Individual Motivations, The Group Process and Organizational

Strategies in Suicide Terrorism

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The very notion of "suicide terrorism" is strange and terrifying. It is far outside the range of what one would consider as normal human behavior, representing a conjunction of two very extreme events, far removed from civilized, socially sanctioned activities: (1) the deliberate (rather than accidental) and indiscriminate killing of noncombatants including women and children. (2) Taking one's own life in the process— militating against the basic human instinct of personal survival. In response, our first inclination might be to relegate "suicide terrorism" to the realm of psychopathology ; and this is precisely how it was regarded by top experts little more than a decade ago. Ariel Merari-- one of the world's supreme authorities on suicide terrorism, in a 1990 paper approvingly cited Weiss's opinion that; "personality disintegration (is) the single most important factor in suicide". On that basis, Merari concluded that: "terrorism suicide, like any other suicide, is basically an individual rather than a group phenomenon: it is done by people who wish to die for personal reasons. The terrorist framework simply offers an excuse (rather than the real drive) and the legitimation for carrying it out in a violent way." (Merari, 1990, p. 206).

A decade later Merari (2002) shifted the emphasis to the organizational level of analysis. In his words: "The key to creating a terrorist suicide is the group process. Terrorist suicide is an organizational rather than an individual phenomenon. …, there has not been a single case of suicide terrorism which was done on the suicide's personal whim. In all cases, it was an organization that decided to embark on this tactic, recruited candidates, chose the target and the time, prepared the candidate for the mission, and made sure that he/she would carry it out.".

Though the above quote suggests that Merari (2002) has come to understand suicide terrorism as a predominantly organizational phenomenon -- he also notes that the organizations seek out individuals who want to die. Thus, he apparently views individual motivations of suicide attackers as also pertinent to the phenomenon. In a similar vein, Moghadam (2003) noted that terrorist organizations recruit candidates with desirable psychological predispositions (not necessarily psychopathological). This author emphasizes also that organizations and individuals have different motivations underlying their desire to engage in a suicide attack. Indeed, in the analysis presented here "suicide terrorism" is treated as a multi-layered phenomenon which adequate understanding requires at least three levels of analysis, namely, the individual, the social, and the organizational levels.

The Individual Level of Analysis

1. Assertion of autonomy. Starting with the individual level, it may be significant that suicide bombers for the most part are rather young males between the ages of 18 and 27[1]. This fact is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is the age when testosterone soars. Studies (Bernhardt, 1997) significantly linked testosterone production to dominance orientation in males. When the desire to dominate is satisfied, high testosterone is not related to a rise in aggressiveness, however when such desire is frustrated it results in increased likelihood of aggressive response (against oneself or others). For example, among men with a high Socio Economic Status (SES) high testosterone is not related to increased aggressiveness, while among men with a low SES

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[1] However, it is important to note that unlike in other forms of terrorism or insurgency, women also participate in suicide attacks (Berman & Laitin, this volume). Additionally, the attackers in 9/11 were older than average terrorist which adds to exceptionality of this attack (also exceptional in size of damage, target population being far from the perpetrators' countries of origin, and in other respects. (See Krueger & Laitin, this volume)

the relationship proves positive and significant. Of course, low SES is not an exclusive source of dominance frustration. Another important such source could be political repression and national humiliation.

Thus, suicide attackers do not represent the lower status, frustrated social strata or weaker, non-dominant position <u>necessarily</u>. However, Kruger and Laitin (this volume) show that perpetrators of suicide terrorism are "those who are politically repressed" (p. 23); and originate disproportionately from countries with low civil liberties. Pape (2003) also argued that this form of terrorism is used as a tactic by oppressed minorities or weaker party in a conflict (see also discussion on the role of social distance in conflict between groups in Jasso & Meyersson Milgrom's chapter, this volume). In other words, young males experiencing <u>some kind</u> of frustration are likely to be particularly susceptible to an ideology that requires them to aggress against others and/or themselves. In that sense, the recruitment of candidates for suicide attacks seems systematic, and attuned to the psycho/biological propensities of the targeted individuals.

Secondly, as Moghadam (2003) implied, the typical age of suicide attackers falls at a transition phase from childhood to adulthood during which uncertainty about one's life course and the proper ways of conducting one's affairs is likely to reign. Exercising their newly acquired autonomy, yet not accustomed to undertaking their own decisions and responsibilities, doubtful about their own selves and motivated to distance themselves from their childhood social networks (i.e. their family), young men may be particularly susceptible to the social influence of organized groups. Highly cohesive organizations with parent-like figures or charismatic leaders and clear-cut, action-oriented messages may be especially appealing to people at this 'lonely' and transitional

life phase. Various social organizations may possess such characteristics for instance, religious cults and extremist organizations who offer purpose and acceptance to would be members (for discussion see Friedkin, this volume; Iannaccone, this volume).

Finally, the transition phase from adolescence to adulthood is the age when asserting one's autonomy is critically important. It is the time when young people are given to experimenting with different social roles, trying out new ways of thinking and behaving, and exploring new, far-out, ideas. They are given to trying different identities and activities without often apprehending the pertinent reality constraints nor the potential gravity of the consequences of their actions. Such quest for individual autonomy often translates into rebellion against all kinds of restrictions including the prohibitions against unhealthy, unsafe, risky and generally self-destructive behaviors, such as smoking, drugs, or alcohol abuse. Such rebellion occasionally targets the greatest prohibition of all--the instinctual as well as the cultural and societal prohibition against the taking of one's own life.

It is indeed a paradox that at this rebellious stage of life young people are also particularly conformist and susceptible to social influence. So much so, in fact, that suicide may become a fashion. For example, Friedkin (this volume) gives the example of young boys' plays containing various death rituals (such as lying down in an open grave, or wrapping oneself in a death shroud) that may serve as a psychological preparation for a suicide attack. Sporadic epidemics of teen suicide have also been reported. Malcolm Gladwell (2000, p. 217) in a recent book comments on the rise of suicide by young people in Micronesia. As he put it: "In the early 1960s, suicide on the islands of Micronesia was almost unknown, (whereas) at the end of the 1980s there were more

suicides per capita in Micronesia than anywhere else in the world. For males between fifteen and twenty four, the suicide rate in the United States is about 22 per 100, 000. In Micronesia, the rate is about 160 per 100,000 more than seven times higher. At that level suicide is almost commonplace, triggered by the smallest of incidents. Teens committed suicide on the islands because they saw their girlfriends with another boy, or because their parents refused to give them a few extra dollars for beer. One nineteen year old hanged himself because his parents didn't buy him a graduation gown. One seventeen year old hanged himself because he had been rebuked by his older brother for making too much noise."(ibid., p. 218). The suicide notes corresponding to these deeds tend to express not depression but protest against mistreatment revealing its psychological affinity to the phenomenon of teenage rebellion. Another example in this regard is a generation of young Polish poets and writers under communist regime in the 1960s and 70s (called 'kaskaderzy literatury'; the martyrs of literature) many of whom died violent deaths or committed suicides as a form of protest against hopelessness and oppression. (Kolbus, 1986).

2. **<u>Assertion of significance.</u>** Teenage rebellion is closely linked to the attention-getting property of suicide terrorism, a third major factor (beyond testosterone, influencability and rebellion) of particular relevance to young males and perhaps females as well. Whereas as a child the individual may have felt significant and respected within the family context, an entry into the adult world may signify a placement at the bottom of a heap in a hugely insignificant social position. Teenage suicide is, in a certain sense, a cry for recognition, a desperate attempt to attract attention through a single, self-affirming act of desperation. In a paradoxical twist on Descartes' Cogito, it cries out to the world "I

die therefore I am".

The attention-getting potential of a suicide is multiplied in the case of "suicide terrorism" where the would-be perpetrator can often expect considerable "pomp and circumstance" with which his death would be greeted. Add to it the 72 black-eyed virgins, a guaranteed place in heaven for one's family, as well as a generous earthly support to the tune of several thousands of dollars, (in the recent past provided to Palestinian suicide bombers by various sponsors such as the Iraqis or the Saudis)- - and the allure can be quite powerful. As David Brooks recently put it (June, 2002) the suicide bomber can expect to be transformed overnight from a miserable youth without prospects into a celebrity, "rock star, a sports hero and a religious idol rolled into one". Moghadam (2003) points out that, at least in Palestinian culture that highly values honor and dignity, becoming a martyr is one of the highest personal attainments and also a way of regaining the pride lost by the entire community under the humiliating occupation by the Israelis. Thus, the "living martyrs" are looked up to with admiration and jealousy by their peers, who may be eager to follow suit, and join their ranks as soon as possible.

Institutionalization of Rebellion

If the community at large is seen to support the acts of suicide terrorism – these might no longer seem as representing rebellion but to the contrary, constitute the acts of conformity. In reality, however, the rebellion aspect is strongly maintained in suicide terrorism albeit with a shift of target. Rather than constituting a rebellion against their own society, suicide bombers' acts are redirected as a rebellion against the common enemy. They are portrayed as defiance of the Israeli occupation, or of the US superior might. Such displacement of the teenage rebellion" lends "suicide terrorism" the benefit

of being simultaneously rebellious and conformist, killing two motivational birds with one behavioral stone as it were.

Overcoming the Instinct to Live

However compelling the motivational reasons for suicide terrorism might be, the survival instinct and the fear of death remain a powerful psychological force. Even though a young person may contemplate suicide and dream about the bliss it would bestow — it is next to impossible, psychologically speaking, to take the crucial step "on cold" and without a motivational "running start" of sorts. Such impetus often is borne of a fit of rage over the killing by the enemy of someone close, a friend or a family member. The resulting wrath may carry the individual over the brink. Once that particular bridge is crossed, he or she falls as a ready prey into the hands of the terrorist organization cleverly adept at cultivating the commitment and augmenting it all the way up to its the horrific climax.

It is important to disavow at this juncture something we are not saying. We are not suggesting that any of the characteristics above are either <u>necessary</u> or <u>sufficient</u> to prompt an individual's to join the ranks of suicide attackers. One need not be an adolescent male, politically oppressed, or of a low socio economic background to become a suicide terrorist. On the other hand, one could be any or all of the above and yet fail to become a terrorist. All we are saying is that to be prepared to commit such a counter instinctual act as the taking of one's own life—one needs to have a strong motivation propelling one to do so. This needn't be a <u>unique</u> or a <u>specific</u> motivation. Rather, a motivation fueling suicide terrorism may stem from a variety of sources, some including personally-felt frustration and rage for any one of manifold reasons, others include

seizing the opportunity for personal glory and a place in history, yet others include the inclination to join a cohesive group or a supportive social network that then cultivates such feelings of frustration and rage to prepare the individual for a suicidal mission via a clever use of group influence processes. We turn now to examine what these processes may consist of.

<u>The Group Level of Analysis</u>

    1. <u>Social reality</u>. A number of social psychological processes are put into play once an individual has joined a militant organization committed to suicide attacks, and has declared (or intimated) a readiness to carry out such an attack by him or herself. First, he is cast into a <u>social reality</u> that forcefully affirms his "newborn" identity of a future "martyr". David Brooks (2002) described how this may happen in some extreme cases: "The bombers are organized into small cells and given countless hours of intense and intimate spiritual training. They are told their families will be guaranteed a place with God, and that there are also considerable rewards for their families in life. .. that paradise lies just on the other side of the detonator, that death will feel like nothing more than a pinch.. Recruits are sometimes made to lie in empty graves, so that they can see how peaceful death will be; they are reminded that life will bring sickness, old age, and betrayal." And they are virtually whipped into a frenzy of happiness for having been selected.

    "We were in a constant state of worship", one suicide bomber who somehow managed to survive his mission, told Nasra Hassan (2001), the Pakistani journalist who interviewed almost 250 would-be suicide terrorists and their mentors. "We told each other that if the Israelis only knew how joyful we were they would whip us to death!

These were the happiest days of my life".

Friedkin (this volume) argues that terrorist organizations infuse their members with a sense of duty and portray individual suicide as honorable sacrifice for the sake of their oppressed community (for a similar process see Rosenthal's discussion of *kamikaze* pilots*,* this volume). Thus, the terrorist acts become 'obligatory altruistic suicides' (as opposed to egoistic or anomic ones in Durkheim's terminology, see Jones, 1986).

"Living martyrs" are subjects to indoctrination which contains elements of glorification of their own group, religion and their special saintly status as well as being fed extensive anti-enemy propaganda (Moghadam, 2003). An important element in creating the appropriate "social reality" involves the use of language. The would-be suicide bomber isn't referred to as such. Nor is he referred to as a terrorist or even as a freedom fighter. Instead, he is depicted as a "martyr" even before he carries out the attack, namely as a "living martyr" (*al Shahid al hai*). After the attack, "weddings" between the martyr and the pure virgins of paradise are advertised in the local press.

The enemy, in turn, is referred to in subhuman terms as the "sons of dogs and monkeys" or in terms related to supernatural but evil beings namely "devils" or "demons". Religious terrorist organizations (Iannaccone, this volume), often refer to the adversary as the "enemy of God" which is not surprising provided that most often targets of suicide attacks belong to different religions than the attackers (Berman & Laitin, this volume; Krueger & Laitin, this volume). Enemies are also analogized to groups known for their inhumanity (Nazis), or destructiveness (barbarians, Vandals), or referred to as despicable criminals (murderers, rapists). These linguistic tactics aim at derogating and diminishing the targets of one's aggression. These are depicted as subhuman creatures

who do not deserve the basic respect, empathy and consideration accorded other human beings, including the basic right to live (Bandura, 1990; Bar-Tal, 1998). These linguistic tactics create a worldview in which an idealized in-group fights a dehumanized enemy. In this fight of right against wrong both sacrifices and atrocities are justified. Norms of decency which govern behaviors toward in group members are viewed as inapplicable to the out-group members. As Berman and Laitin (this volume) notice "the empathy for anonymous innocent" (p. 13) is strangely missing in terrorist worldviews. This perspective facilitates terrorists' adjustment to life in constant conflict by creating a coherent social reality wherein aggression against the despicable enemy is the only option.

To be sure, such strategies of delegitimation and dehumanization aren't unique to suicide terrorism and may be often part and parcel of any punitive and aggressive behavior toward fellow human beings including conventional warfare, for example. Because suicide terrorism involves such an extreme act as the sacrifice of one's own life, however, the derogation of the victims might be correspondingly extreme and vituperative.

2. Ideology. Of course, the suicide mission itself is portrayed as of "larger than life" importance. One wouldn't sacrifice one's life for pragmatic "run of the mill" reasons. No one commits a suicide bombing for a "middle-class tax cut" or, for "prescription drugs for seniors". The love of God and Country, however, are reasons enough to die for**,** if duty calls. As Berman and Laitin (this volume) notice from the suicide bomber's perspective it would be difficult to sustain suicide attacks even if they seemed the only efficient tactic, if some extraordinary motivations were not involved.

The motivation can be, as the authors put it, the "religious promise of eternal grace" but it can be also more secular belief that the individual sacrifice will benefit their nation and grant the attacker its everlasting gratitude and place in history.

Instructive in this regard is a document found in the luggage of several of the 9/11 attackers. As Makiya and Mneimeh (2002), who translated the document, put it "The sense throughout is that the would-be martyr is engaged in his action solely to please God .. the dominant message of the text is a focus on the eternal. To feel connection with God and the work of God, to feel the peace of submission to God's will — these are the imperatives and the promises of the text. Invocations and prayers are to be offered at every stage of the journey; the last night, the journey to the airport, boarding the plane, takeoff, taking over the plane, welcoming death. The reader is reminded that fear is an act of worship due only to God. If killing is necessary, the language of the text makes the killing a ritual slaughter with vocabulary that refers to animal sacrifice, including the sacrifice of Isaac that Abraham was prepared to offer. " (p. 21). Palestinian suicide bombers undergo spiritual purification before the attack. They fast, pray, ask for forgiveness of their sins. Before the attack they attend prayer at a mosque, they put the Koran in a pocket above their heart and say the traditional Islamic prayer of those going to battle (Moghadam, 2003).

Beside religion, ethnicity and nationalism too represent powerful ideologies in which name many suicide attacks have been perpetrated. In fact, the greatest number of suicide attacks to date (namely 168 between July 1987 and February 2000) was carried out by a nationalist group in Sri Lanka that calls itself the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (or LTTE); These acts included the 1991 assassination of the Indian prime minister

Rajiv Gandhi and the 1993 assassination of the Sri Lankan president Prendesa. Similarly, Japanese *kamikaze* pilots seem to be inspired mainly by nationalist motives (Rosenthal, this volume) and Palestinian suicide terrorists, nowadays, perceive their actions as "dying for their land", in combat against the Israeli occupation (Moghadam, 2003).

     3. Epistemic Authority. To say that ideology is important hardly means that every "foot soldier" about to commit a suicide mission for religious reasons is an expert on the Koran, nor that every "foot soldier" about to commit a suicide mission for political reasons, is an expert on political ideology. More likely, the "rank and file" bomber puts his or her trust in certain "epistemic authorities" who explain what the ideology asks of him or her at a given time (Kruglanski, Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, Ellis, Bar, Pierro & Mannetti, in press). Two types of "epistemic authority" are of particular importance: The expert and the group. With regards to expert epistemic authority, consider the focal role played by Sayid Muhammad Husayn Fadlalla in the suicide bombings of Hizbollah, the organization that started it all in 1983. Fadlalla is the informal leader of the Shi'ite clerics associated with the Hizballah, and hence its supreme spiritual leader to whom the operational commanders looked to for approval of suicide bombing. At first (1983) Fadlalla voiced his moral reservations about resorting to suicidal tactics, but subsequently he gave them the fullest possible endorsement short of an explicit *fatwa*, providing the needed spiritual "seal of approval" for unleashing a wave of suicide attacks that has since made history.

     The group or the community also represents a trusted "epistemic authority" whose consensus determines for the individual whether the commission of suicide bombing is legitimate and desirable. It is of interest in this regard that the Palestinian public

opinion's support for suicide bombing has increased steadily over the last six years. Whereas in March of 1996 it amounted to 20%, it has risen to 70-80 % in favor by June of 2002. In short, as far as the suicidal "foot soldiers" are concerned, "theirs is not to reason why". Their own self-ascribed, epistemic authority in various matters is rather low and they, therefore, rely on expert and group authorities to tell them what to do, even when it comes to such a critical personal decision as the taking of their own life. In this vain, Friedkin (this volume) points out that it is in the vital interest of the organization that its members do not have "minds on their own", that they not value their own judgments and opinions and that they be susceptible to the group's influence. Therefore, terrorist organizations may purposefully aim at diminishing self-weight or self-ascribed authority. They may cut off sources of external support to the member (for example training a future martyr in isolated place, separated from the family and friends of his past life) and diminishing his individuality and personal needs, compelling him to sacrifice them in the name of the task (Friedkin, this volume).

4. Public Commitment. When a new recruit is initiated as a novice in a terrorist organization he (or she) comes under its total control and is further trained to serve the organization's goals. As the main goal of any organization is to survive (Moghadam, 2003), defection of a suicide bomber may be very costly to the organization. Therefore terrorist organizations use tactics involving public commitment and social pressure in order to create martyrs who are "reliable" (Berman & Laitin, this volume) and who will not change their minds midway through the task, putting the entire organization at risk and wasting weeks or months of costly preparations. Thus, the final element of the group process brought to bear on the suicidal "bomber" in training is the mechanism of public

commitment creating a psychological "point of no return", as Merari (1990, p. 208) puts it , that very few individuals can overcome. The candidate is made to prepare his will and write last letters to his family and friends. He is then videotaped bidding everybody farewell and encouraging others to follow his example. As one can well imagine, this creates a tremendous pressure to carry out the deed as planned.

According to Merari (July 13, 2000), there have been practically no cases of mind-changing by suicide candidates in the case of the Palestinians, very few in the case of the Tamils, and very few in the case of the Lebanese organizations, the Hizballah and Amal. However, a more recent review by Berman and Laitin (this volume) notes cases of defection among Palestinian suicide bombers between the years 2000 and 2003. Thus, a change of mind constitutes a problem that the terrorist organizations have to perennially guard against via various tactics of social pressure.

The Organizational Level

The organizational level is of the utmost importance to understanding the phenomenon of "suicide terrorism". In a certain sense, is the "dog" that wags the tail of "suicide terrorism". Based on considerable intuitive understanding of various psychological principles some militant organizations have been able to create a veritable assembly line for the production of "suicide terrorists". It is the organizations too that decide when and where to deploy the suicidal operatives in ways that best serve the organizations' political agenda. For instance, Hamas refrained from carrying out spectacular suicide attacks early on in the Oslo peace process (between the Palestinians and the Israelis) for the express reason that they felt that the Palestinian public would not support it (Merari, July 13, 2000). In other words, organizations can turn suicide bombing

on and off in accordance with their assessment of what works best in given geopolitical, social and economic contexts (see Berman & Laitin, this volume; Krueger & Laitin, this volume).

As several authors have noted, from the organizational standpoint the use of suicide bombing is extremely cost effective tactic in an asymmetric warfare (Berman & Laitin, this volume; Jasso & Meyerson Milgrom, this volume; Kruglanski, 2003; Moghadam, 2003; Pape, 2003). It is relatively cheap — the 9/11 attack, for example, cost less than a $100,000 whereas the damage it inflicted was in billions of dollars. There is no concern that the operatives will divulge information when they are caught, according to the common adage that "dead people don't talk". There is no need to provide for complex and costly escape routes or safe houses. These advantages notwithstanding, however, the <u>organizational aspect</u> of suicide bombing, or of terrorism in general, remains a major point of vulnerability for the terrorist organizations, hence an opening for launching significant counter-terrorism efforts.

Suicides operatives need to be trained <u>somewhere</u>. That means the (tacit or explicit) cooperation of states in whose territory the operations take place. Different states vary in the tightness of the control they can exercise over their territory, but no state can afford to allow the armed terrorist organizations to become too powerful, or to set up a state within a state. As an example, King Hussein of Jordan slaughtered thousands of PLO fighters in 1970/71 in an operation known as the Black September, because he considered the PLO a threat to the Hashemite regime.

Furthermore, states that harbor or support terrorist activities can become the targets of attack as the Taliban have painfully realized. Muamar Kadaffi, despite his early

enthusiasm for terrorism, has essentially gotten out of the terrorist business. Libya "has broken completely with its former client Abu Nidal, implemented procedures to prevent terrorists from entering its territory, cooperated on counterterrorism with moderate Arab states, and acted in accordance with an Arab League agreement to extradite suspected terrorists. " (Pillar, 2002, p. 160).

In this sense then, it is not quite true that because suicide terrorists are willing to die, the logic of <u>deterrence</u> does not apply to their activities. Suicide bombers are sent by organizations; organizations require state support and states have multiple needs that can be threatened. This may undermine their support for terrorism without which no terrorist organizations can survive for long. True, the application of deterrence requires the state support for terrorism to be proven and the deterrence to be credible. This may require the willingness to go to war -- something that may be quite difficult from the standpoint of international relations (as attest the Bush administration's difficulties in convincing other nations to join in the 2003 launching of a war against Iraq).

Finally, the fact that suicide terrorism is an organizational tool opens up the logical possibility of finding alternative means to the organizations' ends. In so many words, this means "negotiating with terrorists" one way or the other, something that many view as abhorrent on moral grounds, and that on pragmatic grounds as well may seem to encourage terrorism. Nonetheless, some form of negotiations may ultimately dissolve the organizations' decision to resort to the tactics of suicide terrorism. For instance, the Tamil Tigers have reached an agreement with a Sri Lankan government and (at least for a time) have abandoned their suicidal tactics. "Negotiation with terrorists" in fact is inevitable despite all the declarations, if one acknowledges that the organizational

level is an inseparable part and parcel of suicidal terrorism. Even tough guys like Sharon or Netanyahu have been known to negotiate with terrorists, as was the United States of America. Thus, the organizational aspect of suicide terrorism offers a ray of hope that this appalling phenomenon is, after all, amenable to rational solutions.

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