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## **Note for readers and subscribers**

*We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.*

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# Motivations of Suicide Bombers: An Exploratory Study

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**Adil Rasheed and Saman Ayesha Kidwai \***

## Abstract

*The prevention of a suicide attack has always challenged counter-terrorism experts and security forces around the world. Stopping a suicide bomber from striking at a strategically critical yet undisclosed place and time remains a major challenge. One of the ways of doing it is by unravelling the mind of the suicide bomber itself, discerning how it operates, and then devising ways for preventing or mitigating the frequency of suicide attacks in the future. This paper explores the history of suicide attacks, the social and psychological dimensions of the menace as well as various political, social, and psychological theories proposed by counter-terrorism experts to thwart instances of suicide terrorism.*



A suicide attacker has often been dubbed as a poor enemy's 'smart bomb', who can manoeuvre the way into wreaking havoc on the population, economy, and military targets of a conventionally superior adversary with deadly precision.

The apparent randomness of violence causes great chaos and confusion, shaking a society's sense of security to the core and has a major demoralising effect on the military and security agencies fighting fissiparous and disruptive forces. The consequent cognitive dissonance on impressionable

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The views expressed here are their own.*

minds may lead to unintended reprisal attacks and civil strife, threatening peace and harmony of a country.

One of the more popular definitions of suicide terrorism is that it is an “an operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator.”<sup>1</sup> As a terrorist tactic, it effectively blunts the technological edge and the hard power of a militarily superior force. Furthermore, as a devious form of psychological warfare, its intended victims are not just the people killed and maimed in an attack, but even those who receive the news of the savagery.

### ***History of Suicide Attacks***

For several millennia, terrorists have used suicide attacks against their enemies. One of the earliest instances of suicide terrorism include the acts of violence committed by Jewish zealots of the Sicarii sect against the Roman Empire in the first century. In medieval times, the Order of Assassins (i.e., drug-induced *hashashin* fighters) formed by Hasan Al Sabah carried out suicide missions to take out Seljuk generals and ministers in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Persia. Some people also include anarchist bombers (followers of Bakunin) in

19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and the Japanese Kamikaze pilot bombers of World War II.

After World War II, suicide bombings were first revived in Lebanon, when Shiite Hezbollah militants blew up the US marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. After these bombings, the idea of terrorist suicide attacks caught the fancy of Tamil radical group LTTE and the tactic was used extensively from 1987 onwards in Sri Lanka, killing about a thousand people in many attacks over several years. India’s former Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, was targeted and killed in 1991 by a Tamil woman suicide attacker, followed by the killing of former Sri Lankan President Premadasa by a LTTE suicide bomber in 1993.

However, the most infamous act of suicide terrorism remains the horrific 9/11 attacks in which passenger aeroplanes were used to bring down the World Trade Center buildings in New York as well as a part of the Pentagon building in Washington DC on 11 September 2001, a grave crime against humanity that claimed over 3,000 lives<sup>2</sup>.

As the above historical account shows, suicide bombings, like terrorism, are not linked to any particular political ideology or religion.<sup>3</sup> Although Salafi-jihadist

groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS seek to sanctify suicide bombings by associating them with '*istishhad*' (Islamic martyrdom), there is no precedent for such attacks in Islamic history during the time of the Prophet or the early caliphs. In fact, Prophet Mohammed is said to have explicitly forbidden anyone from committing suicide itself. Thus, The Prophet is said to have stated in a famous Hadeeth:

None amongst you should make a request for death, and do not call for it before it comes, for when any of you dies, he ceases [to do good] deeds and the life of the believer is not prolonged but for goodness.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Cost-Benefit Advantage***

Terrorist groups resort to suicide attacks because of their cost-benefit advantage in that such attacks entail minimal expenses and cause maximum damage at the most strategically vulnerable moment and spot for the adversary. Little in terms of logistical operations or reconnaissance is needed as the perpetrators of violence do not need an exit strategy. Todd Sandler, a professor at the University of Wyoming, points out that the cost-benefit advantage is unparalleled because a) suicide attacks cause more damage and loss of lives vis-à-vis other modes of terrorist attacks,

b) the consequence of suicide attack helps the terrorists as the economy takes a severe hit and average citizens, weary of being caught in the crosshairs of a terrorist attack in public, start refraining from frequenting shared spaces such as markets, restaurants, cinema halls, etc.<sup>5</sup>

All terrorist attacks depend on the "oxygen of publicity" to spread their message of hate and terror, but a suicide attack delivers a more shocking impact on the "airwaves of publicity". One of the strategic advantages of conducting suicide attacks for terrorists is that it causes sufficient cognitive dissonance in impressionable minds. It is human even for the most upright opponent of terrorism to briefly wonder whether there was something noble about the atrocity perpetrated by the suicide attacker, as the killer was so convinced about his or her cause and reason for the act. This subliminal message of the terrorist becomes even more piquant when the suicide attacker happens to be a woman.

One-off attack in a public place may not by itself signify the real strength of a terrorist group. However, the media's role in highlighting the damage out of proportion can play a critical role and, at times, may heighten societal tensions and communal fissures.

Projecting the profile of a suicide bomber and giving a detailed life account may unnecessarily create empathy for a terrorist cause among readers or the audience at the conscious or subconscious levels.

Such media coverage can potentially play into the hands of the terrorists and may lead to reprisal attacks, which may unwittingly promote the terrorist goal of destabilising a country and society. Furthermore, the feeling of discontent generated by the media, veering towards panic in the public, could potentially undermine confidence in security agencies just when they are in need of greater public support.

### ***Women as Suicide Bombers***

Unfortunately, suicide terrorism often exploits gender sensitivities and uses female bombers by provoking them to prove themselves as useful and brave in offering the “supreme sacrifice” as their male counterparts.

For instance, the 1980s broke the ceiling on women being passive participants in a conflict. Initially Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups, then the LTTE, followed by Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab recruited female terrorists

– women and young girls – to carry out their violent pogroms.

Israeli presence in Lebanon in late 1990s spawned many Lebanese female suicide bombers, who were as young as 16 years old. Sana’a Mhaydali, dubbed as ‘Bride of the South,’ was one such suicide bomber who killed two Israeli soldiers before detonating herself inside a car laden with explosives.<sup>6</sup> Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, the militant group of which she was a member, extensively recruited many other female suicide bombers to target Israelis stationed in Lebanon. In fact, up to 42 per cent of the organisation’s suicide bombers were women and young girls.<sup>7</sup>

In 2014, Boko Haram abducted 276 schoolgirls from Chibok town in northeast Nigeria. While this abduction gained global notoriety for Boko Haram, the real aim of the group in kidnapping girls was far more devious, as it turned them into suicide bombers. Boko Haram mostly used female suicide bombers as girls and young women, moving in public places, tended to evade suspicion of security agencies. The abduction of young girls also brought ransom money for the group and Boko Haram even started selling some of the girls into slavery or struck a good deal with security agencies for the release of its imprisoned



members. Some of these girls were even forced to marry Boko Haram militants.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Secular Suicide Bomber***

One of the earliest causes for a person to become a suicide attacker was suggested by psychologist Emanuel Regis in the 1890s when he identified the killing of an unjust king (regicide) as a good enough reason to sacrifice one's life:<sup>9</sup>

... Proud of his (suicide attacker's) mission and his role, he acts always in daylight and public, and never uses a secret weapon like poison but one that demands personal violence. Afterwards, he does not seek to escape but exhibits pride in his deed and desire for glory and for death, either by suicide or 'indirect suicide' as an executed martyr.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Russian terrorist Ignaty Grinevitsky was perhaps the first suicide bomber who used dynamite to kill King Alexander II and himself in 1881. Belonging to the revolutionary group "People's Will", Grinevitsky was an atheist, who killed the king to promote his anti-monarchist cause.

Like Grinevitsky, European anarchists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also atheists and often killed themselves

at the time of arrest. In 1887, after being arrested for his involvement in the Haymarket killings (in May 1886), the anarchist Louis Lingg blew himself up with a capsule of fulminate of mercury, scrawling "Long live anarchy!" in his blood before expiring. Another anarchist convicted for his involvement in the Haymarket affair on the day of his execution proclaimed, "this is the happiest day of my life."<sup>11</sup>

Again, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka — a group that adhered to a Tamil nationalist version of Marxist/Leninist ideology — conducted over 4,000 terrorist attacks in which more than 45,000 people lost their lives between 1981 and 2015.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the words of Robert Pape, "The central fact is that overwhelmingly suicide terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear strategic objective".<sup>13</sup>

### ***Jihad for Allah alone versus Jihad for Ethno-Nationalism***

The 1983 Beirut barrack bombings, even by the Islamist suicide bombers of Hezbollah, was conducted not to carry out any religious act, but to execute an effective wartime tactic that might compel American and French forces to withdraw from Lebanon within months. In fact, President Reagan issued the order

for a complete withdrawal of American forces within four months of the suicide truck bombings, as the country did not have a substantial stake (vis-à-vis Afghanistan) to continue maintaining a presence in the long term.<sup>14</sup>

The same tactics was then emulated by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. These outfits conducted deadly suicide campaigns against Israel from 1993 (the year of the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords) till late 2006 and 2007.<sup>15</sup> Having said that, almost 90 per cent of suicide bombings have taken place in predominantly Muslim-majority countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan in recent decades.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, Islamist insurgents have carried out these bombings against people of their own faith, as part of their violent campaigns against groups they deem as 'collaborators of the enemy' or outright 'apostates'.

What differentiates suicide bombers of Salafi-jihadist groups (like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram) from earlier types of suicide attackers is that their motivation is not political or nationalist, but propelled by a war-like interpretation of the religion that guides and shapes their actions.

Pursuing the ideology of *Jihad fi Sabilillah*, which means conducting

a religious war for the sake of Allah alone, without any political, nationalist, racial, ethnic, or ideological agenda, some of the radical Islamists believe they would be offering "supreme sacrifice" for attaining the elusive goal of a global Caliphate, which by itself would ensure eternal salvation the prime ideological motivation for conducting suicide terrorism. This runs counter to the essential tenets of Islam. Suicide is prohibited in Islam. Anybody using suicide as part of military tactic after becoming despondent about the mercy of God and disillusioned with life leading to mental depression would be in violation of the principles of Islam. However, it is curious to note that some of the mainstream Muslim scholars would offer a different interpretation of the term *jihad fi sabilillah*. Even the radical Islamic ideologue Abu Ala Al Maududi contends that the meaning of *jihad fi sabilillah* is rarely applied to warfare in Islam, unlike what medieval theologian Ibn Kathir asserts<sup>17</sup>, but generally bears a peaceful, non-militaristic connotation.<sup>18</sup>

The other category of suicide terrorists includes those who are driven by both religious and ethno-nationalist fervour. To this group belong the Deobandi Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Perceptibly, it is the Pashtun

nationalism that led the Taliban to continue its insurgency against the US-led occupation of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 and now drives the TTP to wage a militant campaign against Pakistan's Punjabi-dominated bureaucracy and military. Driven by Hanafi-Deobandi Sunni theology, radical Pashtun elements have forged an alliance between the Afghan Taliban and TTP, neither of whom recognise the disputed Durand Line. Here, religious and ethno-nationalist identities have been fused to fuel a deadly armed conflict between the Taliban of Afghanistan and Pakistan on the one side the Pakistani government and military forces on the other. Both groups have used suicide bombings extensively in their militant campaigns. Early this year (on 30 January 2023), one of the deadliest attacks occurred inside a mosque in Peshawar Cantt, claiming over 100 lives and injuring more than 150 worshippers during afternoon prayers. Most of the victims served either in the police or the armed forces.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) and the extremist Sunni group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi use suicide bombings to kill members of the Shia Hazara community and have carried out several suicide attacks even against Shia Hazara labourers and schoolgirls, who have died in their hundreds, in recent years in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A third category of suicide bombers, as mentioned above, are secular nationalists. In the context of Pakistan, Baloch insurgents are a typical example. On 11th August 2018, Rehan Baloch of Majeed Brigade, son of Aslam Baloch, leader of Baloch Liberation Army (BLA)-Aslam faction, carried out a suicide attack on a bus carrying the team working on the Saindak Copper-Gold Mine project near Dalbandin bypass in Balochistan causing injuries to two Chinese nationals. In April 2022, a female suicide bomber of the BLA, Shari Hayat Baloch (who was a school teacher and post-graduate in zoology from Quetta University), detonated herself near Karachi University's Confucius Institute, killing four people – three Chinese instructors and their driver — along with her.

In days leading up to the attack, she had filmed herself in combat gear while walking with her two children in a park. She could be heard praising and thanking leaders of the insurgency for allowing her to become the first female suicide bomber from the group.<sup>20</sup> Among her stated motivations was her intent to avenge Balochistan's alleged socio-economic and political exploitation by Pakistan's federal leadership and Beijing's abetment of Islamabad's oppressive agenda through various agreements such as the China

Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Thus, Shari's motives were purely political and fuelled solely by Baloch nationalism.

### ***Other Theories: The Epistemic Curiosity***

Many theories exist on the factors that motivate a bomber to die and kill fellow humans in a suicide attack. Contrary to popular belief, not all suicide terrorists are anti-social, alienated, poor or unemployed people. Economists such as Jitka Maleckova and Alan Krueger have argued that there is no relationship between economic or educational deprivation and terrorism<sup>21</sup>, giving the example of Palestinian suicide attackers who have often come from wealthy families and have been more educated than the average Palestinian. However, some researchers like Efraim Benmelech believe that while socio-economic status might not have a bearing on the frequency of terrorist events, it may have an effect on the 'quality' of the attack.<sup>22</sup>

To Mark Sageman, the feeling of alienation, lack of emotional support, and disenfranchisement of youth is the cause that triggers most of the suicide bombers.<sup>23</sup> However, Robert Pape found from his interviews with failed suicide bombers in 2005 that liberation from foreign occupation

was the main reason for them to conduct suicide attacks, be it in Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup>

Speckhard and Akhemdova (2005) interviewed Chechen jihadis who had attempted suicide attacks and, in their interviews, found that some of them had psychological disorders and suffered personal loss and trauma during the ongoing conflict, prompting them to avenge the deaths of their lost ones.<sup>25</sup>

However, Nasra Hassan interviewed many Palestinians in 2001 and found that some militants were purposely groomed to become suicide bombers. She asserted that suicide bombers are neither psychologically deranged nor social misfits and attributed the problem to religious and political motivations, the dream of upholding religious values and truths, being in the presence of God or the prophet and for the Palestinian community.<sup>26</sup>

There is also a segment of social motivation theorists, who claim that social pressure, even when it is not apparent, is internalised or induced and it could be the real cause, many times unbeknownst even to the bomber. For instance, the kidnapped girls of Boko Haram knew their conservative households would not accept them back once they had lived with terrorists for a long time. They

were then radically indoctrinated by Boko Haram's female instructors. The research of Stern (2003)<sup>27</sup>, Bloom (2005)<sup>28</sup> and Gambetta (2005)<sup>29</sup> point to this.

These theories provide different perspectives, which at times counter one another, puzzling security experts in their study of suicide terrorism. As Ami Pedazhur would argue, every suicide bomber may have his or her motive<sup>30</sup>, and it may not be easy to generalise on the basis of one set of data or another. However, some experts would consider these studies useful and put all these theories under three broad categories: personal, social, and ideological causes.

### ***Transcending Mortality: 'Quest for Significance' Theory***

One of the theories that have been found to have both insight and a possible strategy to counter the trend of suicide attacks by several experts is 'The Quest for Significance Theory'. The chief exponents of this theory are Arie Kruglanski, Edward Orehek, and Jocelyn Belanger, among others.<sup>31</sup>

The theory argues that humans are perhaps the only species fully aware of their mortality. This awareness carries with it the threat of

insignificance and compels them to strive and achieve distinction in various fields to make their transient and seemingly unimportant lives appear significant. The drive to excel — be it in politics, business, science, culture, academia, etc. and to achieve a sublimated immortality in people's collective memory is what impels human progress.

This human "quest for significance" finds few means of fulfilment besides attaining martyrdom in conflict-prone societies. Thus, the only way to be famous is to live on in the collective memory of a community after death — the sense of sublimated immortality is provided by martyrdom in failing or failed societies or countries.

The supposed 'martyrdom' attained by a lone suicide attacker — as viewed by a prospective self-annihilating bomber — appears even greater than the supreme sacrifice of a soldier or an insurgent on the battlefield. In the case of suicide bombing, the credit or blame goes entirely to one individual for the operation, and even the death and destruction caused add to greater fame and notoriety.

By adopting this conceptual premise, the 'quest for significance' theory' manages to incorporate the personal, psychological, ideological

and social categories found disparately in other theories.

Exponents of this theory also provide a remedy based on their diagnosis. They claim that if one wishes to prevent suicide bombings, one needs to employ the right means to reduce the sense of significance attached to the concept and glory of martyrdom in societies afflicted with extremist and terrorist groups. The war-like narrative must be discredited and replaced with a line of thought that favours alternative means for gaining significance and redress any genuine grievances.

***The 3N's: De-Mythification of Martyrdom***

These theoreticians thus posit three ways (3N's) this can be done: 'The Need', 'The Narrative' and 'The Network'.

a) *The Need* – Members of the vulnerable community should always be offered Sun Tzu's "golden bridge" of retreat so that prospective terrorists, particularly would-be suicide attackers, may always find a chance to retreat, even just before committing the dreaded act. If there is a concerted effort to help a failed or failing state or community to adopt a peaceful and economically profitable path that delivers a life of dignity, honour, and significance in the

realms of politics, commerce, trade, business, arts, sciences, media, sports, etc. the desperation for attaining so-called "martyrdom" could be reduced. Greater respect and effort to understand and redress grievances, and finding peaceful solutions to real or perceived injustice could also demotivate prospective bombers from taking the extreme step. The restoration of the political process, reinstatement of the rule of law and law and order, and the restoration of everyday peaceful activities of life, education, healthcare, and economic benefits would help give more meaning to individual and collective existence.

b) *The Narrative*– These aims can be achieved by first altering the mental outlook of the extremism-afflicted society. Programmes for identifying, parsing, and busting extremist narratives, particularly their dubious reasoning to justify offering the supreme sacrifice of life to a vague political or supposed religious cause, need to be initiated. Based on the careful study of the distorted extremist rationale, flaws in the argument and seeds of enquiry and doubts against the extremist assertions could go a long way in the de-mythification of 'martyrs'. The job of the counter-narrative campaigner does not have to be to totally convince the prospective terrorist, as sometimes just the introduction of a

little doubt that salvation may turn to eternal damnation for the perpetrator if one engages in a suicide bombing can prove effective. If the suicide bomber develops even a slight apprehension about the outcome of his or her heinous deed for him or herself after death or the attacker's community, he or she may desist.

c) *The Network* – The network is sometimes more important than the narrative. Targeting the ideological and physical facilitators of suicide bombers, including the extremist ideologues, social media handlers, the maker of bombs, and the support staff, could dramatically curtail the instances of suicide bombings. In addition, the publicity network and PR ecosystem of extremism in target communities need to be eliminated.

In tandem, a network of moderate counter-narratives by qualified

ideologues on mainstream media, social media, public forums, etc. could be developed in areas afflicted with ideologies of violent extremism.

Thus, irrespective of the plausibility of the 'Quest for Significance' theory, it has undoubtedly opened a door for more actionable approaches at the diagnostic and prescriptive levels to under the motivations for suicide attacks and to counter the threat of suicide bombings by discrediting the halo surrounding so-called martyrdom that inspires the thought of committing the act.

There is thus a clear need to develop theories based on empirically verified commonalities in the mental makeup of prospective suicide bombers so that more effective and actionable measures can be taken to combat the menace of suicide terrorism. ■

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