

Intrinsic and External Factors and Influences on the Motivation of Suicide Attackers

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Introduction

Suicide terrorism is the most extreme example of asymmetrical warfare. It is dramatic, frightening and can be very effective for the terrorist group which employs it. The psychological effects are out of proportion to the damage caused. The individual attackers have a mixture of motivations and the combination of motivators varies between the individual attackers, their groups and their causes.

The terms “suicide terrorism”, “suicide attacks”, “suicide missions” and “suicide bombing” have specific meanings. Pape¹ limits the term “suicide attack” to an attack which is only successful with the death of the terrorist. The terrorist deploys in the expectation of certain death to ensure the success of the mission. “Suicide bombers” are a specific example of this genre as are hijackers who fly aircraft into buildings. “Suicide missions” are carried out by terrorists who realistically do not expect to survive the mission and do not have an escape plan but sometimes survive. The success of the mission is not dependent on their death. Examples are the 1972 attack on Lod Airport and the 2008 attack on Mumbai. “Suicide terrorism” is an all-embracing term that covers all of these events. Participants in suicide attacks have significant differences in their aims, psychological profiles and motivation from those who participate in suicide missions. This paper is specifically directed to the motivation of suicide attackers.

Methodology: A broad internet literature search was performed by entering key words in widely used internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Key words used were “terrorism” (plus derivatives such as “terror”, “terrorist, etc)”, “motivation” and “suicide”. This produced a large number of internet references but the vast majority were unusable because they had been published to express a prejudiced point of view in an attempt to influence opinion to favour the group sponsoring the article. Material was used if confirmed as being from its original source and not being published second or third hand in a context that suited the bias of the author.

The search was performed during July 2012.

A search of the printed literature was performed with the assistance of the Charles Sturt University Library using the key words of “terrorism”, “motivation” and “suicide”.

Liberation Tigers Of Tamil Eelam

Richardson² has provided a brief history of modern suicide attacks. Hezbollah in Lebanon used suicide attacks against US and French military personnel in 1983. The attacks were judged very significant by other terrorist groups because they resulted in the withdrawal of the US and French presence from Lebanon and other groups were influenced to copy. In particular, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) developed suicide bombing to be so unnerving and effective for a vastly outnumbered fighting force, that their methods were studied and copied, notably in the Middle East. Their modus operandi was so influential that it provides some insight into the

motivation of future suicide terrorists. They used men, women, children, animals, boats, trucks and cars, on and off the battlefield. Their suicide bombers killed and wounded Sri Lankan presidents and other national and local politicians. Casualties included thousands of civilians, an Indian former prime minister and moderate Tamil leaders. The effect on the country's political leadership and intellectual elite was severe. They attacked the Sri Lankan top military command, the Sri Lankan navy, oil tankers, oil storage, and major buildings in Colombo. They developed under-garments which carried hidden explosives and enabled them to get close to their targets³.

They developed principles and techniques which have resonated through future groups⁴:

- Glorification of dead bombers with videos, pictures and songs.
- Use of the term “martyrdom” and not “suicide”.
- Use of female bombers.
- Careful selection from many applicants and rejection of those depressed or psychiatrically abnormal.
- Intense physical and psychological training.
- Careful planning by a support team.
- Reconnaissance and infiltration to reach targets.

Prerequisites For Suicide Attacks

There are pre-requisites before a terrorist organisation will resort to suicide attacks. There must be a culture of martyrdom within the organisation or the society which it represents. The group’s social support or pressures can influence the use of suicide. The group itself must make a policy decision to use suicide. It must see sufficient advantages to use the strategy, usually because it is too weak to use conventional methods. There must be a supply of recruits willing to kill or “martyr” themselves. An overabundance of young volunteers can add pressure for them to be deployed by a terrorist group. These factors, 1/ the influence of society or culture, 2/ the terrorist group’s policy, 3/ the psychology or personality of the suicide attacker, all affect the motivation of the attacker.

Psychological Aspects

The psychology of a terrorist will be a factor in his/her motivation to choose the role of suicide attacker. There has been considerable research and publication regarding the psychological profile of suicide attackers, but there is insufficient consistency to establish a workable profile because of the large variety of participants. Bombers have included men, women, villagers, townspeople, unmarried and married people.

“They are young and not so young, educated and not educated, from poor families and from relatively well-off ones. They are not what psychologists call ‘suicidal types’ but are psychiatrically normal, sane and probably logical. They are not depressed, impulsive, lonely, or helpless with a continuous history of being in situations of personal difficulty or economic despair”⁵.

Terrorist groups screen out emotionally unstable people as a security risk⁶.

There is a psychological need for people to have enemies and some of these people are prone to

political violence. Suicide attacks can occur when the circumstances and the individual match.

Terrorists have differing roles within their terrorist group, such as the money launderer, the forger, the organiser of operations, the person who cold-bloodedly shoots someone in the head and the suicide attacker. Each of these roles attracts differing psychological profiles. Bombers may be frustrated and alienated individuals, who have had their identity shaped in extreme fashion by leaders. They can have certain psychological traits, still within normality classifications, which make them more likely to join a terrorist group⁷. “Psychological autopsies” reconstruct the psyche of bombers and reveal personality traits different from other terrorists, such as a weak personality, social marginalisation, rigid thinking and low self-esteem. A possible scenario is that a socially aloof individual joins others at a place of worship. They share a common faith and similar interests. They assume increasingly radical values. Attachment to the group becomes so important that it distorts perceptions and the individual feels obligated to participate in terrorist activity out of loyalty to the group⁸. Individual terrorists may have psychological traits which motivate them to become a suicide attacker in preference to other terrorism options.

Maiese⁹ also considers the psychology of suicide attackers. They see their actions as justified and noble because of their love of their own group and culture which they are protecting. They see their acts as martyrdom, which is heroic and honourable, and not suicide, which is forbidden by Islam and is associated with hopelessness and depression.

Revenge

A very simple summary of motivation for terrorist organisations is “revenge, renown, and reaction”². Suicide attackers frequently claim revenge as a powerful motivator. This information comes from a number of sources such as the attackers’ pre-suicide written or video recordings, and the interrogation of failed or arrested suicide attackers. The Israeli Government has made much of this information available. The revenge motivation may be expressed in very broad terms (eg. anger at the occupation of the Middle East and holy cities by Western nations) or very personal and narrow terms (eg. the death of a relative or an act of personal humiliation). The suicide attacker may be avenging personal grievances or may be avenging perceived grievances against relatives, friends, religion or nation, ie “humiliation-by-proxy”¹⁰. Saleh¹¹ constructed profiles of 67 Palestinian suicide attackers and found almost all had a past history of injury, arrest or death of a

family member by the Israeli Defence Force. The level of desired revenge is extreme and is not limited to simple tit-for-tat. It extends to hatred of the enemy and the need for their total destruction¹².

Religion

Suicide attackers can be motivated by religion when it is distorted to provide the moral justification for immoral acts. They may have been indoctrinated at an early age regarding the virtues and purity of martyrdom and can believe that God has sent them on a mission which will be followed by heavenly rewards in the afterlife. They can have an apocalyptic view that the world is balanced between good and evil, and acting on God's behalf to defend the faith is more important than life⁹. Suicide attackers are not motivated purely by perceived heavenly rewards but mainly by apparent political gains. The heavenly rewards are a consolation or bonus, rather than the prime motivator¹². Religion can remove the normal social, family and other worldly constraints and justify heavenly self-sacrifice¹³.

Religion is not a motivator for all suicide attackers, an example being the LTTE. Also some Middle Eastern groups which use suicide attacks are secular and not Islamic fundamentalists. Pape's¹ opinion is that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any other religion, but that suicide attacks target specific secular and strategic goals. He writes that religion is rarely the root cause but can be used by terrorist organisations for recruiting and motivation.

Nationalism

Maiese⁹ states that religious ideology and political aspirations such as ethno-nationalism tend to be intertwined as motivators. The attacker finds the situation of political oppression, loss of personal rights and the humiliation of military occupation intolerable, and they believe they will find a better life in paradise, particularly if martyrdom is looked on favourably in their society.

Nationalism is a powerful motivator for suicide terrorists. Pape¹ emphasises the nationalistic motivation for suicide attackers responding to foreign occupation. He describes it as "an extreme strategy for national liberation against democracies with troops that pose an imminent threat to control the territory the terrorists regard as their homeland". Most of the groups that have a strategy of suicide attacks are attempting to gain perceived national rights from an "invader" that is militarily too strong for them. Osama bin Laden cited Western presence in the holy cities of Islam and the Middle East as

a prime motive for his group and, as his group is multinational without frontiers, it was necessary for him to nominate a global enemy such as the US¹⁴. Individuals may join these groups and are motivated to become suicide attackers because of factors such as unquestioning acceptance of leadership, reaction to perceived military oppression, the humiliation of living in occupied territory, a sense of outrage and desperation combined with a belief that suicide attacks are the only way to win the war against oppressors⁹.

Religion and ethno-nationalism as combined motivators has been researched and debated by a number of researchers and there is not agreement on the balance of the two^{1,15,16}. The variables between individuals, groups and geography result in no common profile for all suicide attackers.

Rewards

Additional motivation can consist of economic, social and personal rewards, though these are subsidiary to the prime motivators of religion and ethno-nationalism.

The families of suicide bombers get substantial financial and social support after the death of the bomber. At one stage Saddam Hussein of Iraq was paying US\$25,000 to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers¹⁷. Suicide bombers receive large sums of money and their families' social status and reputation improve¹⁸. The Saudi Committee for the Support of al-Quds Intifada, headed by the Saudi Interior Minister, has paid money to the families of Palestinian bombers¹⁹. Palestinian families get a boost in prestige, gifts of household goods and cash. The knowledge that their family will be compensated can remove an important impediment to an attacker's self-sacrifice²⁰. Suicide attackers believe that martyrs can guarantee a place in paradise for 70 people. However not all families are compensated and some are disadvantaged by confiscation of goods and destruction of houses by the Israeli authorities, and so rewards for family should not be regarded as a prime motivator but rather as a side benefit.

Palestinian suicide attackers are aware that they gain substantial social status during training and on completion of their mission. Like the benefits for their families, this is not a prime motivator but is a side benefit. They secure instant fame spread by Arab based television networks like al-Jazeera and their names become well-known, even to children. Bombers prepare videos which are sent to the television networks on the day of the bombing. Posters and calendars are distributed with a "martyr of the month"⁵. A suicide trainee stated "My social

status was greatly enhanced. I got a lot of respect from my acquaintances, and from the young people of my village”⁶. Committing to suicide terrorism can satisfy desires for participation, action, community acceptance and, after joining, a feeling of power and strength with a clearer purpose in life. The terrorist organisation can persuade them that it is rational to sacrifice their life for a good cause and eventually their beliefs and behaviours conform to the group’s basic principles⁹. Deaths are celebrated after the attack with a festive funeral celebration, video cassettes and statements beyond the grave. There is a “Martyr of the Month”²¹.

Attackers anticipate personal rewards in the afterlife following “martyrdom”. These can include rapid passage to paradise with a higher than usual status on arrival, the right to nominate others for easy access to paradise and a welcome by virgins who are available for their pleasure. The reward of virgins is given excessive significance in Western public opinion.

Potential suicide attackers take inspiration from martyrs in previous jihads and publications such as “The Lover of Angels” by Abdullah Azzam, a spiritual mentor for Osama bin Laden, which describes martyrs who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Recruits motivate by watching videos of successful bombings and visiting sites of previous attacks²².

Terrorist Organisations As Motivators

Terrorist organisations have motivations for suicide attacks which have some commonality with the motivations of the individual attackers, but they also have motivations which are strategy or policy driven and are not relevant to attackers’ personal motivations. Continuing the simplification of “revenge, renown and reaction”, “revenge” and “renown” are motivators for both the organisation and the individual. Suicide attacks gain major publicity in the international media for the group and the individual gains personal fame and status. “Reaction”, particularly an excessive reaction, by the target of the attack can be beneficial to the group but is not as relevant to a successful bomber who will be dead and unable to experience the gratification of an inappropriate reaction. Groups can use suicide attacks to sabotage attempts at peaceful resolution, to gain ascendancy over other organisations and for retaliation and provocation¹². The gains for terrorist groups is such that there is value in them influencing and training individuals to become suicide attackers and so the groups themselves can be regarded as a motivating factor for individual terrorists.

There are tactical advantages for terrorist

organisations. It is a simple and low-cost operation requiring no escape route or rescue mission. The bomber can choose the exact time, location and circumstances of the attack. This increases the casualties and damage. Dead bombers do not release important information on interrogation. It makes a big impact on the public and the media because of the “overwhelming sense of helplessness”¹⁸.

Theology

Islam is frequently a motivating factor for suicide attackers when religious ideology persuades them that God has sent them on a mission⁹. Running parallel is the role of Muslim clerics in legitimising the attacks or perverting theology. Suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam and so suicide attackers must be persuaded that they are martyrs. This is done by sympathetic clergy in madrassas in the Middle East or south Asia. Islam has a tradition of the combative martyr who claims the moral high ground against enemies. This can be a motivator or consolation for attackers¹³.

The role of suicide attacks is not universally supported by Muslim theologians. After the 9/11 attacks there were divergent opinions. Some theologians expressed the opinion that suicide attacks such as 9/11 and against Israeli targets were justified, some rejected 9/11 type attacks but supported attacks against Israel and others rejected all suicide attacks. It should be noted that these opinions could be influenced by the background of the theologian with those who supported secular Middle Eastern governments at one end of the spectrum and those involved in fundamental Islamic groups and terrorist training at the other end. The killing of innocent civilians and children is similarly justified by sympathetic clergy legitimising terrorist acts with a fine distinction between “thou shall not kill” and “thou shall not murder”¹⁹. This can be further distorted into an obligation to kill under specific religious circumstances, a distortion which has occurred in all of the major religions including Christianity and Judaism.

Female Suicide Attackers

The first female suicide bomber was 16 years old and attacked in Palestine in 1985. Female attackers have increased in number ever since because they provide advantages for terrorist groups. There is an increase in the number of potential attackers and successful female attackers receive more publicity. There is a greater psychological effect. There are tactical advantages such as the stealth of the attack, the element of surprise, hesitancy to search women, women’s non-violent stereotype and better

accessibility to targets. Initially sectarian groups such as Hamas and LTTE used women while Islam fundamentalists such as al-Qaeda have not been able to reconcile an active role, such as suicide attacks, with the traditional Muslim role for women. There has been discussion as to whether women attackers should be escorted by men. It has been suggested that women have become involved as “a demand for equal status”.

The motivation for women suicide attackers has some similarities with those of men but there are also some differences. They have the same diverse profile or demographics as men and also have the same basic motivation of a nationalistic cause with religious overtones, but frequently the personal loss of a partner, close friend or family member plays a stronger role²³. Dvir²⁴ had the opportunity to interview female suicide bombers, imprisoned by the Israelis, who had either survived their attack or had been detained before activating their weapon. They listed motivations as making amends for a relative who was a collaborator, to escape being a victim of honour killing, a good method of committing suicide for the frail or depressed and to become a heroine at the same time. Many believe they will become chief, or “fairest of the fair”, of the 72 virgins who welcome male martyrs to paradise. Some LTTE female attackers were believed to have been raped by the Sri Lankan army and so could not marry or have children¹. Chechen “Black Widows” expressed a desire to die to take revenge for their husbands and children who were killed in the Chechen war¹². Female suicide attackers deployed by the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) have been “persuaded” by threats and intimidation more so than male attackers and this also appears to be the case within other groups²⁵.

Community Approval

Opinions and attitudes of communities and families will not be prime motivation for suicide attackers but their approval will be a secondary motivator and, conversely, their disapproval or condemnation will be a disincentive for attackers. Generally the local community is supportive for attackers in the Middle East and south Asia. There is social pressure on the local population to celebrate suicide bombers as heroes. They are glorified with cards, poems, songs and images as if they are sports heroes. Children play games, such as mock funerals, glorifying suicide bombers. Palestinian approval for bombings in Israel was 29% in 2005 and had risen to 77% by 2008²⁶. Bombers from the diaspora, such as the London Underground bombers, are supported by other members of the diaspora but not by other

citizens in their country of residence. The vast majority of Indonesian citizens disapproved of the Bali bombings. Community approval adds to the motivation and frequency of bombings.

Family Approval

Similarly family support and approval can influence an individual’s motivation to be a suicide attacker. Family opinions are variable. The typical “party line” expressed by relatives is supportive such as “I am very proud of him and I am even prouder for my children whose father was a hero” (wife of dead attacker) and “I am very happy and proud of what my son did” (father)⁵. Copeland²³ describes relatives wavering between rejoicing and sobbing and a father praising his daughter’s final act. However parents also express distress, disapproval and grief. Mother of dead attacker: “If I could, I would take a cleaver and cut open my heart and take my son and sew him deep inside to keep him close and protect him”²⁷. There are numerous examples where parents have criticised their sons or daughters or have taken an active stand to prevent their suicide attack²⁰. Female attackers get less family approval than male attackers and so tend to be more secretive about their intentions.

Recruitment and Training

Recruitment and training are linked to motivation. The recruiters target potential suicide attackers and their motivation is increased during the training. Ideally the process is started at as early an age as possible. The recruitment process in Palestine starts with the Palestinian Authority fomenting hatred of Jews and a love of death. School curricula, camp activities, TV programmes and religious indoctrination convince children that Jews are sub-human and should be killed. Impressionable children and adolescents are persuaded that “martyrdom” is the most noble of goals²¹.

Training is also an example of motivation occurring as an external influence rather than from the intrinsic ambition or aspiration of the individual. Recruits enter a highly supervised and disciplined regimen of spiritual studies, psychological training and military training which lasts for months. They are trained to see suicide operations as an open door to paradise. Videos show what is about to happen and encourage the attacker to confront death and not to fear it. The final days of training are far more rigorous and spent in near seclusion with other bombers-to-be, immersed in spiritual contemplation and prayer. Once individuals join organizations that share their frustrations, they may undergo a process of indoctrination whereby their beliefs and behaviours are made to conform to the group’s basic principles.

Within these tight-knit communities, individuals' fear of letting down their comrades becomes greater than their fear of dying. Many come to believe that their lives can take on a broader meaning by sacrificing their existence for the sake of the cause⁹.

Summary

Motivating factors which have been identified are

- 1) appropriate prerequisites for the terrorist group,
- 2) a potential attacker with the right background, demographics and psychological profile,
- 3) hatred of the enemy with a desire for revenge,
- 4) an ethno-nationalistic struggle which is asymmetrical,
- 5) religious motivation,
- 6) perceived religious and status rewards for the attacker,
- 7) financial rewards and status for the attacker's family,
- 8) influence applied by terrorist groups because of the strategic and tactical advantages of suicide attacks,
- 9) distortion of theology by sympathetic clergy to make "martyrdom" (ie suicide) acceptable,
- 10) approval by the attacker's community and society,
- 11) influence and cultivation at a very young age and during the recruiting process,
- 12) continuing impetus during training.

Some are intrinsic to the individual attacker and some are external influences. Each attacker has a different mix of this "cocktail" and no single motivating factor is decisive for suicide attackers but it is the combination of factors that results in an "explosive cocktail"²⁰. Gambetta¹³ states:

"Suicide missions show such a diversity of traits as to make the search for an overarching explanation of their occurrence and patterns seem futile. The wealth of facts and arguments may even leave the reader wondering whether suicide missions should be treated as a single phenomenon rather than several."

Many of the motivating factors, such as revenge,

religion and financial reward, can be strong, but normally not strong enough to induce a person to kill at the sacrifice of their own lives. Not all suicide attackers are subjected to outside influence and pressure. The London Underground bombers were substantially self-motivated and female bombers often develop in isolation to avoid family resistance. The factors which appear to be most common across the genre are

- 1) severe repression by dominant regimes,
- 2) asymmetry between the competing forces resulting in feelings of hopelessness and desperation,
- 3) lack of foreseeable opportunities to make a success of future life.

In addition there must be a culture which accepts martyrdom and an individual with the psychology or personality to be a suicide attacker. It is notable that there are exceptions for every motivation for suicide terrorism that has been listed. There is a wide cross section of attackers and many do not fit the predicted demographic or psychological profile or have a religious motive. Some may be recruited and trained at a very young age and others may attack as adults without requiring persuasion or recruitment. Not all families are rewarded and some are punished by the authorities. This lack of conformity and consistency results in difficulties in profiling potential suicide attackers and hinders counter-terrorism measures. Often the information presented was second or third hand and had been altered to suit the bias of the author. All but a few were rejected. Separating truth from disinformation is a hazard when researching terrorism.

Organisations, governments, national states and other bodies that have social and political influence were searched through the internet and classical texts on the topic of terrorism in order to examine their definitions of terrorism and how these definitions affect their social and political influence.

These searches were performed during January and February 2012.

A search of the printed literature was performed with the assistance of the Charles Sturt University Library.

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