What Motivates the Suicide Bombers?

The heart-wrenching and horrible daily accounts of suicide bombings rarely reveal the underlying cause of the bombers’ motivations. But a comprehensive database at Australia’s Flinders University that has compiled information on these types of attacks from as early as 1981 can shed light on such motivations. And the conclusions are startling, Professor Riaz Hassan, author of a forthcoming book on suicide bombing, tells us. For one, the conventional wisdom that bombers are insane or religious fanatics is wrong. Individual bombers show no personality disorders and the attacks themselves are often politically motivated, aimed at achieving specific strategic goals such as forcing concessions or generating greater support. Moreover, the motivations are complex: “humiliation, revenge, and altruism” all drive the individual to engage in, and the community to condone, suicide bombing. Indeed, as Hassan notes, participating in suicide bombing can fulfill a range of meanings from the “personal to communal.” Without understanding these motivations and addressing them, it would appear the governments or organizations that seek to end suicide bombings are likely to be disappointed. – YaleGlobal

Study of a comprehensive database gives a surprising answer

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ADELAIDE: Suicide bombing attacks have become a weapon of choice among terrorist groups because of their lethality and ability to cause mayhem and fear. Though depressing, the almost daily news reports of deaths caused by suicide attacks rarely explain what motivates the attackers. Between 1981 and 2006, 1200 suicide attacks constituted 4 percent of all terrorist attacks in the world and killed 14,599 people or 32 percent of all terrorism related deaths. The question is why?

At last, now we have some concrete data to begin addressing the question. The Suicide Terrorism Database in Flinders University in Australia, the most comprehensive in the world, holds information on suicide bombings in Iraq, Palestine-Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which together accounted for 90 per cent of all suicide attacks between 1981 and 2006. Analysis of the information contained therein yields some interesting clues: It is politics more than religious fanaticism that has led terrorists to blow themselves up.
The evidence from the database largely discredits the common wisdom that the personality of suicide bombers and their religion are the principal cause. It shows that though religion can play a vital role in recruiting and motivating potential future suicide bombers, the driving force is not religion but a cocktail of motivations including politics, humiliation, revenge, retaliation and altruism. The configuration of these motivations is related to the specific circumstances of the political conflict behind the rise of suicide attacks in different countries.

On October 4, 2003, 29 year old Palestinian lawyer Hanadi Jaradat exploded her suicide belt in the Maxim restaurant in Haifa killing 20 people and wounding many more. According to her family, her suicide mission was in revenge for the killing of her brother and her fiancé by the Israeli security forces and in revenge for all the crimes Israel had perpetrated in the West Bank by killing Palestinians and expropriating their lands. The main motive for many suicide bombings in Israel is revenge for acts committed by Israelis.

In September 2007 when American forces raided an Iraqi insurgent camp in the desert town of Singar near the Syrian border they discovered biographies of more than seven hundred foreign fighters. The Americans were surprised to find that 137 were Libyans and 52 of them were from a small Libyan town of Darnah. The reason why so many of Darnah’s young men had gone to Iraq for suicide missions was not the global jihadi ideology, but an explosive mix of desperation, pride, anger, sense of powerlessness, local tradition of resistance and religious fervor. A similar mix of factors is now motivating young Pashtuns to volunteer for suicide missions in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Apart from one demographic attribute – that the majority of suicide bombers tend to be young males – the evidence has failed to find a stable set of demographic, psychological, socioeconomic and religious variables that can be causally linked to suicide bombers’ personality or socioeconomic origins. With the exception of a few cases, their life stories show no apparent connection between violent militant activity and personality disorders.

Typically, most suicide bombers are psychologically normal and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities. Randomly attached labels such as “mad” denote one’s inability to fathom the deeper reasons but don’t advance our understanding of the causes of the phenomenon of suicide bombing. Rather, they impede us from discovering its real nature, purpose and causes.

Understanding the terrorist organization’s logic is more important than understanding individual motivations in explaining suicide attacks.
bombings have high symbolic value because the willingness of the perpetrators to die signals high resolve and dedication to their cause. They serve as symbols of a just struggle, galvanize popular support, generate financial support for the organization and become a source of new recruits for future suicide missions.

Suicide bombings serve the interests of the sponsoring organization in two ways: by coercing an adversary to make concessions, and by giving the organization an advantage over its rival in terms of support from constituencies. Contrary to the popular image that suicide terrorism is an outcome of irrational religious fanaticism, suicide bombing attacks are resolutely a politically-motivated phenomenon.

Humiliation, revenge and altruism appear to play a key role at the organizational and individual levels in shaping the sub-culture that promotes suicide bombings. Humiliation is an emotional process that seeks to discipline the target party's behavior by attacking and lowering their own and others' perceptions of whether they deserve respect.

The actions of the US prison guards at Abu Ghraib played on what it meant to be an honorable, self-respecting subject in Iraqi society. The disciplinary practices humiliated the prisoners, but were also felt and seen as humiliating to all Iraqis. In the months following the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, daily suicide bombing attacks in Iraq increased dramatically. Similarly, counterinsurgency operations involving random house searches, interrogations, arrests and other violations of human dignity were followed by an increase in suicide attacks.

People tend to have a strong aversion to what they perceive as injustice, with the dark side manifested as revenge. One consequence of the desire for vengeance is an individual’s willingness to endure sacrifice to fulfill the act. Contemplation of revenge can appear to achieve a range of goals, including righting perceived injustices, restoring the self-worth of the vengeful individual and deterring future injustice.

Revenge is also a response to the continuous suffering of an aggrieved community. At the heart of the whole process are perceptions of personal harm, unfairness and injustice, and the anger, indignation, and hatred associated with such perceptions.

Men attach more value to vengeance than women; and young people are more prepared to act in a vengeful manner than older individuals. It is not surprising, then, to find that most suicide bombers are both young and male.

The meaning and nature of suicide in a suicide bombing are strikingly different from ordinary suicide. Suicide bombing falls into the category of altruistic suicidal actions that involve valuing one's life as less worthy than that of the group's honor, religion, or some other collective interest. Religiously and
nationalistically coded attitudes towards acceptance of death, stemming from long periods of collective suffering, humiliation and powerlessness enable political organizations to offer suicide bombings as an outlet for their people’s feelings of desperation, deprivation, hostility and injustice.

For the individual, participating in a suicide mission is not about dying and killing alone but has a broader significance for achieving multiple purposes – from personal to communal. These include gaining community approval and political success; liberating the homeland; achieving personal redemption or honor; using martyrdom to effect the survival of the community; refusing to accept subjugation; seeking revenge for personal and collective humiliation; conveying religious or nationalistic convictions; expressing guilt, shame, material and religious rewards; escaping from intolerable everyday degradations of life under occupation, boredom, anxiety and defiance.

The configuration of these purposes varies and is an outcome of specific circumstances of the political conflict behind the rise of suicide attacks as a tactic and a weapon.

The causes of suicide bombings lie not in individual psychopathology but in broader social conditions. Understanding and knowledge of these conditions is vital for developing appropriate public policies and responses to protect the public.

Suicide bombings are carried out by motivated individuals associated with community based organizations. Strategies aimed a finding ways to induce communities to abandon such support would curtail support for terrorist organizations. Strategies for eliminating or at least addressing collective grievances in concrete and effective ways would have a significant, and, in many cases, immediate impact on alleviating the conditions that nurture the subcultures of suicide bombings. Support for suicide bombing attacks is unlikely to diminish without tangible progress in achieving at least some of the fundamental goals that suicide bombers and those sponsoring and supporting them share.

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Outline

I. Introduction
- The driving force behind suicide attackers is not solely based on religion; in fact, it has just as much to do with revenge, humiliation, and indoctrination.

II. Suicide bombers decide to take such actions as an act of vengeance

III. Friedman explains Terrorists are assignee with a handler who prepares the suicidal bomber for his or her mission.

The preparation process is extensive and well planned. The handler’s job is to prepare the bomber for a trial run of the attack, and to foresee any potential disruption that can hinder the plan. Once the suicide bomber completes the mission, the family of the suicide bomber receives compensation and becomes a celebrity in the community.