Requirements and Facilitators for Suicide Terrorism:

An Explanatory Framework for Prediction and Prevention

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Abstract

When it comes to explaining, predicting, and preventing suicide terrorism, there is a lot more important work to be done. This paper draws on the most recent evidence about where suicide terrorism occurs and why to propose a basic explanatory framework. Taking a bottom-up approach, it first identifies the minimum requirements for a suicide terrorism attack, and then outlines additional facilitators for the deadliest attacks and most prolonged suicide terrorism campaigns. Next, it applies these variables to clarify popular misunderstandings about foreign occupation as the primary cause of suicide terrorism. Finally, it shows how security officials can use this framework to develop a series of short term and long term countermeasures and begin to reduce the prevalence of suicide terrorism worldwide.

Introduction

There has been a great deal of previous research which has attempted to explain the psychology of suicide terrorists, the patterns among their attacks, and the best countermeasures for stopping them [1]. However, with the exception of the fence Israel built to keep suicide terrorists out of its cities, it is not clear that efforts to combat this deadliest of threats have actually been successful. The United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs recently met to address the question "Ten Years After 9/11: Are We Safer?" Its answer was a resounding 'yes,' and given the lack of a suicide attack on U.S. soil since 9/11, it is possible that the committee was correct [2]. On the other hand, political proclamations of this type should be viewed with skepticism, given the speakers' potential agendas, which may be to reassure the populace, protect their own jobs, and appear tough on terror. For comparison's sake, if a government committee had met the day before 9/11 to discuss the terrorist threat, it may have similarly framed its assessment in positive terms, unaware of the terrible danger that was right around the corner. Furthermore, on a global scale, suicide terrorism attacks have significantly increased over the past decade [3].

Ultimately, when it comes to explaining, predicting, and preventing suicide terrorism, there is a lot more important work to be done. This paper draws on the most recent evidence about where these attacks occur and why to propose a basic explanatory framework. Taking a bottom-up approach, it will first identify the minimum requirements for a suicide terrorism attack, and then outline additional facilitators for the deadliest attacks and most prolonged suicide terrorism campaigns. Next, it will apply these variables to clarify popular misunderstandings about foreign occupation as the primary cause of suicide terrorism. Finally, it will show how security officials can use the proposed framework to develop a series of short term and long term countermeasures and begin to reduce the prevalence of suicide terrorism worldwide.

Minimum Requirements for Suicide Terrorism

It is critical for scholars and security officials to first identify the minimum requirements for suicide terrorism, because these variables dictate when a single attack is even possible. If one of these variables is missing or successfully neutralized, officials can sleep soundly at night, knowing that, at the very least, a suicide attack will not occur in that specific context. On the other hand, as long these factors are present, the threat of a suicide terrorist attack persists, no matter how much progress is made in other areas of the broader counterterrorism struggle.

It is often said that for a crime to be committed, three things are needed: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a capable guardian [4]. In the counterterrorism realm, similar principles apply. At the bare minimum, there are three main requirements for a suicide attack: (1) suicidal intent, (2) access to weapons, and (3) access to enemy targets. If these three factors are present, a suicide attack can be launched. It may be limited in sophistication or magnitude, but it can occur.

Suicidal Intent

Psychologically, an individual only needs to have suicidal intent to potentially carry out a suicide attack. Past research on both conventional suicide and suicide terrorism has shown that this intent may be the combination of individual, social, and situational factors [5]. Sometimes people develop suicidal intent due to their own individual problems, such as mental illness, substance abuse disorder, or a personal crisis, and then decide to carry out suicide attacks for those reasons [6]. For instance, a preemptively arrested suicide bomber known as Zuheir had a horrible family life which led him to "such a state of despair that I wanted to kill myself" [7]. As he explains, "I used to stand in front of Israeli tanks, hoping they would shoot me. I tried more than once, but it didn't work….I developed a mental complex from thinking a lot whether to commit suicide or not" [8]. Ultimately, Zuheir decided to carry out a suicide attack "not because I belonged to the organization, but to realize my wish to die" [9]. On the other hand, sometimes an otherwise psychologically healthy person may become suicidal due to extreme social pressures, which could range from explicit threats or coercion to perceptions of peer pressure. In addition, otherwise psychologically healthy individuals sometimes become suicidal because of extreme situational factors, such as being cornered by police [10]. As long as the individual intends to orchestrate his or her own death, that qualifies as suicidal intent [11].

However, the vast majority of people never develop suicidal intent, and thus would never seriously consider carrying out a suicide attack. A number of recent studies have shown that there appear to be fundamental psychological differences between those who volunteer for suicide missions and those who do not, as with any sample that is primarily self-selected [12]. For instance, Ariel Merari's research team recently asked a series of regular terrorists and organizers of suicide attacks whether they would be willing to carry out "martyrdom operations." Eleven of twelve regular terrorists said they would not, making statements such as "I am incapable of doing it," "I simply am not interested," "I cannot see myself dead," and "This is no way to die" [13]. Similarly, nine of fourteen organizers said they would not, commenting that "I didn't want to do it myself," "I wasn't ready to do it myself," "I wouldn't be willing to carry out a martyrdom operation," "I didn't want go on a martyrdom operation…the thought of being a

martyr didn't cross my mind," and "I am willing to fight but not to die in a suicide attack" [14]. Even the minority who said that in theory they would consider it also offered numerous excuses for why they would not volunteer [15].

As an aside, it must be noted that there are some attacks which appear to be suicide terrorism but are not, and in these cases, suicidal intent is not required. For instance, in some past attacks, individuals have been tricked into carrying explosives and then were detonated by remote control, against their will [16]. They are not suicide terrorists, they are victims—much like an average civilian would be if a terrorist secretly slipped something explosive into his or her bag. Similarly, donkeys have been used for bombing attacks [17], but they did not have suicidal intent either.

Access to Weapons

In the modern era, no one has carried out a suicide attack with his or her bare hands; weapons are always required. Historically, most suicide terrorists have used bombs, and in the vast majority of cases, they received these bombs from others, rather than making the explosive devices themselves [18]. When individuals with suicidal intent do not have access to ready-made bombs, their options are immediately limited. On the one hand, they can try to construct the bombs themselves, which may be tricky for a novice, but is certainly not impossible. As Bruce Hoffman details, "a merely competent technician, rather than the skilled engineer once required, can build a bomb. Explosive material is packed into pockets sewn into a canvas or denim belt or vest and hooked up to a detonator—usually involving a simple hand-operated plunger" [19]. Instructions for bombmaking can be found online (which only helps if the individual has unfiltered internet access), but not everyone is up to the bomb-making task.

The other primary option is to carry out a suicide attack using a gun, assuming that the individual can obtain one. (Some commentators insist that gun-wielding suicide attacks are not suicide terrorism, because the perpetrator's acts of killing and suicide are sequential, rather than simultaneous. However, this momentary difference is essentially meaningless in cases where the motives and destructive results are identical.) The problem with this method is the uncertainty of death, which may deter those with suicidal intent who want to be sure to perish in their attacks. Unless they are willing to shoot themselves in the head (and most Islamic suicide terrorists are not), suicide attackers with guns are relying on death coming via "suicide by cop." If the bullets do not strike just right, they may end up wounded and in enemy custody. Examples of this outcome include Major Nidal Hassan, who was shot in the spine and paralyzed, and a series of other attackers who have been shot in the face, groin, leg, and so on—and then lived to face the consequences [20].

Finally, if the individual does not have access to bombs or guns, he or she could attempt a suicide attack by crashing a plane or vehicle into enemies at a high rate of speed (like the 9/11 hijackers), or by spreading a deadly chemical, biological, or radiological weapon. Examples of suicide attacks by these methods are exceedingly rare.

Access to Enemy Targets

Naturally, individuals with suicidal intent and weapons still need access to targets for their attacks. Of course, the nature of terrorism dictates that soft targets are virtually everywhere, and it can seem nearly impossible for security officials to guard them all. On the other hand, access is sometimes prevented by geographic barriers, such as oceans, mountains, or thousands of miles, or physical barriers, such as walls and fences. For instance, if an individual in Iran wants to attack the U.S. or Europe, that person will need to travel, and that presents its own set of costs and challenges. On the other hand, if the same individual wants to attack the Iranian government, that may be a hard target, depending upon local security measures. But if the target is simply the Iranian people, access is everywhere.

Beyond simple logic, the best evidence that access to enemy targets is a critical requirement for suicide terrorism comes from Israel, where a fence was built to prevent suicide terrorists from entering the country's cities [21]. Of course, even fences cannot deny all access, but the result of this countermeasure was a dramatic decrease in attacks. According to the *Global Terrorism Database*, from 2001-2003, there were 82 suicide attacks on Israeli soil [22]. After the initial portions of the fence were finished in late 2003, there were just 16 suicide attacks over the next three years [23]. After the fence's path was finalized in 2006, there were just 3 suicide attacks over the next three year span [24]. This security success is almost completely attributable to the fact that suicide terrorists were denied access to enemy targets.

Additional Facilitators of Suicide Terrorism

Beyond the minimum requirements, there additional facilitators of suicide terrorism attacks and prolonged suicide terrorism campaigns. These include: (4) homicidal intent, (5) a sponsoring terrorist organization, (6) social approval of suicide terrorism, and (7) social stigma of conventional suicide.

Homicidal Intent

Despite widespread assumptions to the contrary, homicidal intent is not a fundamental requirement of suicide terrorism. There have been a number of suicide terrorists who have not demonstrated the desire to kill anyone, although the percentage of these offenders in unknown. In these cases, the perpetrators may have wanted to frame their deaths as heroic acts of martyrdom, rather than as conventional suicide, because they cared so desperately about how they would be perceived. The aforementioned case of Zuheir, who was just looking for a way to die, is one example where homicidal intent was absent [25]. In addition, there have been cases where suicide terrorists directly acted to minimize casualties. For instance, suicide bomber Qari Sami deliberately walked away from a crowd in Kabul before blowing himself up [26]. Furthermore, recent reports from Afghanistan indicate that nearly fifty percent of suicide bombers there only end up killing themselves [27]. This statistic is hard to attribute to mere incompetence; it suggests that at least in some percentage of these cases, the suicide terrorists did not really care to kill.

Of course, when homicidal intent is present and particularly strong, the resulting attacks are likely to be much more deadly, because truly homicidal suicide terrorists are motivated to

maximize enemy casualties. Suicide terrorists' desire to kill is often rooted in their lust for revenge [28], which is also a common motive for murder-suicide [29]. In various cases, suicide terrorists have attacked to avenge past insults and offenses, personal mistreatment and abuse, or the death of a loved one at the hands of the enemy [30].

Sponsoring Terrorist Organization

Sponsoring terrorist organizations are another common facilitator of suicide terrorism. However, organizations are not a requirement for successful attacks, and technological advances have ensured that today's attackers can do more damage on their own than ever before. For instance, on July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik carried out a bombing attack on government buildings in Oslo, Norway, leaving eight people dead. He then traveled to a Workers' Youth League summer camp 25 miles away and launched a suicide attack there, fatally shooting 69 people and wounding 66 more [31]. As it turned out, Breivik, who had written at length about martyring himself in his manifesto and had wanted to commit "suicide by cop" during his attack, eventually changed his mind and surrendered when security officials arrived after an hour long delay [32]. Subsequent investigations revealed that although he shared the ideology of some radical groups and had even tried to reach out to them, his attack was solely the product of his own efforts [33].

On the other hand, there are many suicide attacks which would never occur without the sponsorship of terrorist organizations, and others which become far more deadly because of it. In part, this is because the organizations often provide the access to weapons and access to targets [34], without which attacks are essentially impossible. Sponsoring terrorist organizations may also increase suicidal and homicidal intent among future attackers, as well as boost social approval of suicide terrorism through their use of propaganda [35]. In addition, the most sophisticated attacks, such as those of September 11, 2001, generally benefit from the professional expertise, funding, and support operations provided by terrorist organizations and their leaders [36].

Social Approval of Suicide Terrorism

Social approval of virtually any activity increases the likelihood that people will engage in it, and suicide terrorism is no exception. A great deal of past research indicates that individuals who believe they will celebrated and honored for committing acts of suicide terrorism find the prospect significantly more alluring [37]. Because of the social approval in their cultures, subcultures, or peer groups, these people often feel that carrying out suicide attacks will increase their "personal significance" and provide "self-fulfillment...material rewards, status advancement, [and] conspicuous demonstration of bravery" [38].

In the past, social approval of suicide terrorism has often been highest in the regions where Islam is the dominant religion [39]. In addition, Pew Research Center surveys in a number of countries around the world found that individuals who primarily identify themselves as Muslim are more likely to approve of suicide bombings [40]. In part, this may be due to a distortion of the Islamic concept of martyrdom, which in its original sense did not refer to individuals who intentionally killed themselves. By conflating martyrdom and suicide terrorism, radical leaders have

successfully infused the latter with both social and religious legitimacy [41]. However, it must also be noted that some individuals do not care whether their behavior is socially approved of or not, and they may prefer to defy social standards.

Social Stigma of Conventional Suicide

Previous research has shown that some people carry out suicide terrorism attacks to escape their overwhelming personal crises, which may include mental illness, financial difficulties, adultery scandals, unwanted pregnancies, substance abuse addiction, or painful health problems [42]. For these individuals, conventional suicide might have appealed as a potential escape, but strong social stigmas and religious prohibitions against the practice got in the way. Virtually all cultures discourage suicide, but some are far more accepting than others of the individual's right to make that decision [43].

Social approval of suicide terrorism and social stigmas of conventional suicide often work together. When a significant percentage of people in any context believe that suicide terrorism is justified, that opens the door for desperate individuals looking for a way out. And when the same community condemns conventional suicide as a certain path to hell, that closes the alternative escape, furthering the likelihood of a suicide attack. Most societies where Islam is the dominant religion have particularly strong stigmas against conventional suicide, which may help explain why their conventional suicide rates are often below average, while their suicide terrorism rates are often above average [44].

The Misunderstood Role of Foreign Occupation

The requirements and facilitators of suicide terrorism help expose the flaws in past assumptions about why attacks occur in some regions more than others. For instance, in his condescendingly-titled article "It's the Occupation, Stupid," Robert Pape claims to have *proven* that "more than 95 percent of all suicide attacks are in response to foreign occupation" [45]. Citing Pape's research, presidential candidate Ron Paul recently declared that "honest studies show that the real motivation behind the September 11 attacks and the vast majority of other instances of suicide terrorism" is primarily "foreign occupation" [46]. Beyond the apparent agenda—which sounds like blaming the prevalence of suicide terrorism on the presumed bad deeds and bad foreign policy of the United States—this position is also far too simplistic. Complex behaviors are rarely produced by a single cause.

By considering the seven factors reviewed earlier, we can better analyze how foreign occupation affects suicide terrorism rates. For starters, foreign occupation should be expected to increase suicidal intent, due to the psychological consequences of war. For instance, during the first two years of the Iraq war, more than 67,000 civilians were documented as killed or wounded, and many more went missing [47]. Others lost their jobs and homes. Of course, this is not all the fault of the U.S.—in fact, the majority of those killed, wounded, and displaced had local fighters and criminals to blame [48]. But either way, it was almost inevitable that this kind of turmoil would increase the number of people with suicidal intent. In addition, occupation increases access to enemy targets, due to the presence of a large military force. It often increases access to

weapons as well [49]. And finally, foreign occupation should be expected to lead to a rise in both homicidal intent and social approval of suicide terrorism, due to widespread victimization and desires for revenge.

Of course, all policies have costs and benefits, and the decision to occupy a foreign country is no exception. But those who rush to blame foreign occupation for increased suicide terrorism are missing several critical points which should not be overlooked.

First, the relationship between foreign occupation and suicide terrorism rates does not mean that suicide attacks are just politically-motivated. The problem is that foreign occupation often unintentionally increases suicidal and homicidal intent, and then, because of the context and confusion, commentators are quick to attribute political motives to individual attackers.

Second, other types of conflict may produce many of these same effects. For instance, due to their psychological consequences on local inhabitants, sectarian violence and civil war should also be expected to increase suicidal and homicidal intent. And in regions where suicide terrorism has already been established as a combat tactic, these types of conflict will likely boost social approval of suicide terrorism against local enemies as well. This helps explain why many suicide attacks in Iraq have been launched against other Iraqis—not just the foreign occupiers.

Third, *anything* which provides potential attackers with access to 100,000 new enemy targets is likely to increase attack rates. Whether the American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were there for political purposes or humanitarian ones, their presence alone would increase the number of suicide attacks sponsored by local terrorist organizations who have sworn to strike. There are plenty of would-be suicide terrorists who are willing to attack if their enemies are close by, but not if they have to travel thousands of miles to seek them out. This does not mean that the U.S. military should always run or hide from its enemies.

Short and Long Term Countermeasures

By considering the basic requirements and facilitators for suicide terrorism, security officials can begin to craft sound countermeasures. The alternative—throwing strategies against the wall to see what sticks—can be effective on occasion. Sometimes a countermeasure works, even though we may not be sure why. But given the dynamic nature of the threat and the likelihood that challenges will continue to evolve across different countries, cultures, and eras, it is far better to take a research-based approach.

If those in power can prevent (1) suicidal intent, (2) access to weapons, or (3) access to enemy targets, suicide attacks will not occur. If they can prevent (4) homicidal intent, (5) a sponsoring terrorist organization, (6) social approval of suicide terrorism, or (7) social stigma of conventional suicide, the deadliest attacks and most prolonged suicide terrorism campaigns are much less likely.

But some factors are easier to counter than others. For instance, U.S. forces already appear to be doing everything they can to eliminate sponsoring terrorist organizations, so making significant new progress in that area will be difficult. It will also be hard to counter suicide terrorists' access to weapons and targets. As Hoffman suggests, security officials may be able to "encourage businesses from which terrorists can obtain bomb-making components to alert authorities if they

notice large purchases of, for example, ammonium nitrate fertilizer; pipes, batteries, and wires; or chemicals commonly used to fabricate explosives. Information about customers who simply inquire about any of these materials can also be extremely useful to the police" [50]. However, to a large extent, the weapons may already be accessible, and short of withdrawing U.S. personnel or building fences—as Israel has—suicide terrorists will continue to have access to potential targets for their attacks.

On the other hand, in the short term, much more can be done to identify those with suicidal and homicidal intent—before they strike. Specifically, counterterrorism officials should work to develop more accurate psychological and behavioral profiles of suicide terrorists, based on existing data on others with suicidal and homicidal intent, including previous suicide terrorists and previous perpetrators of murder-suicide. These offender profiles should not only be used to train security personnel on what to ask, listen for, and look for, but also to improve internet monitoring and surveillance, educate community members about dangerous warning signs, and develop "sting" operations whereby future suicide terrorist can be lured and arrested.

In addition, over time, much can be done to combat the social approval of suicide terrorism. Most glaringly, counterterrorism officials should actually strive to capitalize on existing stigmas against conventional suicide to properly stigmatize suicide terrorism. The key is to use public diplomacy—or so-called "truthful" propaganda—to show that some past suicide terrorists have been suicidal, thus discrediting them. By providing compelling anecdotes about these individual suicide terrorists, the personal crises and problems that led them to act, and the true motives behind their attacks, officials could expose such killers as cowardly, unstable, and self-destructive.

Furthermore, true heroes and martyrs—both past and present—should be publicly celebrated and distinguished in both character and deed from those who lust for glory and then kill themselves in suicide attacks. By gradually changing the language, so that every suicide terrorist is not automatically labeled a "martyr," leaders could begin to reduce the destructive worship of such attackers and restore social approval to genuine acts of heroism.

Conclusion

Policymakers and security officials should draw upon the most accurate explanations of suicide terrorism to guide their assessments of where attacks occur—and why. By understanding the basic requirements and facilitators for suicide attacks, they should be able to better predict how prospective policies will alter suicide terrorism rates. In addition, officials should implement research-based countermeasures so that, in the short term, potential suicide terrorists can be identified and arrested and, in the long term, the underlying conditions which facilitate such attacks can eventually be undone.

About the Author

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