



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Human Bombs: Rethinking Religion and Terror

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Suicide terror has become a daily news staple. Who are these human bombs, and why are they willing to die in order to kill? Many observers turn to Islam for an explanation. They cite the preponderance of Muslim bombers today, indoctrination by extremist institutions, and the language used in jihadi statements.

But these arguments fall short. At present, bombers are primarily Muslim, but this was not always so. Nor does indoctrination play a strong role in growing today's self-selected global jihad networks. Rather, militants and bombers are propelled by social ties. And even when jihadis use the Qur'an and Sunna to frame their struggle, their justifications for violence are primarily secular and grievance-based.

So what is religion's role? Almost 100 years ago, Emile Durkheim contended that religious ideation is born of sentiment.¹ This is worth considering in the current context. Against the repression, alienation and political helplessness of the Muslim world, jihad speaks of individual dignity and communal power. 'Against the Goliaths,' martyrdom says, 'even one bursting body can make a difference.' The Muslim street is buying it, though sometimes ambivalently. To stop the bombers of today and tomorrow, we need to figure out why.

A Different Profile

Suicide attacks have been a prominent tactic in insurgent movements since the 1970s. Then, analysts believed that bombers and their masterminds were irrational, if not crazy, or had given up on life because of desperate circumstances such as poverty, depression, or social failure. However, data that have since been compiled show that suicide attackers come not from the criminal, illiterate, or poor, but from largely secular and educated middle classes.² They do not exhibit signs of sociopathy or depression, nor do they appear to have suffered more than their respective populations.³ Surprisingly, many are volunteers, rather than recruits. There is, in short, no individual-level profile for a suicide bomber. Human bombs are a product of structural, social, and individual interactions.

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Rather than evince suicidal tendencies—as the term “suicide bombers” connotes—psychological autopsies of past and would-be bombers⁴ show many of these individuals to be wholly, even altruistically invested in life.⁵ As a result, it is more apt—and less misleading—to refer to these individuals as “human bombs” rather than “suicide bombers.”

Why Religion, and Why Not

Since 9/11, the notion that terror is bound to religious extremism has almost become an implicit assumption. This is easy to understand. If bombers were once “normal” people, then religious indoctrination could explain their fanatical behavior. Moreover, the numbers are powerful: 81 percent of suicide attacks since 1968 have occurred after 2001, with 31 out of the 35 organizations responsible being jihadi.⁶ Even the London and Bali (II) bombers who acted independently of terror organizations were Muslim. It would be difficult to deny that Islamic inspiration is at work in the motivation and mobilization of rising terror. But how? Inspiration is not causation, and a growing body of data suggests that Islamic indoctrination and belief are not the answer. Below, I audit several arguments commonly offered in support of the religious terror thesis.

1. *Muslims perpetrate most of today's terror, so most terror must be motivated by Islam.*

At present, 31 of 35 organizations perpetrating suicide terror are Muslim. But five years ago, a majority of attacks were carried out by secular rather than religious organizations. Because religion-terror correlations have changed over time, they tell us little about causation. Even if the statistics were stable, it is not possible to infer bomber motivations from organizational charters. Rather than ask who is perpetrating the attacks, we need to ask why.

Here history can help. Martyr missions made their official twentieth-century debut in the Second World War with the Kamikazes; they showed up again in the 1960s, when Viet Cong sympathizers exploded themselves amidst U.S. troops.⁷ Their debut in the Islamic world was not until the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq war. Facing a far superior Iraqi military, Ayatollah Khomeini rounded up children by the tens of thousands and sent them in “human waves” to overrun the enemy. While Persians accrued losses in the war against Iraq, the role of the martyr in defensive jihad was exalted. As in U.S. wars, the dead became heroes.

The Iranian example had seismic effects. Lebanese groups appropriated the notion of a martyr's death almost immediately, employing human bombs against Israeli and international presences in Lebanon as early as 1981. Half of the human bombs in Lebanon were perpetrated by secular organizations. The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka perfected the tactic, becoming the most professional cadre in the world. Human bombs were also used by the Kurdish PKK against Turkey, the Sikhs in India, and the Palestinians against Israel, to name a few.

When we think of suicide bombers, we think of extremism. But the cases above locate the bomber as one popularly supported element in a coherent campaign of resistance against a perceived occupier, and such was true for 95 percent of the bombings prior to 2003.⁸ Note that allegiance to resistance appeared to trump allegiance to religion. And most important, for bombers and for the publics that exalted them, the notion of self-sacrifice would not have existed except for the context: a perceived necessity for group defense.

2. *Indoctrination: madrassas, mosques and terror cells manufacture suicide bombers.*

Indoctrination suggests brainwashing. In popular parlance it can happen emotionally, when intense bonds are forged in a cell-like setting, or ideologically, where students are exposed to one rigid view of the world. If such mechanisms have been at work in fomenting global terror, we should see it in the data. Bombers would: a) spend significant time “training” with terror organizations; b) exhibit organizational allegiance, and probably share political views with their mentoring institutions; and c) come disproportionately from extremist madrassas or mosques. Above all, we would expect to locate the genesis of the twenty-first century surge in martyrdom in such institutions. But this is not what we find.

Consider the lack of organizational attachments revealed in a 2003 study of 15 would-be Palestinian bombers in the second intifada. Sixty percent had no prior experience with ter-

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citation

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ror organizations, much less a history of violence against Israel.⁹ Twenty percent started their mission within one week of accepting it, while 80 percent set out on their mission within a month. Indeed, half of them volunteered for missions, while those recruited were usually approached to take on the mission by family or friends. Organizational allegiance was slim: 20 percent originally attempted missions independently, turning to local groups to help them when matériel or logistics became difficult. Three switched organizations when it appeared another group had better capabilities. These numbers, which ran parallel to findings in a similar Israeli government study, suggest that bomber convictions in the second intifada existed with little or no organizational priming. Terror organizations served as facilitators, not indoctrinators. Most bombers came to them through friends, and many times, friends engaged in operations together.

Neither organizational recruitment nor madrassa training figured heavily in former intelligence officer Marc Sageman's 2004 study of 172 members of the global Salafi jihad. Sageman found that discipleship, a kind of mentor-student indoctrination, accounted for only 8 percent of the network. Although the study included networks from Europe, the Mideast, the Maghreb, and Asia, that entire 8 percent came from only two Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and Malaysia.¹⁰

The remaining network came to jihad informally through kinship and friendship bonds, 20 and 70 percent respectively. Like the Palestinian case, many joined in groups. Importantly, 78 percent of the network joined jihad in a country other than their homeland. Many of them met in mosques—the primary local community centers for Muslims. Alienated and alone, they bonded over a feeling of Muslim victimhood as observed on television and in pictures of wars involving Muslims. Religious devotion did increase for most individuals prior to their missions, but it is difficult to say what that means: growing devotion could be a cause or an effect of engaging the jihadi network.

How does this compare to what we see in Iraq? Little evidence is available, but according to Saudi and Israeli investigations of 154 foreign fighters in Iraq, “The largest group [of foreign fighters] is young kids who see the images [of war] on TV and are reading the stuff on the internet. Or they see the name of a cousin on the list or a guy who belongs to their tribe, and they feel a responsibility to go.”¹¹ This suggests that foreign fighters come self-motivated, ready to sacrifice before funneling themselves into insurgent networks within the country.

What of hate-preaching madrassas throughout the Muslim world? Consider Pakistan, known as a “Jihad U” of sorts, with its ten thousand-plus madrassas, many of them sending students to Afghanistan for the war there. We would expect Pakistan to produce bombers in the early stages of global jihad, but there were only two. Rigid worldviews were not enough to push students to strap on bombs. They needed an emotional impetus. One had existed in Afghanistan; another was with the invasion of Iraq. Images of humiliation and needless death were

ubiquitous on television, and in stories from friends and family.¹² By the end of 2004, the number of Pakistani martyrs reached at least 10.¹³

In sum, until 2004 and despite their hate-mongering, religious institutions did not contribute significantly to the rise in global terror.¹⁴ Instead, the empirical data parallel neuroscientific inquiries into how people acquire beliefs: First, emotion and social ties precede acquisition of ideology;¹⁵ second, joining the jihad does not appear to be an explicit decision, but a social and emotional process that happens over time.

“By itself, religious and cultural infringement on Islam was not enough to spur individuals to the risk and sacrifice of jihadi terror”

3. Terrorists justify their violence with the language of Islam.

What about Islamic texts and martyr statements? By designating the non-Muslim West as an infidel enemy, do they not endorse a “we hate you for who you are, not what you do” belief? A closer examination of three words—infidel, jihad, and martyr—calls this into question.

Infidel. Abu Bakr Ba'asyir may be the most qualified “zealot” to teach about infidels. As the Emir of Jema'ah Islamiyya in Indonesia (an affiliate of al Qaeda), he is arguably responsible for at least 202 deaths, many from the Bali bombings in October 2002. But he says the logic of jihad is not against non-believers: “There are two types of infidels; the infidel who is against Islam and

declares war on Islam is called *kafir harby* [enemy infidel]. The second type is *kafir dhimmi* [protected infidel]. These are people who don't fight against Islam, but don't embrace Islam or remain neutral... As long as other communities don't fight against [us], we won't fight them.” Ba'asyir says that the people in power today “do not tolerate [Islam], as in the case of America now which pushes its idea to change Islam with its weapons and dollars.”¹⁶

What does it mean to “fight” against Islam, and is the U.S. guilty? If “fighting” Islam means dictating what is preached in mosques, or disallowing headscarves in France, it was happening long before today. By itself, religious and cultural infringement on Islam was not enough to spur individuals to the risk and sacrifice of jihadi terror.

Rather, it seems that most Muslims, including terrorists, justify defensive jihad in response to violent social injustices. For instance, Osama bin Laden's statements are shrouded in religious references, but he cites the persecution of Islam in communal terms: “Its sons are being killed, its blood is being shed, its holy places are being attacked.”¹⁷ Such are the images and arguments that accompany most bomber wills and videos. Such are the images invoked in polling questions that ask whether Islam is under “threat”: moderate Muslims who respond in the affirmative tend to support terror against the West.¹⁸

Jihad. The Islamic debate over jihad—greater and lesser, collective vs. individual, offensive vs. defensive, and ethical concerns—is too complex to capture here. But most of those joining jihad today have not captured it either. They are not religious scholars, and the jihad that originally appeals to them appeals on the emotional basis of defense. The jihadi narrative solves a pressing emotional problem:

Why are my people dying, or oppressed? What can I do?

In Palestine, psychologist Brian Barber found that adolescent participation in the struggle against occupation is correlated with higher esteem and pro-social in-group behavior, despite its risks and sacrifices.¹⁹ In contrast, unorganized Bosnian Muslim youth studied during the Balkans conflict exhibited lower self-esteem, anti-social behavior, and general feelings of depression. Irrespective of the chances for success, in certain conditions it may be psychologically harder to not act.²⁰

We know that suicide bombing and jihad are statistically unlikely where there are civil liberties and constructive political channels for action.²¹ That said, even in democratic countries opportunity is a matter of perception. Thus wrote Mohammad Khan before he became the leader of the London bombers, “Our words have no impact upon you. Therefore I’m going to talk to you in language that you will understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.”²² In short, emotions matter to the creation and embrace of radical beliefs, especially the beliefs worth dying for. “Emotions create new beliefs... [because they] entail an appraisal based on currently salient concerns.”²³

Martyrdom. In Arabic, the root for martyr has two meanings. Westerners know the term in its offensive sense: those who “sacrifice their lives”—often against us—in jihad (*istish’hadiyyin*). But the foundational meaning is “those who are killed by the enemy” (*shuhada*)—often noncombatants, *i.e.*, civilian casualties. The distinction is important because most terrorists and their communities will tell you that in the locale, state or homeland they identify with, *shuhada* (innocent casualties) came before the *istish’hadiyyin* (bombers). Whether or not they agree with the tactic of terror, these populations understand the *istish’hadi* as giving his life for those who fell before, and to prevent those who would fall in the future.

Those who interview terrorists often hear about the role that media images have played in their conclusions that Muslims are threatened. A militant in Gaza once remarked to me about the power of television: “The difference between the first intifada and the second is television. Before, I knew when we were attacked here, or in a nearby camp, but the reality of the attacks everywhere else was not so clear. Now, I cannot get away from Israel—the TV brings them into my living room... And you can’t turn the TV off. How could you live with yourself? At the same time, you can’t ignore the problem—what are you doing to protect your people? ... We live with an internal struggle. Whether you choose to fight or not, every day is this internal struggle.”

For all of us, images we view on television prompt two separate processes: affective reactions and cognitive appraisals.²⁴ We feel the characters onscreen, but the feelings are turned off with an appraisal of reality.²⁵ If the images were of your group under attack, however, it is highly plausible they would remain salient. We see this in the new terror. Global jihadis, like 78 percent of Sageman’s network, often don’t come from war zones. Like descriptions of Iraqi foreign fighters, they see images of injustice, have friends or family there, and feel obligated to help.

Sacred Values, Social Networks

Religious beliefs do not simply mold individuals. They exist as “sets of ideas that ‘are there,’ as if on the shelves of a supermarket waiting for someone to make them their own.”²⁶ Individuals pull them off the shelf when their old frames no longer make sense of the world around them.

If beliefs are not born of sacred texts alone, neither are behaviors like martyrdom. Rather, would-be bombers place jihadi values—fighting for life, dignity, equality—above all else. It is not the commandment that is sacred, but the emotional reward it bestows.

We need to be asking new questions: For what are normal individuals able to kill? A plausible answer is: their community, under threat. When does a person make costly sacrifices to do so? Within a social structure—a terror cell, a military unit, a family, or group of friends—that continually regenerates conviction to a cause, a feeling of obligation to do something about it, and a sense of shame at the idea of letting each other down. Whether one lands in a social group with jihadi tendencies may be random. But the prerequisite for this path is perceived injustice.

Policy Implications

Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?

—Donald Rumsfeld, Internal Memo, National Security Council, 2002

The Bush administration argues that a violent ideology is at the root of terror, and that eradicating it and its believers is the way to a better world. But people aren’t joining the jihad because of ideology. It is true that there are radical leaders capitalizing on the emotions of anger and resentment that seethe throughout the Muslim world—but they could not foment something that did not resonate with many normal people. In today’s terror mobilization story, demand is as strong as supply. Understanding why this is so is the first step to defusing terror mobilization.

The social networks theory has several implications for policy. First, because commitment to jihad is rarely a cost-benefit decision, or an explicit decision at all, military deterrence will likely fail. Terrorists and insurgents forge loyalties that are difficult to betray, and like our own military units, many would prefer to fight to the death rather than leave their brothers. Second, under urban conditions of asymmetrical engagement, military missions almost inevitably entail civilian casualties. Military leaders must re-conceptualize the effect civilian casualties have on the populations surrounding the terrorist or insurgent. They are frequently interpreted by the population as offensive, and thereby engender an impulse to fight back. As one Palestinian told a reporter: “If we don’t fight, we will suffer. If we do fight, we will suffer, but so will they.”²⁷

Lastly, findings about the way in which people acquire beliefs suggest that a war of ideas will mean nothing unless it resonates emotionally with our targets. Emotional resonance only comes when the values we promote reflect our role in the local realities on foreign ground.

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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