



**THE ANATOMY OF SUICIDE TERRORISM:
A DURKHEIMIAN ANALYSIS**

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This article examines the strategic motives of suicide terrorism. A Durkheimian analysis of altruistic and fatalistic suicide is used as a theoretical framework to examine why individuals surrender their lives to and for a terrorist organization. I define a suicide attack as an operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator. I examine terrorist organizations' group identity where systematic suicide attacks are used to emphasize collectivity of self-sacrifice for the group. It is argued that the motivations for suicide terrorists are both economic and religious, however are very self-fulfilling as in the case of martyrdom. It can be seen that through a socialization process into the terrorist organization, volunteers are recruited in the name of God, but are used solely to further the political interests and future recruitment of suicide terrorists for the sponsoring group.

SUICIDE TERRORISM

Suicide terrorist attacks, while becoming ever more popular in recent political and religious warfare, are nothing new in human history. Suicide attacks were first seen among the Jewish Sicaris during the 1st century, among the Moslem Hashishiyn in the 11th century, and among Asians in the 18th century (Schweitzer 2001). Modern suicide bombers are unique in when compared to those in the past. An individual today willingly approaches a selected target with the knowledge and self-awareness that death is imminent. As of the middle of 2001, there were over 300 suicide attacks carried out in 14 countries by 17 different terrorist organizations (Schweitzer).

The ultimate goal of suicide terrorism, similar to terrorism in general, is to gain media coverage used to promote the organizations own political and religious interests. Suicide attacks are unique in the fact that if the terrorist does not kill himself, the attack is looked upon as a failure. A suicide attack can be defined as an "operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator" (Ganor 2000, p. 1). It is a violent, politically motivated attack, which is carried out in a deliberate state of awareness by a person who blows himself up along with the chosen target (Schweitzer 2001). The death of the suicide bomber is a pre-condition therefore for the success of the terrorist attack itself.

Suicide terrorism, while looked upon by many as an insane act, is actually a very deliberate and effective tactic.

Terrorist actions define the nature of the stakes involved in the struggle, attracting attention to the cause, provoking the state into retaliatory actions that radicalize public opinion, pushing individuals into the arms of the opposition, and reshaping popular attitudes concerning the direction and outcome of the fight (Hoffman and McCormick 2004, p. 246).

Suicide attacks cannot be looked upon as a group of insane or deranged individuals who seek revenge out of desperation. These attacks are often well planned by educated individuals. Targets are pre-determined so preparations and details surrounding the attack can be carefully planned. The suicide bomber can activate the explosion, which is either strapped to his body or placed in a vehicle, at a time when maximum damage and casualties can occur.

Suicide attacks are simple and low-cost operations that require no escape routes or rescue operations. It guarantees mass casualties and extensive damage. There is no fear that the interrogated terrorists will surrender important information, because death is certain. This will have a large impact on both the public and the media due to the overwhelming sense of helplessness felt from the attack (Sprinzak 2000). This overwhelming sense of hopelessness is important because there are very few ways in which to prevent suicide terrorist attacks from occurring. The suicide bomber can activate the explosives at any time, making prevention efforts fallacious.

Suicide bombings are more effective than acts of conventional terrorism. The act of suicide terrorism is one that attracts an array of media coverage. A terrorist attack is ultimately a publicity stunt, designed to gain the highest possible exposure. Terrorists hope to put together an operational package so spectacular, violent and compelling, that the media cannot refuse to cover it (Hoffman and McCormick 2004). It is the violence and willingness for an individual to give up their life that makes a suicide attack hard to ignore. These attacks are looked upon as successes by the terrorist organization because it accomplishes three goals: 1) causes large-scale casualties among a selected group of innocent people; 2) negatively influences public morale; and 3) media coverage of the attack focuses on a nationalistic or religious cause.

The extreme psychological fear that suicide attacks have on the public is an influential factor in the success of a terrorist organization. When the public views a suicide attack and realizes that there is little or no preventative deterring actions to stop it from occurring, it can result in a state of fear and hopelessness. When the attacker is female, this impact has been seen to be even more severe. In patriarchal societies where women have been historically discriminated against, terrorist organizations are now allowing women to participate in suicide attacks. Bassiouni (1985) states, "the campaign (of suicide bombing) has been designed to obscure the wickedness of ethnic mass murder by seeking to place the killer on the same moral plain as the targets, both are seen as victims (p. 67).

The impact of the female bomber has largely effected the recruiting of terrorist organizations. Both boys and girls can now look up to suicide attackers, and eventually one day become a participant. Children now have new heroes to look up to, both male and female suicide bombers. They look up to them as role models, and want to grow up to die (Bassiouni 1985). Female suicide bombing has emancipated women, and now gives them access to a world that was previously reserved solely for males. With women becoming part of the terrorist process, a new door of gender is open for media coverage and exposure. "It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about women's weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement" (Egril 2001, p. 52).

Durkheim (1951) asserted that the reason people kill themselves does not occur through random occurrences. Durkheim (1951) defines suicide as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (p. 44). To commit suicide, an individual has to have some idea of what they are doing. The greater the certainty that death will follow an event or action, the more likely that it will be suicide. Therefore, if a person puts himself in a knowingly dangerous situation where death is likely or inevitable, it is considered suicide.

Durkheim's altruistic and fatalistic suicide will be used to examine the circumstances that motivate an individual to sacrifice their life for a collective terrorist organization. Using this theoretical framework, it can be seen how an individual can be recruited, trained, and finally carry out a suicide attack while being fully aware that they are most valuable to the organization when they die. Terrorist organizations use many methods for recruitment that range from exploiting an individual's political and economic oppression to using one's concentrated belief in the collective organization as a means for martyrdom.

ALTRUISTIC SUICIDE

According to Durkheim, altruistic suicide occurs when an individual is too highly integrated into the collective. This individual understands himself solely in terms as a member of the group. They are almost completely absorbed in the group and completely discard their individual personalities for the idea that they have become servants (Durkheim 1951). Insufficient individuation, as can be seen with terrorist suicide bombers, can make an individual feel it is their duty to commit suicide for the betterment of the organization of a whole (Ritzer 1992).

Durkheim argues in effect that the relation of suicide rates to social regulation is curvilinear, where high suicide rates are associated with both excessive individuation and excessive regulation. Looking at excessive regulation, the demands of the organization are so great that suicide varies directly rather than inversely with the degree of integration.

Hence an individual who strongly believes in a terrorist organization's ideology and goals will become a human-bomb and sacrifice himself for their cause. In the case of religious terrorist organizations, "take an insane person obsessed by religious ideas who would be classified among religious monomaniacs...He believes himself called upon to reform not only religion but also to reform society; perhaps he will also imagine the highest sort of destiny reserved for himself" (Durkheim 1951, p. 60-61). When an individual believes strongly enough in the collective, he will do anything to help their cause.

Durkheim also contends that altruistic suicide may actually spring from the hope and belief that there is a beautiful life after death. For suicide bombers, the belief in becoming a martyr following death can in some cases be enough to engage in the suicide attack. Suicide for martyrdom is also labeled acute altruistic suicide.

According to the Quran, the benefits of suicide for the collective is said to include forgiving the martyr's sins, redemption from the torments of the grave, security from the "fear of hell", a crown of glory featuring a ruby "worth more than the world and all that is in it", marriage to seventy-two black-eyed virgins, and the ability to extend these heavenly privileges to seventy relatives (Rapoport 1998).

Martyrdom seems to offer these individuals more in the afterlife than they could ever have while living. A senior Hamas official stated that becoming a martyr was among the highest, if not *the* highest, honor (Juergensmeyer 2000). Hence the respect and gifts one would receive for sacrificing one's self for the terrorist organization and cause is very influential. According to Young (1972), the person who commits acute altruistic suicide must be certain that he has no life of his own.

FATALISTIC SUICIDE

The most underdeveloped category of Durkheim's suicide typology, fatalistic suicide occurs from excessive regulation. Suicide of this nature can be characterized by situations that result from continuous political and economic oppression (Johnson 1979; Taylor 1982). In the case of suicide terrorism, many individuals are excessively regulated both politically and economically. As will be discussed further, the families of those who are chosen and volunteer for a suicide attack receive money after the act has taken place. Sacrificing oneself for to end the economic oppression for their family, along with the promise of becoming a martyr, is a means to help the family, the terrorist organization, and the oppressed individual.

Individuals who endure excessive regulation are blocked from legitimate opportunities for advancement in society. "Fatalistic suicides involve an escape from a normative situation from which there is no appeal" (Stack 1979, p. 162). The process of over-control where an individual is blocked from political freedom and economic opportunity creates a condition of over-control. Stack (1979) contends, "in such a totalitarian environment, marked by relatively low freedom and respect for human dignity, already suicidal persons have an additional reason for viewing life as meaningless and are more apt to commit suicide" (p. 162).

It can be argued that while many individuals who are recruited and trained for suicide attacks are well educated, these individuals are usually highly integrated into the terrorist organization. Those individuals who are excessively regulated are often religious males, who are often young, unmarried, unemployed, with some high school education (Ganor 2000). This profile has been found to fit the Hamas Shahid, the Black Tigers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the Shiites in Lebanon (Ergil 2001; Gunaratna 2000; Schbley 2000). The socio-economic status of individuals has therefore been found to be similar among many suicide terrorists that fit the fatalistic suicide typology.

ALTRUISM AND FATALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SUICIDE TERRORISM

Recruitment into the Terrorist Organization

When contemplating whether or not to become involved in a terrorist organization for the sole purpose of becoming a human time bomb would seem to most people to be easy decision. However, imagine you are in an economic stranglehold where you cannot support yourself or your family or you are being politically or religiously prosecuted. Now imagine that you are given a chance to fight for your religion or political beliefs, earn enough money so that your family won't have to worry about money ever again, and what might be considered as the most important benefit, the opportunity of achieving martyrdom. The above illustrates scenarios and dilemmas that some individuals who are recruited for suicide attacks endure daily. As in the case of martyrdom, it is believed to be the highest honor one can attain, ensuring that volunteers for suicide attacks are at a ready supply.

The process of recruitment is extremely important for the terrorist organization. Generally, an organization will reject volunteers if at all possible. Suicide attacks are vital to the success of the group, which makes the selection process crucial. Potential suicide bombers have to prove their

religious loyalty and allegiance, honesty, and acceptance of the organizations' ideology. "Because candidates are chosen on the basis of religious devotion, trust, and the ability to keep a secret, recruiters naturally prefer to pick candidates that they have known for a longer period of time" (Ben-Yishai 1995). Terrorist members recruit possible suicide bombers in mosques, schools, universities and jails. It is important however that if a recruit not be too involved in illegal activity to avoid being watched by police. The low profile of a suicide bomber is important to ensure that the mission will be fulfilled and the plans of the attack remain secret until the mission is complete. Some organizations such as Izz-al Din al-Qassam or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) circulate among schools or mosques during religious instruction. The recruiters introduce the subject of giving one's life for Allah and watch the students' reactions. Students who seem interested are then singled out possible special merit (Kushner 1996).

A suicide bomber who is socialized and indoctrinated into the terrorist organization's ideology is apt to earn thousands of dollars for his family for completing the attack. Those individuals in an impoverished society may be recruited because they little or no means to support themselves. As one elderly Palestinian stated, "Look around and see how we live here. Then maybe you will understand why there are always volunteers for martyrdom. Every good Muslim understands that it's better to die fighting than live without hope" (Jacobson 2001, p. 20). The suicide attack will take one individual's life, however this will be the means of which all family members will be economically taken care of for an extended period of time.

After the suicide attack, both the material and the social status of the shaheed's (martyr) family improve significantly. The family usually receives a cash payment of between \$1,000 and \$25,000 dollars (Shaked 2000). While this is a loss for the suicide bomber and his family, he believes that they will eventually rejoin him in the afterlife. This excessive economic regulation proves to be a more than appropriate comparison with Durkheim's fatalistic suicide.

Martyrdom

Possibly the most attractive and appealing reward for potential suicide bombers is martyrdom. An individual becomes a martyr when he dies or makes a great sacrifice for a cause. The word martyr comes from the Greek work for "witness," such as to witness one's faith. In most cases, martyrdom is regarded not only as a testimony to the degree of one's commitment, but also as a performance of a religious act, specifically an act of self-sacrifice (Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 167). In the context of suicide terrorism, the bomber sacrifices his life for the terrorist organization. Many believe that becoming a martyr is a fulfillment of religious command, it is a duty and right. Others see it as an escape for both the suicide bomber and their family. The bomber is glorified in an afterlife paradise while the family of the recipient is granted economic security.

Martyrs are of immeasurable propaganda value. Martyrs speak to their people and the organization they represent and tell them to follow their example, the cause is greater than your lives. They say to the outside world, "We fear humiliation more than we fear death, and therefore, we have no fear of your well-trained and well-equipped armies, your high-tech arsenal." To the potential recruit for a suicide mission, the more powerless he may have felt before committing the attack, the more dramatically death will exalt him. After a life devoid of

any previous significance, he now becomes a powerful ideal; his very name inspires fear” (Reuter 2002, p. 3-4).

Martyrdom is a powerful recruiting method. Terrorist organizations have replaced the language of “suicide” with that of “martyrdom”. The term suicide is viewed upon those individuals who are unbalanced and insane, while martyrdom is looked upon as sacrificing one’s life for the betterment of the group and their interests. Those who commit suicide kill themselves for personal gain, while those who kill themselves in the name of martyrdom do so for the collective. While it is believed among suicide bombers within terrorist organizations that they will become martyrs, they are still committing suicide.

The distinguishing factor between martyrdom and suicide, according to Hoffman and McCormick (2004) has been socially constructed. Martyrs only exist in the minds of those who grant this status to them. “The social basis of this interpretation has given sponsoring groups the opportunity to reframe suicide attacks as acts of *self*-martyrdom. In so doing, they have helped popularize these attacks in the eyes of their political constituents and ensured themselves a steady stream of recruits” (p. 253). The term martyrdom is suggestive of the process of destroying as spiritual since the word comes from the Latin, *sacrificium*, “to make holy.” The destruction is performed within a religious context that transforms the killing into a positive act. Therefore, like all religious images of sacrifice, martyrdom provides symbols of a violence conquered by the larger framework of order that religious language provides (Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 167-168).

Upon being socialized and deeply integrated into the sponsoring terrorist group, the suicide bomber makes a videotape that is designed to evoke a sense of pride and reciprocal obligation on the part of the viewing audience. “The tapes show the “living martyr” standing tall, wearing his suicide vest, holding a copy of the Koran and a Kalashnikov, calling on those he leaves behind to join him in paradise” (Hoffman and McCormick 2004, p. 255). It is here where he pledges his allegiance to the terrorist organization, states the objective of his mission, and praises the holy war that he wishes others to participate in.

These tapes are used for multiple reasons. First, they are used to elevate the suicide bombers’ status and show his absolute devotion to the group. Second, they are used as a recruiting tool for future suicide bombers. The sense of pride of the “living martyr” in the tape is meant to signify what could be for potential volunteers. Finally, the tape is meant to finalize the socialization and integration process. This videotape seals the contract of the suicide bombers fate and prevents him from changing his mind at the last minute.

By employing this type of pressure upon the suicide bomber, he comes to understand that a sudden change of mind would be equivalent not only to betrayal of the organization and its ideology, but also to tremendous shame (Hoffman and McCormick 2002). He will watch the videotape multiple times to familiarize himself with the upcoming operation and to further reinforce the reasons for completing the attack. It is at this point where the individual understands himself solely as a member of the terrorist organization, where self-sacrifice is the only obligation left to perform.

The death of a martyr is thought to be an end to suffering and repression, and a chance for a new beginning. As a recruiting tool martyrdom is two-fold, individuals are recruited to kill themselves in the name of God but to fulfill the goals and motives of the sponsoring terrorist organization. The deaths of suicide bombers are glorified and celebrated, while they are projected as heroes of the cause. The family is congratulated upon the death of their son or daughter, while their heroic and selfless act is the topic of discussion in sermons and discussions.

Terrorist Group Identity

Integration of a suicide bomber into a terrorist organization is vital to the likelihood of the attack being carried out. Suicide attacks, as well as the cultivated legacies that follow them, serve as a symbol of group cohesion and commitment to the organization (Hoffman and McCormick 2004). The most integrated individuals into the organization are best suited to its needs and goals, and are less apt to focus on the disadvantages. It is these individuals who are most likely to volunteer or participate in a suicide attack for the betterment of the group. The socialization into the organization, along with specific motives and goals, perpetuate selected individuals to carry out with the attacks as well as to end their own lives.

Identity construction provides a template for framing and interpreting the world, defining one's place in the world, and shaping one's responses to external events. The identities of suicide bombers are shaped by their larger social context and by the organizations that sponsor them (Hoffman and McCormick 2004). The shaping of identities in terrorist organizations is the same as with any other group. Similar to preliminary militaristic socialization, individuals assume the roles within the group that will accord them the best response from those in higher-ranking positions. Behavior that is consistent with the identity of the organization will be rewarded, while unwanted behavior will provoke punishment. Over time, the individuals are indoctrinated into believing the group's ideology where the goals and motives of the organization come before the individual.

In studies of the military, persons in leadership positions were shown to be most likely to commit heroic altruistic suicide (Riemer 1998). On the contrary, within terrorist organizations, leaders rarely put their own lives (or those of their relatives) at risk. This suggests that there are clear distinctions between individual motives and the organization's goals and motives (Moghadam 2003). Thus, it is necessary for the organization to recruit individuals either from within the organization that strongly believe in the group ideology, or get those outside the organization that are being oppressed and need an escape.

The act of self-sacrifice serves as a major function for a terrorist organization. Some organizations therefore look to recruit individuals for suicide attacks rather than accept volunteers. Selection is based upon individuals that have been radicalized by their religious, economic, or political circumstances. Individual's selected go through a socialization process, "designed to reinforce the qualities for which the individual was selected in the first place and ensure that their sense of identity and obligation are aligned with the group's operational requirements" (Hoffman and McCormick 2004). These individuals are expendable, however they are a key component in the fulfillment of an organization's goals and motives. Both training and the indoctrination involve the mental preparation to sacrifice one's life for the larger

effort. “To that end, the organization provides the candidate with religious and political indoctrination, in the course of which the terrorist act will be given a moral, political, and religious justification” (Moghadam 2003, p. 85).

Training and Indoctrination

The indoctrination into the terrorist organization is done so primarily through training exercises. Training can last up to several months, depending on the intricateness, complexity, and urgency of the operation. Religious indoctrination as well as anti-propaganda towards the targeted objective is subjected to the potential suicide bomber on a regular basis. These individuals attend classes where emphasis is placed on those parts of the Quran and Hadith that glorify martyrdom, and that describe the benefits of the afterlife. The students are then required to show their commitment to the group by completing assigned tasks that test the recruit’s ability to follow orders and manage secrecy (Kushner 1996).

Once a volunteer has been successfully indoctrinated and socialized into the groups’ ideology and goals, he will disappear and undergo intensive training for several days. It is here where he will learn and become familiar with the operational aspects of the mission, including how to detonate the explosives he will be employing (Ganor 2001). In the suicide bombers last days, he will compose the videotape that portrays himself as a “living martyr” and get mentally prepared for the upcoming mission. Just before the bomber sets out on his mission, Nasra Hassan writes,

He performs a ritual ablution, puts on clean clothes, and tries to attend at least one communal prayer at a mosque. He says the traditional Islamic prayer that is customary before battle, and he asks Allah to forgive his sins and to bless his mission. He puts a Quran in his left breast pocket, above the heart, and he straps explosives around his waist or picks up a briefcase or bag containing the bomb. The planner bids him farewell with the words, “May Allah be with you, may Allah give you the success so that you achieve Paradise.” The would be martyr responds, “Inshallah, we will meet in Paradise.” (Hassan 2001, p. 41).

CONCLUSION

Through analyzing the process of recruitment, socialization, and training of suicide bombers into terrorist organizations, it can be seen how suicide attacks mirror Durkheim’s altruistic and fatalistic suicide types. A terrorist organization without individuals willing to die are not able to translate its goals into practice, whereas an individual who is willing to die to become a martyr would normally lack the resources, information, and logistical capacity to turn his intentions into actions. The indoctrination of the willing individual into a supporting terrorist organization can meet both objectives. The suicide attacker dies in the name of God, while the terrorist organization has its goals and objectives met.

There are only two basic requirements that a terrorist organization must obtain to achieve their operational objectives: individuals willing to kill and individuals willing to die. By taking advantage of people’s poor socio-economic state or through the promise of martyrdom, terrorist organizations are able to recruit individuals who will sacrifice their lives. Motivations for completing the suicide attack range from earning money for the family, fighting against religious

persecution, or becoming a religious martyr. While not all recruited individuals may fully believe in the terrorist organizations' cause from the outset, they come to after a rigorous indoctrination process.

Upon being socialized into the terrorist organizations' ideology and completing the attack, the suicide bomber is celebrated as hero throughout the supporters of the cause. The terrorist organization uses the suicide bomber three reasons: 1) to complete the goals and objectives of their cause; 2) a graphic attack such as this attracts a vast amount of media coverage, creating fear within the targeted group and gaining the highest possible exposure from the viewing audience; and 3) used as a recruiting technique in attracting new suicide bombers who are supportive of their cause.

The use of suicide bombers is hard to ignore. It is hard to comprehend how someone could willingly blow themselves up, yet this is the new wave of terrorism in the world today. Terrorist organizations must state the importance of giving one's life for the group because in reality, they have limited means to fight with. If a terrorist organization had conventional weapons to fight with, there would likely be a decline in suicide attacks. They therefore use martyrdom as a rationalization technique to continue attracting new recruits. The most frightening aspect of suicide bombers is that there is no deterrence that can stop them from completing their missions. Until one is discovered and utilized, suicide attacks will continue. In such circumstances, individuals are both pulled into carrying out suicide attacks by an attracting organization, and pushed into doing so by a social and cultural environment that honors those who sacrifice themselves in the name of their larger collective.

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