

# Dying to Bomb: An Interactive Triangular Approach to Suicide Terrorism

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Although suicide terrorism is still intuitively seen as inherently defiant to the very premise of liberal society (Michelsen, 2003), academic efforts are increasingly being made to make sense of the phenomenon as a product of endogenous and exogenous circumstances. Because its definition bears consequences on the understanding of its causality, the contentious nature of the term 'suicide terrorism' bears clarification. This essay will understand suicide terrorism as a tactic amongst others deployed by a specific organisation consisting in "the targeted use of self-destructing humans against non-combatant populations to effect political change" (Atran, 2003: 1534). Whereas Assaf Moghadam (2006: 707) considers the perpetrator's death as a necessary criterion, this essay will concur with Ariel Merari (1998: 192) in lowering the benchmark to simply the expectation of non-survival.

Single-dimensional explanations pinning the phenomenon on one root cause are doomed to be reductionist. While excluding the communal level draws a decontextualized portrait of actors in a vacuum, a societal approach alone risks underestimating human agency. Similarly, whereas accounting for the organisational motivations is crucial to understand the strategic rationale informing the widespread use of suicide terrorism, disregarding the individual level fails to explain why only a minority decides to carry out such attacks. Drawing on behavioural interaction theory (Rabbie, 1991), this essay will adopt a comprehensive-integrated approach and argue, in line with Mohammed Hafez (2006) and Paul Gill (2007) that a satisfactory explanation can only be found in an interactive triangular framework, involving all three meso-, micro- and macro- levels, the organisation, the individual and the society. Suicide terrorism is neither an exclusively top-down nor bottom-up phenomenon and variables at one level are inherently dependent on variables at another. Thus, each pillar should be understood as neither individually comprehensive, nor in isolation or in competition, but rather in complementarity with the others. Whereas the first section will tackle the organisational incentives and argue that the resort to the tactic cannot be distanced from the strategic efficiency it yields, the second will discuss individual motivations and argue that the combination of collectively-shared grievances and collectivist societies renders individuals more cognitively susceptible to engage in an act they conceive as altruistic investment. The third section will then tackle the societal level and argue that without societal support, neither organisations nor individuals would engage in suicide terrorism. This essay will conclude that while all three strands are crucial to the production of suicide terrorism, insofar as it plays an active role at every level, capitalising on individuals' predisposition, rationalising the tactic and engineering societal support, the organisation could be pinpointed as the supporting beam in the analysis.

What makes the phenomenon so hard to explain is that there is no one explanation applicable beyond time and space. Because most works are either analytically weakened by an overreliance on a case-study approach or overly simplified by attempts at developing a theoretical framework distanced from empiricism, this essay will illustrate its analysis with the case of Palestinian suicide bombing. This explanatory framework is not exclusive to this case-study, yet it should be understood as relatively tailored to it. Although a discussion of gender and terrorism is beyond the scope, this essay will make no distinction between men's and women's individual motivations.

### **Organisational level: suicide terrorism as a rational strategic weapon**

That explanations emphasising the organisational level are the most resorted to should not come as a surprise. If

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there is one thing most scholars agree upon, it is that suicide bombers rarely operate independently (Hoffman, 2003; Crenshaw, 2007; Gill, 2007). With the large majority occurring as part of coherent campaigns (Pape, 2003: 347), suicide attacks are the end-result of an organisational trail. Drawing on rational choice theory, this section will argue that because it is a cost-beneficial efficient *modus operandi*, the widespread use of suicide terrorism cannot be distanced from the organisation's political calculus.

## *Cost-benefit calculations: comparative advantages of the tactic*

Compared to conventional terrorist attacks, suicide attacks are mechanically easier, more reliably destructive and considerably less expensive, costing 150 dollars according to one Palestinian official (Atran, 2003: 1537). Suicide bombers' readiness to die serves as a signal demonstrating extreme commitment – thus intensifying the psychological effect – (Hoffman and McCormick, 2004), makes them harder to deter (Crenshaw, 2007: 141), more versatile and reliable (Kimhi and Even, 2004: 815), and annuls the risk of arrest or information leakage (Winkates, 2006: 94). Because no escape plan is required, they are better able to infiltrate heavily-protected targets (Hoffman, 2003). Between 2000 and 2006, suicide terrorism accounted for less than one percent of Palestinian attacks but for up to 44 percent of all Israeli casualties (Winkates, 2006: 98) and according to Hamas member Muhammad Nazal, whereas conventional military tactics yielded on average one Israeli death per twelve Palestinians, each suicide attack resulted in an average of nine Israeli casualties. This multiplier effect creates a 'balance of terror' in what would otherwise be an asymmetrical conflict against a military superior opponent (Hafez, 2006: 174). In the words of Azet Al Rushuq, another member of Hamas, "this weapon is our winning card, which [...] created parity never before witnessed" (cited in Hafez, 2006: 174).

## *An effective means to a political end*

Like all terrorist methods, the collective rational reasoning informing an organisation's decision to engage in suicide terrorism lies in the tactic's expected potential to satisfy its goals. Highlighting its capacity to generate leverage, Pape argues that the objective of every campaign has been to end foreign occupation by coercing modern democracies into withdrawing their forces (Pape, 2003: 345). The success of Hamas' April 1994 suicide terrorism campaign seems to validate Pape's theory. After two Hamas suicide attacks, on April 6 and April 13, the Israeli Knesset voted to accelerate its withdrawal from Gaza (Pape, 2003: 353). The fact that Israel had missed the deadline agreed under the Oslo accords and that, on April 13, Yitzhak Rabin has stated that the only response was to accelerate negotiations (Pape, 2003: 353), implies that there are reasons to credit the April 1994 campaign with coercive success. Arguing that Pape's interpretation disregards internal dynamics, Mia Bloom sees in suicide terrorism a means for inter-organisational competition, a way for the sponsoring organisation to increase its prestige and its political "market share" at the expense of its rivals (Bloom, 2004:61). Bloom and Atran argue that that Hamas' suicide bombings during the Second Intifada increased the group's appeal at the expense of support for the Fatah-dominated PLO (Atran, 2006:132). Whereas 70 percent of Palestinians supported Arafat in September 2001, within three months, the increase in Hamas' attacks was paralleled with a decrease in Arafat's approval rate to 57 percent (Bloom, 2004: 72). Brym and Araj, on the other hand, focus on the retaliatory function of suicide bombing, arguing that between 2000 and 2005, up to 82 percent of Palestinian suicide attacks were reactive, triggered by the desire to reciprocate an Israeli attack (2006: 1969). These explanations are not immune from criticisms. For instance, while Bloom's theory applies to the Palestinian case, it fails to explain Al Qaeda's and the LTTE's: while the former had no rival to compete against, the latter only began suicide attacks after its rivals were discarded (Crenshaw, 2007: 146). Although those theories are complementary in explaining Palestinian suicide terrorism, attempting to explain an organisation's cost-benefit calculation under one causal factor should not be the point. Organisational motives are short-term and long-term and context-contingent, and the only generalisation to be drawn is that "suicide terrorism pays" (Pape, 2003: 355).

Although expectation of political return is necessary to rationalise the tactic, the fact that the tactic's strategic advantages rarely figure in suicide bombers' last testaments (Hafez, 2006: 175) shows that rationality alone is hardly sufficient. Ariel Merari is right when asserting that "no organisation can create a person's readiness to die" (cited in Sprinzak, 2000). An explanation neglecting individual motivations would wrongly assume that all persons are equally likely to engage in the tactic and fail to explain why, when asked, more than 64 percent of organisation leaders

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admitted they would not be willing to sacrifice their lives (Sheehan, 2014).

## Individual level: cognitively susceptible and collectivist individuals

It would be as myopic to neglect individual motivations as it would be unfounded to assert there is one psychoanalytical portrait of a suicide bomber. This section will argue that, when confronted to empirical evidence, first-wave culturalist arguments cannot help but falter. Instead of explaining suicide terrorism as “*folie a plusieurs*” (Salib, 2003), a more constructive way to conceive the individual level while accounting for situational factors is to think of suicide bombers as individuals whose socio-political grievances and collectivist inclinations increase their cognitive susceptibility to engage in what they conceive as a form of altruistic investment.

### *Psychological reductionism of single-profile explanations*

Lester et al. (2004) are misguided in asserting there is a set of personality traits shared amongst all suicide bombers. Most empirical studies have shown that suicide terrorists are not necessarily economically deprived, under-educated or religious fanatics (Pape, 2003; Silke, 1998) and “the search for a typical suicide attacker seems to be as hopeless as the search for a typical terrorist” (Crenshaw, 2007: 153). First, Palestinian suicide bombers seem to come from wealthier more educated backgrounds than the average Palestinian (Krueger and Maleckova, 2002; Berrebi, 2007). Palestinian suicide terrorists have to date included two sons of millionaires (Hoffman, 2003), Berrebi found that only 16 percent of terrorists, compared to 31 percent of the general population, can be identified as poor (2007: 17) and Krueger and Maleckova showed that the higher the education-level, the lower the support for negotiations (2002). Moreover, as implied by Hamas spiritual leader, an organisation’s selection process is positively correlated with individuals’ social statuses (Atran, 2006: 137). Whereas on one hand, a higher education-level can evidence superior abilities (Efraim and Berrebi, 2007: 224), on the other, the sacrifice of a hopeless individual would have a lesser symbolic effect than that of someone who has more to lose (Atran, 2003: 1536). Even if some suicide terrorists are poor, the material incentives offered by an organisation are not enough to offset the costs (Atran, 2003: 1537), further discrediting the economic deprivation theory. The religious fanaticism argument is as easy to dismount. Besides reproducing an Orientalist perspective, by arguing that the causational roots of suicide terrorism are embedded in Islamic culture, Joan Lachkar (2002) and Raphael Israeli (2003) disregard the fact that the LTTE, producing half of all attacks between 1980 and 2001, is a Marxist-Leninist secular organisation (Pape, 2003: 343). Arguing that religious belief can alone generate a willingness to die would be implying that all religious individuals are as prone to becoming suicide terrorists. Whether suicide terrorists are suicidal is another contentious topic. Merari demonstrated that around 53 percent of suicide terrorists have showed suicidal inclinations (cited in Sheehan, 2014) and Lankford argued that suicide terrorism serves as a loophole for suicidal individuals in a society which condemns suicide (2010: 22). On the other side of the argument, Pape, Hassan and Brym and Araj have argued instead that suicide bombers are not exceptionally more depressed than the average Palestinians considering the living conditions (Brym and Araj, 2012: 437). Given that most studies are impressionistic, individual-level studies are bound to remain inconclusive. Even if a consensus were to be reached, suicidal tendencies are only one factor which can elicit a wide range of responses, including but far from limited to suicide terrorism.

### *Suicide terrorism as a symptom and consequence of socio-political grievances*

One generalisation which could nonetheless be drawn is that suicide terrorists’ motivations are almost always underpinned by a range of socio-political grievances. Humiliation, victimisation, anger and despair have been emphasised as drivers within Palestinian society (Atran, 2003; Butler, 2002; Crenshaw, 2007: 140). Those grievances need not be experienced at the personal level: the perception of general submissiveness at national-level can be enough to trigger a sense of humiliation by proxy (Atran, 2003: 1536). In the context of Palestinian society, suicide terrorists can be seen as the symptom and consequence of a wider condition, a way for individuals to “project out of their condition” and experience “momentary empowerment” (Michelsen, 2003: 211). Socio-political grievances might be a prerequisite, yet they are not more than catalysts. Drawing a direct link between a people’s collective sense of oppression and the resort to suicide terrorism does not explain why only a minority of Palestinian society engages in suicide terrorism.

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## *Towards group dynamics: the weight of collectivist cultures*

Grievances, even if collectively-held, would not translate into the willingness to carry out suicide attacks without a strong sense of communal solidarity. A collectivist culture is crucial to the production of suicide terrorists in three respects. First, individuals integrated in tight-knit communities have an intensified vicarious feeling of collective consciousness. The more cohesive the in-group, the more rigid the 'us' vs 'them' dichotomy and the stronger "ingroup-outgroup enmity" (Lankford, 2014: 351).

Second, by de-individuation, a culture valuing groups' over individuals' interests promotes the notion of suicide terrorism as "parochial altruism" (Ginges et al., 2009: 224), an act whose significance transcends individuality (Post, 2009: 382). Jean-Paul Azam sees suicide terrorism as "intergenerational investment" (2005), conducted upon the belief that the expectation of success to the next generations will offset the costs of self-sacrifice. Hamas activist Muhammad Hazza stated: "we die so that future generations may live" (cited in Hafez, 2003: 176). In opposition with Lankford's interpretation of suicide terrorism as an egoistic loophole for suicidal individuals in a society condemning suicide (Lankford, 2010), suicide terrorism should be seen as "altruistic suicide" (Hassan, 2010: 45).

Third, group belonging and conformity can be a powerful bottom-up facilitator of radicalisation. Whereas Marc Sageman (2006: 128) argues that friendship and kinship ties predate the commitment to an ideology, Kassim (2008: 207) and Crenshaw (2007: 140) show how intense group camaraderie anchors commitment, making it impossible to back-out without being seen as a traitor. The willingness to carry out suicide attacks should be viewed, at least partly, as a socialising process, where radicalisation is shaped within a group setting (Gill, 2007: 152). However, Pedahzur and Perliger (2006) are wrong to discard the role of organisations. By regrouping would-be-suicide bombers in small cells and emphasising collective rituals, trainers consciously cultivate group solidarity and 'coalitional commitment' (Ginges et al., 2009: 224; Pape, 2003: 347). Moreover, top-down pressure makes backing out unthinkable. By referring to him as 'Al Shaheed Al Hay' – living martyr – and urging him to film a video testimony of his last will, the aura the organisation surrounds the would-be-terrorist with serves as indirect emotional blackmail (Hutchinson, 2007: 197). Shared socio-political grievances embedded in a collectivist society might be crucial prerequisites at the individual level, yet following Wiktorowicz' "cognitive opening" logic (2013), they are not more than permissive factors shaping potentialities. In opposition to Lankford who sees suicidal intent as a requirement for suicide terrorism and the sponsoring organisation as a mere additional facilitator (2014: 361), this section has argued that individuals, although now cognitively susceptible, would not engage in suicide terrorism if their predispositions were not capitalised on by the organisation and the tactic not supported by their society.

Neither organisations nor individuals operate in a contextual vacuum. Although structural variables cannot predetermine actions, suicide terrorism cannot be explained without considering the social matrix which enables as much as constrains human agency (Hafez, 2006:170). Because their strategy cannot be seen as independent from or indifferent to the wider society they are embedded in, a structuralist approach explains why only some terrorist organisations resort to suicide terrorism while others repudiate it.

## **Societal Level: the cultural resonance of martyrdom**

Disagreeing with Kimhi and Even who find a supporting atmosphere to be simply a supporting factor (2004:824), this section will argue that societal support is one of the indispensable pillars to the production of suicide terrorism. Whereas the cultural context within which organisations are operating shapes the meaning suicide terrorism can be imbued with, most individuals would not make the conscious decision of self-sacrifice if the latter was not "socially-approved" (Lankford, 2010) and in accordance with internalised norms.

## *Cultural resonance reducing the costs of suicide terrorism*

Whether suicide terrorism is carried out and whether it succeeds depends on the domestic level of support. Far from being uncostly, the use of suicide bombers might lower support, discourage recruits and precipitate splinter groups (Braun and Genkin, 2014: 21). Because it reduces potential moral backlash (Pape, 2003: 346) and aids recruitment (Braun and Genkin, 2014: 29), an approving collectivist society plays a crucial role in the organisation's decision to

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implement suicide terrorism. According to Hafez, a culture of martyrdom requires three converging elements: cultural norms validating self-sacrifice, a legitimate authority rationalising suicide terrorism and political conditions intensifying collective victimisation (Hafez, 2006: 165). Hafez's first condition echoes Braun's and Genkin's 'cultural resonance' argument, according to which whether suicide terrorism is adopted depends on whether it is internalised in the wider society (2014). Hutchinson's assertion that "suicide bombers are victims of their own cultural socialisation" (2007: 199) is not unfounded. Whereas the surfacing of photos of toddlers dressed as suicide bombers (Post, 2009: 383) is evidence of a martyrdom culture ingrained at a very young age, this glorified perception of the suicide bomber is constantly maintained through education curriculums, public commemoration ceremonies and media and posters praising the martyrs (Kimhi and Even, 2004: 829). The perception of the martyr as a power symbol – and indeed the positively-connoted notion of martyr itself (El Sarraj, in Butler, 2002: 6) – explains the high rates of volunteerism and is reflected in the fact that one out of four Palestinians aged twelve to seventeen is willing to self-destroy (Madsen, 2004).

## *A culture orchestrated by the organisation*

Drawing the line between spontaneous and organisationally orchestrated support can be difficult, yet that societal support is somewhat deliberately nurtured by the sponsoring organisation is undeniable (Hafez, 2006). Pedahzur goes as far as to deny the possibility of a grass-roots movement, arguing social support is always a "calculated top-down phenomenon" (Crenshaw, 2007: 152). The organisation rationalises suicide terrorism, presenting it as the only option to those seeking empowerment and using theological rhetoric to sanctify it and invest it with symbolic meaning (Piven, 2007: 755). Islam, like any other religion, is thus simply one frame manipulated by the organisation to its own ends (Slavicek, 2008: 554). Organisational practices also increase the appeal to become a suicide bomber. Besides the \$1,000 monthly stipend Hamas grants families of martyrs (Winkates, 2006: 100), Hamas calendars include for example a "Martyr of the Month" feature (Sheehan, 2014). Moreover, the organisation's competitive selection process for martyrdom operations contributes to elevating the status of those selected. Yet, top-down initiatives would not resonate without a political environment fuelling frustration and reflecting the organisation's narratives.

## *The indispensability of a conducive political environment*

The credibility and receptivity of the cultural framing argumentation is dependent on the political environment. Hafez (2006), Hassan (2010) and Araj (2008) point out to intense militarisation and brutal repression as crucial to the sustainability of a culture of martyrdom. A poll conducted in 2002 showed that two thirds of Palestinians were backing suicide bombings because of Israeli army operations (Atran, 2003: 1538). Moreover, whereas during the Oslo Process negotiations, more than 70 percent of Palestinians opposed suicide terrorism, more than 73 percent supported it a few months into Al Aqsa Intifada (Hafez, 2006: 172). A focus on exogenous conditions of violence also helps explain the timing of suicide campaigns (Hafez, 2006: 171).

This essay has argued that a satisfactory explanation for suicide terrorism can only be found in an interactive triangular framework involving organisation, individual and society. Whereas suicide terrorism can be explained in terms of the strategic efficiency the tactic yields for the organisation, at the individual level, collectively-shared grievances ingrained in a collectivist society results in individuals conceiving of suicide bombings as a form of altruistic investment. Because neither organisations nor individuals operate in a vacuum, a cultural resonance of martyrdom coupled with conducive political conditions shapes societal support for suicide terrorism, without which neither would engage in suicide terrorism. Insofar as it is actively involved at every level of analysis, the sponsoring organisation can be seen as the supporting beam of the analysis.

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