was a 167% increase in Israeli settlers. Abrahms believes that Pape's study therefore finds that terrorist groups sometimes achieved strategic successes, not that terrorism is an effective policy.

Pape (2005) states that terrorist organizations recognize that they are smaller and weaker than Western forces. They must make their trainees as effective and efficient as possible (Qirko, 2009). In short, barring access to a nuclear weapon, suicide bombing is the most reliable and deadly method available to them (Pape, 2005).

*What is the social logic of suicide terrorism?* Terrorist organizations could not continue without support from the community from which they recruit. As long as they are seen as pursuing the legitimate goal of liberating the community from foreign occupation, they receive broad support from it (Pape, 2005).

*What is the individual logic of suicide terrorism?* Pape (2005) believes that most suicide attackers fit the profile for altruistic suicide as developed by Emile Durkheim—that their extreme level of social integration and deference to community values lead them to commit suicide from a sense of duty instead of seeing the act as murder.

#### SUICIDE TERRORISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY THEORY

At the time that Emile Durkheim was writing *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897), France was transitioning from an agricultural, male-controlled Catholic society to a modern, industrial nation. This shift was opposed by religious and military hierarchy and the landed aristocracy. In contrast with these groups, Durkheim favored the individualism, secularism and free market belief characteristic of modernity—within reason. He believed individualism should be rooted in social institutions and ethical focus (Seidman, 2008). Similar to the French transition from agrarian to modern, Saudi Arabia's transition from a tribal land resistant to Ottoman rule to the oil-rich, Sa'udi-Wahhabi Empire of today has been one of conflict.

Durkheim's theory of Social Solidarity postulates that there are two types of society—that of mechanical solidarity and that of organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity involves a segmental society of self-sufficient clan-bases (Durkheim, 2013). These clan-bases are traditional and conservative, with a unified religious culture. Any behavior considered deviant is dealt with harshly as it poses a threat to social unity. Societies with organic solidarity are specialized; different institutions maintain different expertise and understanding. These institutions are thus interdependent. Cultural pluralism is prevalent and the law is concerned more with contracts and advocates ideals of restitution as opposed to the punitive type of punishment characteristic of mechanical society. In effect, the scope of

common knowledge and common culture lessens until the only common belief is that of individualism, becoming society's public religion (Seidman, 2008).

Looking at the beginnings of the Saudi royal family, one can see a good example of a mechanical society. According to Al-Rasheed (2010), in 1727, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud was Amir of Dir'iyyah, a village of less than 70 households in Najd. The al-Sa'ud were sedentary, landholding merchants. As such, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud lacked tribal affiliation or excess capital with which to expand his influence over territory or trading routes. This changed when al-Sa'ud met Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and embraced Wahhabism in 1744. Abd al-Wahhab had been expelled by another nearby Amir for engaging in punitive punishment, publicly stoning a woman accused of fornication. Abd al-Wahhab espoused a pure form of traditional Islamic monotheism, including a strict interpretation of *shari'a* law that would not allow deviancy to pose a threat to social unity. He needed a political partner with whom to further this vision. Abd al-Wahhab advocated *zakat*, a religious tax given to the needy but, in effect, tax to the ruler. In return, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud would be obliged to wage *jihad* against those that did not follow the traditional, conservative doctrines of this unified religious culture. This commitment to rid Arabia of heretical religion served as reason for expansion by conquest, resulting ultimately in the nation of Saudi Arabia with state religion of Wahabbism (2010).

Some posit that this type of society with a pure form of traditional Islamic monotheism and a strict interpretation of *shari'a* law that would not allow deviancy to pose a threat to social unity is the society that al-Qaida, the Taliban and other Salafist groups would like to return to, although some sociologists disagree (Van Biema & Crumley, 2003). It is interesting to note that, in attempting to achieve a return to mechanical solidarity, groups like al-Qaida have succeeded in building organizations that best represent organic solidarity. Al-Qaida is multi-national, with different interdependent divisions for financing, strategic planning, training, carrying out attacks, etc.

Continuing with his work on Social Solidarity Theory, Durkheim published *Suicide* in 1897. In it, he proposed two continuums that offered insight into suicide. The first continuum (social integration) has egoistic suicide on one end and altruistic suicide on the other. Social integration is the level of connection between the person and society. The second continuum (social regulation) has anomic suicide on one end and fatalistic suicide on the other. Social regulation indicates the person's social wants and how they interact with the norms and boundaries imposed by society.

Egoistic suicide is a lack of social integration. Lacking social goals, the person loses purpose and meaning and becomes self-absorbed and isolated (Seidman, 2008; Sutton & Vertigans, 2005). It is marked by high individualism. Durkheim found that Protestants had higher suicide rates than Catholics and

believed that this was due to the individualistic nature of Protestantism, as opposed to the social integration of Catholicism (Seidman, 2008). This is also characteristic of “egoistic lone wolf terrorists” that identify “with an agenda, but not an organization” (Bates, 2011, p. 7).

In contrast, altruistic suicide can be seen as an excess of social integration, to the point of conformity. A person’s individuality becomes secondary to the needs, interests, and identity of a group. The individual becomes so enmeshed with the group that threats to it can lead to suicide. Durkheim cites the example of the soldier that dies to save his brothers-in-arms (Seidman, 2008; Sutton & Vertigans, 2005). Bates cites suicide terrorists from Al Qaeda and Hamas as examples of “altruistic suicide terrorists” (2011, p. 7). Durkheim further divides altruistic suicide into obligatory, optional and acute altruistic suicide. In the obligatory type, the suicide is seen as a cultural norm and the person’s duty, often to having been shamed. Stack (2004) states that failure to suicide can often lead to punishment by the group. In the optional category, suicide is not seen as a duty but as an option communicated to the individual, often from an early age. The individuals sometimes achieve high status in the group as a result of their death. In the acute altruistic category, suicide is “purely for the joy of sacrifice” (Durkheim, 1951, p.223). Durkheim gives the example of Christian martyrs. This best characterizes most suicide bombers that have lost themselves and choose to suicide for their group and a higher power (Sutton & Vertigans, 2005). Stack (2004) states that altruistic suicide has four significant characteristics: extreme social integration, much public support (from the group), a profit to the group materially or culturally, and is characterized by tremendous positive emotion.

In terms of the social regulation continuum, in anomic suicide the person needs social and moral direction. Durkheim believed people structured their needs, wishes and goals in reference to society. Lack of stability, such as in economic crises (or economic booms), keeps them from being able to do this in a consistent way. Security forces in the West are concerned about second and third generation individuals from previous migrations/diasporas that find it difficult to integrate into a new culture and feel stateless. Although not previously devout, their anomie and search for stability leads them to extremist mosques or into contact with charismatic clerics (Post, et al, 2009) and they become “anomic insurgent terrorists” (Bates, 2011, p. 6). This is also found to be a problem for new immigrants or foreign students studying in the West (Khalid & Olsson, 2006).

Opposite anomic suicide on the social regulation continuum is fatalistic suicide in which the social rules and norms are so intrusive and confining the individual can’t envision progress. This category was undeveloped by Durkheim. He cites the example of slaves. This category can be seen to characterize some suicide attackers, particularly those of Palestine in response to Israeli occupation.

Another example of “fatalistic suicide terrorists” is Chechen female suicide bombers (“Black Widows”) (Bates, 2011, p. 7). The desperation can be found in a quote by the mother of the second intifada's first female martyr, Wafa Idris, “She was young, intelligent, and beautiful, and had nothing to live for” (Sutton, & Vertigans, 2005, p.69) and in a quote by an elderly Jenin woman to a reporter, “Look how we live here. Then maybe you'll understand why there are always volunteers for martyrdom. Every good Muslim understands that it's better to die fighting than to live without hope” (Post, et al, 2009, p.19).

As has been seen in this section, individual terrorists’ motivations are best explained by Social Solidarity Theory. Terrorist acts such as those by Palestinians against Israel can best be explained by Emile Durkheim’s concept of Fatalistic suicide, while Anomic suicide best explains terrorist acts by second generation and student immigrants and Altruistic suicide best characterizes most suicide bombers.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In considering the perspectives of Rational Choice Theory and Social Solidarity Theory to try to determine motivations behind suicide terrorism, it has been found that both appear to help one gain insight into the phenomenon. Individual suicide bombers’ motivations can be explained by Durkheim’s suicide types, while sponsoring organizations’ motives are more political, and thus best viewed as rational choice. An explanation for this is suggested by Bloom (2005) and Kydd and Walter (2006), who state that the individual must be considered separately from the organization. However, individuals and organizations can both be seen as acting rationally as their actions can be seen as consistent with choosing options most likely to realize their objectives (Bloom, 2005). This seems confusing at first. However, an element of Rational Choice Theory is methodological individualism, where: “The elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals” (Scott, 2000, p.127). Thus one sees elements of this theory when looking at the individual and the organization.

Therefore, in viewing societies as whole, speaking of mechanical and organic solidarity is useful, especially in explaining what type of society is preferred and which one is denounced by terrorists. In examining the sponsoring organizations, Rational Choice Theory is most useful, although one will see this at work at the individual level as well.

In searching for the motives of the suicide attackers themselves, the more useful tactic is to look at individual responses to different levels of social integration and social regulation and the categories of altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide. Emile Durkheim’s acute altruistic suicide best characterizes most suicide bombers that have lost themselves and choose to suicide for the

group. His category of anomic suicide explains second and third generation individuals from previous migrations/diasporas whose anomie leads them to extremist mosques where they become radicalized, homegrown terrorists. His category of fatalistic suicide in which social norms are so invasive that the individual can't imagine improvement best characterizes Palestinian suicide attackers responding to Israeli occupation.

It is possible that motivation for suicide attackers is an example of “the end justifies the means” and thus could best be explained by Robert Merton’s (1938) study of the lack of coordination between means and end processes. A disproportionate emphasis on culture goals and product could exert pressure resulting in nonconformist behavior limited only by technical rather than institutional norms and process. However, the question still becomes which culture is utilized to define the “aspirations and socially structured means” (1938, p. 674) whereby the terrorist countermores are generated and would that culture be considered a mechanical or organic society? Would this be an example of a mechanical society engaging in “rebellious conduct ... to refashion the social framework” (1938, p. 682) of a more organic society? This is an interesting question that should be addressed in future research.

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