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- Home
- Publications
- News
- Events
- Press Releases
- Resources
- Authors
- About Us
- Support
- Employment
- Getman Paintings

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< Back To Archives

Soft Power and the Psychology of Suicide Bombing

06/08/2004 - By Scott Atran

The soldiers believed they came that spring to free a part of the Middle East from the tyranny of terrorists and evil men. What amazed them was the warm welcome from Shi'ite Muslims in the south and the Capital. The victors confidently sent in their experts to replace the ousted leadership with locals they considered more "reliable." This soon led to anger and distrust at the "invaders" and their "collaborators." Within a year, a new "terrorist" organization arose from the Shi'ite core to expel the occupiers. It armed itself with a novel type of "smart weapon" that would radically alter the nature of political warfare across the planet – the suicide bomber. That was 1982, when Israel entered Lebanon and Hezbollah (The Party of God) was spawned.

In recent months, Iraqi Shi'ites have joined Sunni insurgents calling for worldwide suicide actions against Americans and their allies. Will history repeat itself on a grander and deadlier scale? The risk increases daily.

Like pounding mercury with a hammer, top-heavy use of massive military force to counter Islamic terrorism only seems to generate more varied and insidious forms of terrorism and broaden support. The London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies reports in its recently released "Strategic Survey 2003/4" that the Iraq confict has "focused the energies and resources of al-Qaeda and its followers while diluting those of the global counterterrorism coalition." The survey also indicates that massive and direct assault on jihadist networks and their supporters, although effective against traditional armies, has actually benefted al-Qaeda and its associates. Dispersing to many countries, their networks have become more "virtual" and elusive, and much harder to identify and fght. Membership has also become more v aried and diffcult to profle.

In the frst four months of 2004, 60 suicide attack ers killed nearly 800 people and wounded thousands. There were frst -time suicide attacks in Uzbekistan (by at least 5 female bombers) and in Western Europe (the "no-surrender" suicide explosion by 6 cornered plotters of the Madrid train bombings). In Iraq alone, 30 suicide bombers killed nearly 600 people — a greater number by far than in any single country for any comparable period since the attacks of September 11. Even a casual glance at media outlets and websites sympathetic to al-Qaeda reveals a proliferating jihadist fraternity that takes heart from the fall of Saddam, Iraq's secularist tyrant. [1]

Yet many U.S. and allied leaders continue to persist in their portrayals of Islamic militants as evil misfts and homicidal thugs who hate freedom and thriv e only in a moral desert swept by poverty and ignorance. "These killers don't have values," President Bush declared in response to the spreading insurgency in Iraq, "these people hate freedom. [2] And we love freedom. And

that's where the clash is." Secretary of State Colin Powell previously told a World Economic Forum that "terrorism really flourishes in areas of poverty, despair and hopelessness."

In fiact, study afiter study finds suicide terrorists and supporters to be more educated and economically well off than surrounding populations. They also tend to be well-adjusted in their families, liked by peers, and – according to interrogators – sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves helping. A report on The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism used by the Central and Defiense Intelligence Agencies (CIA and DIA) finds "no psychological attribute or personality distinctive of terrorists." [3] They do not act despairingly out of neediness or hopelessness, as many ordinary suicides do. If they did, they would be denounced as blasphemers and criminals. "He who commits suicide kills himselfi fior his own benefit", warned Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qardawi (a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and perhaps the most important religious authority on "martyr actions" for Sunni Islamists around the world), but "he who commits martyrdom sacrifices himself for the sak e of his religion and his nation… the Mujahid is full of hope." [4] Like the educated and motivated Japanese Kamikaze who romantically described their impending deaths as "cherry petals that fall before bearing fruit," so, too, for the Palestinian shaheed (martyr): "They are youth at the peak of their blooming, who at a certain moment decide to turn their bodies into body parts… flowers." [5]

Researchers Basel Saleh and Claude Berrebi independently flind that the majority ofi Palestinian suicide bombers have a college education (versus 15 percent of the population of comparable age) and that less than 15 percent come from poor families (although about one-third of the population lives in poverty). [6] DIA sources who have interrogated al-Qaeda detainees at Guantanamo note that Saudi-born operatives, especially those in leadership positions, are often "educated above reasonable employment level, a surprising number have graduate degrees and come from high-status families." The general pattern was captured in a Singapore Parliamentary report on prisoners from Jemaah Islamiyah, an ally of al-Qaeda: "These men were not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised. Like many of their counterparts in militant Islamic organizations in the region, they held normal, respectable jobs. Most detainees regarded religion as their most important personal value." [7]

As in nearly all instances of revolutionary terror in history, rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations – especially regarding personal security and civil liberties – are critical to generating support for terrorism, no matter how rich or educated a person is to begin with. Studies by Princeton economist Alan Krueger and others find no correlation between a nation's per capita income and terrorism, but do find a correlation between a lack ofi civil liberties, defined by Freedom House, and terrorism. [8] In Iraq, the aspirations that the U.S. invasion initially incited have rapidly dwindled into fearful expectations about the future.

Polls show that Muslims who have expressed support for martyr actions and trust in Bin Laden or the late Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yasin do not as a rule hate democratic freedoms or even Western culture, though many despise American foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. After the 1996 suicide attack against U.S. military housing at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, a Defense Department Science Board report found that: "Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States." [9]

According to the 2004 Freedom House survey of democracy in 47 nations with an Islamic majority, Morocco and Jordan are the Arab states making the most progress towards representative government. [10] But majorities of their people now support suicide bombings as a way of countering the application of military might by America in Iraq and by Israel in Palestine. [11] Survey data from the Pew Research Center reliably show these people favor participation in elected government and decision-making, personal liberty and freedom of expression, educational opportunity and economic choice. [12] Polls by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies indicate that Iraqi opponents of U.S. occupation, now almost 9 out of every 10 Iraqis (including nearly 6 out of 10 who support radical Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr), espouse similar sentiments. [13]

Preempting and preventing terrorism requires that U.S. policymakers make a concerted effort to understand the background conditions as well as the recruitment processes that inspire people to take their own lives in the name of a greater cause. Current political and economic conditions

that policymakers are monitoring remain important although not necessarily determinant. Rather, what likely matters more is the promise of redeeming real or imagined historical grievances through a religious (or transcendent ideological) mission that empowers the militarily weak with unexpected force against enemies materially much stronger. This was as true for Jewish Zealots who sacrifced themselv es to kill Romans two millennia ago as it is for modern Jihadists.

This doesn't mean negotiating over goals such as al-Qaeda's quest to replace the Western-inspired system ofi nation-states with a global caliphate. Osama bin Laden and others afifiliated with the mission of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders seek no compromise, and will probably fight with hard power to the death. For these already committed group members, using hard power is necessary. The tens of millions of people who sympathize with bin Laden, however, are likely open to the promise of soft-power alternatives that most Muslims seem to favor— participatory government, freedom of expression, educational advancement, and economic choice. [14]

Shows of military strength are not the way to end the growing menace of suicide terrorism: witness the failure of Israel's and Russia's coercive efforts to end strings of Palestinian and Chechen suicide bombings. Rather, nations most threatened by suicide terrorism should promote democracy, but be ready to accept "democracy's paradox": representatives who America and its democratic allies don't like, who have different values or ways of doing things, must be accepted as long as this does not generate violence. Democratic self-determination in Palestine, Kashmir and Iraq – or for that matter, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia – will more likely reduce terrorism than military and counterinsurgency aid. At the same time, America and its allies need to establish an intense dialogue with Muslim religious and community leaders to reconcile Islamic custom and religious law (shari'ah) with internationally recognized standards for crime and punishment and human rights.

The precondition for such undertaking is to ensure that potential recruits in the Arab and Muslim world feel secure about their personal safety, cultural heritage and participation in political decisions that affect their lives. Although such soft-power efforts may demand more patience than governments under attack or pressure to reform typically tolerate, forbearance is necessary to avoid catastrophic devastation to Iraq, the United States, democracies worldwide, and the future hopes of peoples who aspire to soft empowerment from a free world.

NOTES:

1. For example: "Saddam Hussein was an evil tyrant who wreaked havoc and abused his people for many decades. As Muslims we believe wholeheartedly in the miserable ending of all tyrants, including the one who parade today as triumphant victors." From: "What after the Capture of Saddam," December 16, 2003, www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=mYDRef.
2. Cited in Louis Frazza, "Bush Committed to Iraq Handover in June," USA Today, April 4, 2004, p.1.
3. "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism," Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., September 1999, p. 40, www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/Soc_Psych_ofi_Terrorism.pdfi
4. Al-Ahram Al-Arabi (Cairo), February 3, 2001.
5. Editorial, Al-Risala (Hamas weekly), June 7, 2001.
6. Basel Saleh, "Palestinian Violence and the Second Intifada," Paper presented to NATO AWR, "Suicide Terrorism: Strategic Threat and Counterstrategies," Lisbon, Portugal, June 10-14, 2004.
7. "White Paper—The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests," Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, January 9, 2003, http://www2.mha.gov.sg/mha/detailed.jsp?artid=667&type=4&root=0&parent=0&cat=0&mode=arc.
8. Alan Krueger, Jitka Malecková, "Seeking the roots of terror," Chronicle of Higher Education, June 6, 2003, http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i39/39b01001.htm
9. "DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol. 2: DSB Force Protection Panel Report to DSB," U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., December 1997, p. 8, www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/trans2.pdf.
10. See Martin Walker," The Democratic Mosaic," The Wilson Quarterly, 38(2), Spring 2004.

11. "A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists," Pew Research Center Survey Report, March 16, 2004, http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=206.

12. "Views of a Changing World 2003," Pew Research Center Survey Report, June 3, 2003, http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185.

13. Rouala Khalaf, "Iraq Rebel Cleric Gains Surge in Popularity," Financial Times, May, 19, 2004 (reporting on a poll by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies; - interviews with 1,640 Iraqi adults in Baghdad, Babylon, Diyala, Ramadi, Mousel, Basra and Sulaimaniya, conducted from April 20 to April 27, 2004.).

14. Joseph Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (Public Affairs, New York, 2004).

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