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A Précis of Suicide Terrorism

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Abstract

Since the early 1980s, suicide bombings have become the deadliest form of terrorism. Suicide bombers are not generally clinically deranged and are socially and politically motivated. Furthermore, the motives of suicide bombers can be considered separately from those of their sponsoring organizations. Security personnel are advised to watch for seven signs of terrorist activity and to be mindful of certain behavioral indicators of subjects about to attack. Terrorism must be prevented at the source, during pre-attack phases, and at the target.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, suicide bombings, terrorism signs, profiling

INTRODUCTION

Broadly defined, terrorism is the use of extreme violence against innocent civilians in order to create fear for the purpose of forcing political, social, or religious change. Terrorism has been defined in numerous ways by academics, political leaders, and the popular press. Cooper (2001) and Hoffman (1998) discuss the debates surrounding the multiple definitions of terrorism. Although terrorism will likely remain a “contested concept” (Smelser and Mitchell 2002), Crenshaw (1983) has suggested that terrorism can be distinguished from guerrilla warfare by the former’s emphasis on nonmilitary targets, unconventional weaponry, and unlikelihood of victory in the traditional sense of the word.

Suicide terrorism is a particularly virulent strain of terrorism in which terrorists destroy themselves during the act of murdering others so as to maximize both the number of casualties and the emotional impact such a seemingly desperate attack will have on a broader audience. For example, a suicide terrorist may drive an explosives-laden vehicle down the crowded street of a market area and purposefully detonate his charge next to a crowd of men, women, and children innocently shopping for vegetables. Certainly, the attacks of September 11 constituted suicide terrorism in that the aircraft hijackers fully intended to destroy themselves in order to murder large numbers of civilians.

Suicide terrorism often results in maximal carnage since the suicide bomber can guide or carry the weapon to the particular place and at the particular time he or she may determine a detonation will produce the greatest number of casualties. Although over 70 percent of terrorist attacks utilize explosives, suicide terrorists may also select biological, chemical, or incendiary weapons of mass destruction. In spite of the fact that terrorist groups motivated by religious beliefs are more likely to seek mass casualties through weapons of mass destruction than nationalist groups, there well may be certain considerations which have so far limited their willingness to do so. Arguably, this is because the identities of the “martyrs” would remain unknown and uncelebrated, their deaths may be slow, painful, and less dramatic, and retaliation against remaining terrorists would be massive (Dolnik 2003).

In a worse case scenario, terrorists and suicide terrorists may also attempt a nuclear explosion or otherwise spread radioactive materials by combining conventional explosives with radioactive waste. Although the world has so far been spared an attack of this nature, suicide terrorism remains substantially more fatal than other acts of terror.

Since the beginning of modern suicide terrorism in Lebanon in the early 1980s, suicide terrorism has become the most deadly form of terrorism. Although suicide attacks amounted to just three percent of all terrorist incidents from 1980 through 2003, these attacks were responsible for 48 percent of all fatalities, not even

counting September 11 (Pape 2005). Unfortunately, suicide terrorism is practiced because it has successfully forced troop withdrawals and other concessions in Lebanon, Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Spain. Dershowitz (2002) provides several explanations as to why terrorist attacks of any nature should not be rewarded.

EXPLANATIONS

Because suicide terrorism is a complex social phenomenon, attempts at constructing demographic, motivational, personality, and behavioral profiles have met with only limited success. Some of this conceptual confusion derives from a failure to clarify the type of suicide terrorism under discussion, for example, whether of a nationalist, religious, criminal, state-sponsored, or ideological nature. Also, the Palestinian suicide bomber of the 1980s may be different than the second generation Englishman of Pakistani descent who blows up a London bus in 2005 (Soibelman 2004). The female Chechen suicide bomber may be a “Black Widow” whose motivations differ from those of a male Egyptian expatriate living in Germany, training in Afghanistan, and murdering thousands in the United States. Members of a suicide terrorist organization occupy different roles such as recruiters, indoctrination and logistics specialists, explosives technicians, and the homicide-suicide bomber himself. While they may have overlapping motives and share other personal characteristics, some play a more dominant role than others, and their personalities may well reflect this difference.

Nevertheless, significant progress has been made in both classifying and clarifying the most promising explanations of suicide terrorism to date. Contrary to popular opinion, suicide bombers are not simply deranged fundamentalists driven to irrational acts by ignorance and crushing poverty (Atran 2004a). Nor are they uniformly ridden with psychoses, profound personality disorders, and other defects of character which readily explain their violent acts against noncombatants (Silke 1998).

Instead, some current research suggests that suicide terrorism is a response to the occupation of troops from democratic nations of land claimed by the militarily inferior ethnic or religious groups to which the terrorists belong. Suicide attacks often prove politically effective against these larger forces and constitute a form of altruistic suicide on the part of individuals deeply committed to their cause and to each other (Pape 2005). Sageman (2004) further details the strong social bonds formed by members of terror cells as they deal with the alienation they feel sometimes after moving to foreign countries. It should be noted, however, that the debate continues as to whether suicide terrorists do, indeed, possess certain pathological traits or states of mind which contribute to their decisions to kill

themselves and murder others at the same time. For example, Lester, Yang, and Lindsay (2003) believe many observers too readily conclude that suicide terrorists lack suicidal traits. Indeed, they conclude that many possess personality traits, e.g., authoritarian personality, which may help explain their actions. Other commonly cited deficiencies include antisocial, borderline, dependent, narcissistic, and paranoid personality disorders or tendencies. Meloy, Mohandie, Hempel, and Shiva (2001) offer envy, dependency, omnipotence, entitlement, emotional detachment, paranoia, and various other descriptors to explain the “Homicidal and Suicidal States of Mind” possessed by the 9/11 murderers. Post (1986) explains terrorism as the manifestation of an attempt to consolidate identity and a need to belong. This notion of a need to belong is reminiscent of Hoffer’s (1951) classic work on the “true believer.” Victoroff (2005) and Miller (2006a, 2006b) have reviewed psychological explanations of terrorism, and Turk (2004) has done the same from a sociological perspective. Stern (2003) offers a multifaceted understanding of terrorism based on extensive fieldwork coupled with a comprehensive analysis of the literature. Personal crises generated by financial pressures, shame associated with sterility or extramarital pregnancy, and a desire for revenge may also contribute to suicide bombings (Pedahzur 2005).

Other explanations for suicide terrorism range from analysis of child-rearing practices (de Mause 2002) and cultural support and contagion (Reuter 2002) to the competition between rival terrorist groups for publicity (Bloom 2005). Some analysts point to the nature of Islamic religious tenets themselves, or their various interpretations, as rationalizations utilized by terrorists for the justification of their violent acts (Cook 2004; Spencer 2002). A radical interpretation of Muslim theology may prove decisive in the decision to become a suicide terrorist although the suicide bombers of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are generally Hindus, though other suicide terrorist groups are not particularly motivated by religion at all. According to Atran (2004b), support for suicide terrorism arises primarily from the relative deprivation generated by rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations, especially regarding civil liberties.

INDICATORS

Military, police, and security personnel are encouraged to monitor critical infrastructure target properties for evidence of terrorist activity in general, as well as indicators of the presence of a suicide bomber in particular. Surveillance, elicitation, tests of security, acquiring supplies, presence of suspicious people, dry runs, and deployment of assets constitute seven common signs of terrorist activity.

For example, terrorists will most likely closely observe a given target for quite some time before an attack. They do this in order to determine target strengths

and weaknesses as well as the behavior of first responders. Target defenders should be trained in surveillance detection and be on the alert for anyone recording or monitoring activities, annotating maps, or drawing sketches. Terrorists may also attempt to elicit information about a place, person, or operation and make inquiries concerning deliveries, guard capabilities, or other relevant activities pertinent to asset protection. They may also attempt to place “key” people in sensitive work locations in order to gather this information.

Terrorists may also test the security of an installation or property by moving into sensitive areas and judging police or security responses to these incursions. They may trigger an alarm to assess emergency response protocols. Another area of which to be cognizant is the acquisition of supplies. Police and security should watch for unusual purchases or thefts of explosives, ammunition, or chemicals. Any unusual cache of flight manuals, military uniforms, police equipment, flight passes, counterfeit personal identification, and other items may signal terrorist activity.

Security personnel should be on the alert for suspicious appearing people who seem out of place. This may mean monitoring someone in the workplace or commercial center who does not fit in because of irregular behavior, language usage, or unusual questions they are asking. Terrorists will also engage in “dry runs,” or practice exercises, before their final assault. It is during this “rehearsal” exercise that defenders may have their best chance of preventing an attack since multiple dry runs are normally conducted at or near the target area.

The seventh and final sign to watch out for is an individual or individuals deploying assets and getting into position to strike. Because this and other pre-incident indicators may come weeks or months apart, it is important to document and report each instance of suspicious activity, even though it may appear to be an isolated and, therefore, insignificant act.

Although these seven signs of terrorist activity do not necessarily portend a murder-suicide bombing per se, such suicide terrorism will often be preceded by these same steps. In other words, suicide terrorism is generally preceded by the same indicators as other terrorist attacks. There are, however, certain behavioral profiles which may allow defenders to intercept the fanatic about to murder others in the process of taking his own life.

Although no single profile has proven applicable to all acts of suicide terrorism, a number of terrorists have been intercepted based on behavioral clues. For example, security and police personnel have been advised to watch for young, Middle-Eastern appearing males who are alone and dressed in loose or bulky clothing inappropriate for the weather, and seeming nervous or under the influence of a drug of some sort. However, women and children have also been involved in acts of suicide terrorism. Bombing suspects may tightly grip a backpack or other luggage, be unresponsive to salutations or voice commands, and seem deliberate and focused

on their route of travel. They could be perspiring and exuding a flowery scent from freshly applied body oils, and the lower part of their faces may seem paler from having recently shaved off a beard. They may even be smiling broadly due to the joy they anticipate as they “look upon the face of Allah.”

Suicide bombers about to detonate may be avoiding eye contact, staying away from security personnel, and mumbling under their breath as they attempt to position themselves near a crowd of people or VIPS. Their mid-sections may appear stiff or rigid from the IED, and wires may even be visible. Chemical stains and odors have also been detected in association with prior suicide bombings, and the use of disguises is certainly not unknown. The International Association of Chiefs of Police has recently developed Training Keys #581 and #582 (Bunker 2005a, b) to help in the identification and response to suicide terrorism. It must be cautioned, however, that suicide bomber characteristics are drawn from multiple sources and have not been formally or empirically validated. While their predictive validity has yet to be proven, behavioral profiling itself is seen to be far more productive than “hard” ethnic or racial profiling. As suicide terrorism evolves, more Western, female and prison converts to radical Islam as well as second-generation citizens of non-Islamic nations, may commit murder-suicide. Behavioral profiling must adapt to this evolving threat.

It is doubtful that any suicide terrorist will manifest all or even most of these behavioral characteristics. Conversely, many perfectly innocent citizens will manifest some of these same characteristics, thus authorities must expect an enormous “false positive” problem (erroneously identifying someone as a bomber who actually is not). Nevertheless, police and security personnel must consider the totality of the circumstances which present with the surveillance subject and proceed cautiously in any event.

PROSPECTS

Although suicide terrorism may ultimately be the last decision of a solitary individual, it has generally been made possible by the efforts of several terrorists, each performing a specialized function. Recruiters seek out likely murder-suicide candidates in madrassas and mosques or otherwise receive volunteers. “Minders” sequester and train the bombers in safe houses. Quartermasters obtain explosives and other materials such as nuts, bolt, nails, and the like. Film crews prepare martyrdom videos to help ensure the bomber does not back out, and may even film the explosion itself for propaganda purposes. Other terrorists select an array of targets and conduct surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities. Practice exercises may also take place. Technicians prepare the explosives, and handlers transport the suicide bomber to the target area. In some cases, handlers may even detonate the suicide bomber’s

payload remotely. These efforts must all be financed including possible payments to the murder-suicide bomber's family. The point, of course, is that a suicide bombing itself is generally a fairly complex undertaking relying on a sophisticated infrastructure which is well-established in and basically tolerate to its host community. Although there will be instances of "Lone Wolf" suicide attacks and the occasional depredations of "self-starter" cells, murder-suicide campaigns are generally far more intricate than initially they appear to be (see generally, Hoffman 2003; Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence 2005). Some experts believe a substantial terrorist infrastructure already exists in the United States. Emerson (2002), Hamm (2002), and Kushner and Davis (2004) describe what they perceive to be the widespread nature of internal terrorist threats.

Because of the difficulties in establishing such complex suicide terrorism infrastructures in Western countries geographically remote from Middle-Eastern and Asian war zones, it is likely that future suicide bombings perpetrated against the West may differ somewhat from the predominant patterns thus far observed. For example, while many Middle-Eastern suicide bombers resemble Durkheim's "altruistic" suicide type or a hybrid "fatalistic altruistic" type (Pedahzur, Perliger and Weinberg 2003; see, also, Khashan 2003 and Oliver and Steinberg 2005), the middle-class, alienated suicide bomber projected to appear in the West may be described as more "egoistic" in nature (Nunn 2004). The anomie sometimes associated with migration and cultural marginality may also play a role in extremist thinking (Patai 2002). To the extent such individuals are particularly susceptible to "suicide contagion" (Coleman 2004; Phillips 1974) the locations and growth in the number of murder-suicides by bombing may well depend partially on the nature of press coverage afforded these atrocities.

Given the complexities of terrorism itself, governmental responses to this problem must be multi-faceted as well. Global, long-term efforts to modify the demographic, political, and cultural (including theological) wellsprings of terrorism and suicide terrorism must be undertaken. Prevention "at the source" entails disrupting staging areas in the several countries that harbor terrorists. Prevention at the "end of the line" entails target-hardening of critical infrastructure targets. "Along the way" antiterrorism can be implemented by controlling the movements of people and weapons at national borders. Certainly, these preventive activities must be accompanied by response and recovery apparati which will mitigate the effects of a terrorist attack (Smelser and Mitchell 2002). More succinctly, it is the responsibility of legitimate governments everywhere to prevent, protect, respond, and recover from the scourge of terrorism and suicide terrorism.

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