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The making of a suicide bomber

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What drives someone to kill themselves while killing others? Psychologists and anthropologists have been studying suicide attacks and have come to some startling conclusions. Michael Bond reports

IN ANY normal circumstances, a 16-year-old schoolboy and a mother of two young children would be symbolic of life and growth. Yet in two cases in the Middle East this year they signified only death and self-destruction.

The mother was Reem Raiyshi, who killed herself and four Israelis in a suicide bombing in Gaza in January, leaving behind a 3-year-old son and 18-month-old daughter. The boy was Hussam Abdu, whose failed attempt to blow himself up at an Israeli army checkpoint near Nablus in March was televised around the world. Raiyshi was the first "martyr mother", but Palestinian terrorist groups insist she will not be the last. And Abdu's case was not exceptional - dozens of Palestinian teenagers have tried to do the same and some have succeeded.

In the face of such unfathomable contradictions it is comforting to imagine that suicide terrorists - even those who are mothers or teenagers - are different to the rest of us. One popular assumption is that they are homicidal or suicidal maniacs; another that they are poor and ignorant with little prospect of a decent future; another that they are driven to act by unbearable political oppression; a fourth that they are religious fanatics, usually Islamic. These notions are widely affirmed by analysts and politicians. They are also wrong on almost every count.

While suicide terrorists invariably come from oppressed communities, recent research by psychologists, anthropologists and others suggests that they fit none of the other common profiles. They are no less rational or sane, no worse educated, no poorer and no more religious than anyone else. "They are like you and me," says Rohan Gunaratna, head of terrorism research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. What this amounts to is in many ways more alarming than the ubiquitous misperception of the suicide bomber as fanatical. It means that, in the right circumstances, anyone could be one.

Killing yourself while killing your enemy is not a modern idea. It was practised against the Romans in 1st-century Judea by Jewish Zealots, and by the Islamic order of Assassins in the Middle East from the 11th to 14th centuries. Japanese kamikaze pilots changed the course of the second world war (though not in the way they would have hoped) by flying their planes into enemy ships.

The modern era of suicide terrorism started in April 1983 when Hezbollah, under the cover name of Islamic Jihad, attacked the US embassy in Beirut with a truck-bomb, killing 63. The tactic has since been used by dozens of groups around the world, most prolifically by Hamas and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (otherwise know as the Tamil Tigers). Altogether there have been some 500 suicide attacks around the world since 1980.

All this has given academics studying the psychology of suicide bombers and the environments in which they act a wealth of data to draw on. And they are overturning some persistent myths. Take the idea that terrorism is born of poverty and lack of education, the basis of almost all the US's foreign aid programmes. "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror," said President Bush at a UN development conference in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002.

Yet in a study of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad suicide terrorists from the late 1980s to 2003, Claude Berrebi, an economist at Princeton University, found that only 13 per cent came from a poor background compared with 32 per cent of the Palestinian population in general. In addition, more than half the suicide bombers had entered further education, compared with just 15 per cent of the general population. And in a paper published last year in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (vol 17, no 4, p 119), economist Alan Krueger of Princeton University and the Russell Sage Foundation in New York and Jitka Malecková of the Institute for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, showed that Hezbollah militants who died in action in the 1980s and early 1990s were less likely to be impoverished and more likely to have attended secondary school than others of their age.

What of the idea that suicide terrorists are simply suicidal? Ariel Merari, a psychologist at Tel Aviv University in Israel and perhaps the foremost expert on Middle Eastern terrorism, says he used to believe this. But when he studied the background and circumstances of every suicide bomber in the Middle East since 1983 he came to an unexpected conclusion. "In the majority you find none of the risk factors normally associated with suicide, such as mood disorders or schizophrenia, substance abuse or history of attempted suicides," he says. Scott Atran, an anthropologist at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, agrees. "There is no psychological profile whatsoever for suicide terrorists." There have been highly disturbed suicide bombers - Raiyshi, the mother who blew herself up in Gaza, had been ostracised by her parents and family and was depressed, according to Eyad El Sarraj, chairman of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme - but they are exceptional.

The link with religion is more complicated since most Islamic terrorist groups use religious propaganda, largely the promise of paradise, to prepare recruits for suicide missions. Yet suicide terrorism is in no way exclusive either to religious groups or to Islamic culture. Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, compiled a database of every suicide attack from 1980 to 2001, 188 in all (*American Political Science Review*, vol 97, p 343). He found no direct connection between suicide attacks and religious fundamentalism. As he points out, the leading perpetrators of suicide terrorism, the Tamil Tigers, are a Marxist-Leninist group whose members are from Hindu families but who are themselves hostile to religion. Merari has shown that 22 of the 31 suicide attacks in Lebanon between 1983 and 1986 were carried out by secular organisations. Moreover, one of the first suicide bombers to attack Israeli forces in the Middle East was Loula Abboud, who defied all the stereotypes: she was a secular, middle-class 19-year-old from a Christian background who blew herself up in front of a group of Israeli soldiers in Lebanon in 1985.

What, then, would lead a sane, rational, educated and comfortably-off person to do something so irrational and extreme? The key, many researchers agree, lies with the organisation that recruits them. In the modern history of suicide terrorism it appears that every mission has been authorised and planned by a resistance group. "Suicide terrorism is an organisational phenomenon," confirms Merari. "An organisation has to decide to embark on it."

The decision to engage in suicide terrorism is political and strategic, Pape says. What is more, the aim is always the same: to coerce a government, through force of popular opinion (apart from a few isolated cases, modern suicide terrorism has only ever been used against democracies), to withdraw from territory the group considers its homeland. That certainly applies to the 9/11 terrorists, who considered the US an occupying presence in the Middle

East because of its military bases there and its backing for Israel. It also holds for groups who attack democracies indirectly, by attacking those who support them. The ongoing attacks on police stations in Iraq are an example.

This raises the question: why do some groups resort to suicide terrorism while others do not? Why, for example, did the IRA not use suicide bombers when all the conditions seemed set for it: an occupation, as the IRA saw it, by a democratic government, and a resistance organisation whose members were already bombing civilians and martyring themselves for their cause through hunger strikes? One researcher, who cannot be named, went undercover in Northern Ireland at the height of the conflict by posing as a terrorist from an Islamic group, and asked an IRA commander this question. "He replied that it was against their culture, that their people would turn against them. Hunger strikes were the furthest they could go."

Bruce Hoffman of the research organisation RAND Corporation in Washington DC, who specialises in studying political violence, agrees that culture can play a part in deciding an organisation's strategy. But he warns against seeing suicide terrorism as a phenomenon alien to the west. Both he and Merari insist there is no evidence that westerners are less easily coerced into sacrificing themselves than anyone else.

Yet Gunaratna, who interrogated the "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh captured in Afghanistan in 2001, is not convinced. Lindh told him that he was asked by an Al-Qaida commander if he wanted to become a martyr, and that he had declined. Gunaratna believes this was because he was an American. "The western mindset is very materialistic," he says. "They don't have the same desire, the same culture, for sacrifice. Maybe it's because the west has achieved so much materially. If you are materialistic, you will never make a good suicide terrorist."

Other researchers, however, think it has less to do with culture than with strategy: groups resort to suicide terrorism when conventional terrorist methods are doing little to further their cause, or when their enemy's military strength becomes overwhelming. Atran says that the frequency with which Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have used suicide bombers against Israel correlates directly with the increased use of force by the Israeli army. "It is a classic vicious cycle," he says.

Hoffman has another explanation. The overriding reason for the emergence of suicide terrorism, he says, is almost always rivalry between terrorist groups. He points out that in the Palestinian territories, resistance groups have tended to adopt it only when they are losing political ground to rival groups and feel the need to mark themselves out. Hence Hamas's decision to start using it against Israel in 1993, when the peace process engineered by Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization threatened its central ideology of the obliteration of Israel; and the decision by Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Tamil Tigers, to start using it against the Sri Lankan government in 1987 to establish his group as the pre-eminent force in Tamil separatism. This is also, says Hoffman, the major reason some of the groups have started using women: it is a way of escalating their campaigns.

Organisations are not just responsible for the decision to embark on suicide terrorism; they are also necessary to make bombers go through with the act, Merari says. How does an organisation do it? First it must win popular support for the tactic, which it does by proclaiming it the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the community. Where a community is being violently oppressed by an occupying power or suffers severe social deprivation, the message is quickly taken up. On the streets of Gaza and in the Tamil towns of northern Sri Lanka, suicide bombers are celebrated on posters and in songs, their deeds glorified in coffee shops and school playgrounds. "It is like the patriotism you find in any country at war," Merari says. "In such an atmosphere many people say, sometimes offhandedly, that they too would like to become a martyr, because the society views that as the ultimate form of patriotism." Certainly Hamas has volunteers knocking down its doors, and the Tamil Tigers did too before they declared a ceasefire in 2001.

But as Merari points out, a person might volunteer in the heat of the moment and change their mind as the day of reckoning approaches. So groups have ways of ensuring that their recruits cannot back out. Almost always they organise them into small bands - or in the case of the Tamil Tigers an academy - and over weeks, months or years put them through intense psychological training to reinforce the idea that they will soon become martyrs for their cause.

With Al-Qaida, Hamas and other Islamic groups, much of this indoctrination is religious. This is how a member of Hamas explained it to UN relief worker Nasra Hassan, who interviewed failed suicide bombers and their families and trainers - 250 people in all - while working in Gaza between 1996 and 1999: "We focus his attention on Paradise, on being in the presence of Allah, on meeting the prophet Muhammad...and on fighting the Israeli occupation and removing it from the Islamic trust that is Palestine."

Often the decisive part is a written or videoed testimony in which the recruit declares his or her commitment to what they are about to do. At this point they become, as Merari puts it, a "living martyr" and it is then almost impossible for them to back out without losing the respect of their peers and their community.

This sense of duty to the community but especially to a brotherhood of peers is, many psychologists agree, the single most important reason why rational people are persuaded to become suicide bombers. "If you are in a small cell of suicide terrorists and they are all dying one by one, and you have made this commitment on a videotape saying goodbye to your family and everyone else, the psychological investment is such that it would be almost impossibly humiliating to pull back," says Atran. It is an old trick: armies use it, he says, to get people to fight for each other. Merari has found this "brotherhood mentality" in everyone he has studied who has willingly killed themselves for a common cause, including the 9/11 bombers, kamikaze pilots and the IRA hunger strikers.

Another question researchers want to answer is this: once a group has decided to deploy suicide terrorists, why do certain people allow themselves to be recruited while others do not? Here the answers are less clear, though there are some clues. The strongest is that recruits are better educated and better-off than most in their community. Krueger and Malecková point out that such people are more likely to be politically motivated, and therefore more prepared to commit themselves completely to a political cause.

Other researchers suggest there could be pointers in an individual's personality. "There are some indications that suicide bombers are more marginal people, more influenced by the social atmosphere and the group," says Merari. "Those who are more independent, or stronger personalities, find it in their power to say no." Gunaratna, who has interviewed many failed bombers, has also found a common vulnerability. "The suicide terrorist is easiest to break because his mind is very fragile. His mindset is very narrow. He has seen only one side of life." El Sarraj says his studies of Palestinian "martyrs" point to something else: a traumatic childhood experience. All of them have experienced helplessness as a child, he says, most especially the humiliation of their father by Israeli soldiers.

Increasingly, however, researchers believe that in the vast majority of cases, individual psychology is not the determining factor. They point to an observation made by Hassan about the "living martyrs" she interviewed in Gaza: "They all seemed to be entirely normal members of their families," she said. All you need, it seems, is a peculiar mix of social, cultural and political conditions for a group to make the decision. After that, it could be anyone, schoolboys and mothers included.

Michael Bond

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