MANUFACTURING
HUMAN BOMBS

Manufacturing Human Bombs

The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers

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For Abeer, Omar, and Kareem

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

A Call for an Interdisciplinary Approach to Suicide Terrorism

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In the spring of 1989, with the sponsorship of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Affairs, Walter Reich organized a conference to explore "the psychological underpinnings of terrorist motivation and behavior." The participants' contributions were published the following year in a volume entitled *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind.* Reich initiated the conference with a debate, tasking Martha Crenshaw to marshal the arguments for terrorist behavior as a strategic choice, and tasking me to marshal the arguments that psychological processes undergird terrorist behavior. As Reich notes in the introduction to the book, he did this to emphasize that both approaches must be used to account for most instances and forms of terrorist behavior. Many readers of the volume apparently ignored the terms of reference for the debate spelled out in the introduction, for Crenshaw has been criticized for ignoring the psychological dimensions, while I have been criticized for ignoring the strategic logic of terrorist behavior.

Not constrained by Walter Reich, Mohammed Hafez has wisely taken an interdisciplinary approach in responding to the question whether it is strategic logic or other forces that underpin suicide terrorism by answering, both. He calls our attention to the complexity of the suicide terrorism phenomenon and insists on an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account three levels of analysis: individuals, organizations, and societies. He argues that there are at least three conditions required for suicide terrorism: a culture of martyrdom, a strategic decision to employ this tactic, and a political context that generates a supply of recruits.

That there are definitive elements of strategic choice seems clear. Just as Hezbollah, when celebrating Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, made clear that it believed its violent campaign had worked, so too did Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade claim credit amid the Palestinian celebrations of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza.

Yet while there is widespread support in the Palestinian territories for the strategic efficacy of the campaign of terror, especially suicide terror, by no means do all follow this pathway. What differentiates those who are attracted to this path from those who are not? Is the psychology of the Palestinian suicide bombers the same as that of the suicidal al Qaeda hijackers responsible for the coordinated attacks of 9/11? And what are the motivations of secular terrorist organizations, especially the Kurdish separatists of the PKK, the Tamil Tigers, and the Chechen nationalists?

Hafez has focused in this volume on Palestinian suicide bombers, but suggests that his overarching conclusions are applicable to suicide terrorism campaigns in other cultures as well, a conclusion with which I strongly agree. However, it is important always to locate each group accurately in its own political, historical, and cultural context.

One of the best ways of learning what makes terrorists tick is to ask them—which is why a number of us in the terrorism scholarship field have been interviewing terrorists for years. What was particularly striking about the population of incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists my team interviewed in Israeli and Palestinian prisons was their apparent normality. The apparent paradox of how Islamic terrorists can commit suicide terrorism in the name of Allah when the Quran specifically proscribes suicide was succinctly resolved by one of the human bomb commanders we interviewed. Asked this question, he responded angrily, "This is not suicide. Suicide is weak; it is selfish; it is mentally disturbed. This is *istishad* [martyrdom or self-sacrifice in the name of Allah]."

Other pioneering scholars cited in this book have interviewed failed suicide terrorists to discover once again the apparent normality of the subjects. The terrorists emphasized that they were doing something for the cause of Palestinian nationalism, for their people, for the purpose of conveying to the weak and the powerless a sense of being able to do something. This was reminiscent of one of the subjects in our interview study, who, speaking of the positive value of being involved in this violent campaign, declared that "an armed action proclaims that I am here, I exist, I am strong, I am in control, I am on the field, I am on the map." This type of research needs to be expanded.

If the subjects are normal, without manifest psychopathology, how can we explain their willingness, indeed eagerness, to pursue this path? The answer is to be found in the sociocultural context and, for many, in the power of the destructive relationship between charismatic leaders and

their followers. These hate-mongering leaders have an ability to connect with alienated, frustrated youth in such a manner that their individuality becomes subordinated to the collective identity, and they develop a willingness to sacrifice their individual lives if it serves the collective cause.

The power of the collective identity induced by the hypnotic influence of the destructive charismatic leader helps explain how the Tamil Tigers, a secular nationalist-separatist group, have so successfully adopted the strategy of suicide terrorism, for the suicide terrorists have yielded control of their lives to their powerful charismatic leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. Indeed, although the LTTE is a secular group, its members ascribe near-Godlike status to Prabhakaran and uncritically accept his views and unquestioningly obey his directives.

While both the Palestinian suicide bombers and the suicidal hijackers of 9/11 kill in the name of God, they differ considerably. "Suicide autopsies"—the reconstruction of the lives of suicides—of the Palestinian human bombs in an Israeli study showed that they were conducted by young men in a rather narrow age range, 17–22 years of age (although recently that range has broadened, and both men and women have been involved). Unmarried, uneducated, and unemployed, they were unformed youth. The suicide bomb commanders emphasized to them their bleak prospects, that they could bring honor to their names, that they would be enrolled in the hall of martyrs, that their parents would be proud of them and would gain esteem in the community and receive financial benefits. Once a young man entered the safe house, he was never left alone lest he backslide, and he was physically escorted to the site of the bombing.

This stands in vivid contrast with the suicidal hijackers of 9/11, who were older (28–33 years of age with the exception of some younger individuals who were brought in late for "muscle" and who probably were unaware of the nature of the operation until it was under way) and well educated—Mohammed Atta and two of his colleagues were in a masters degree program in the technological university in Hamburg, and came from comfortable middle-class families in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. And, in striking contrast with the Palestinian suicide bombers, they had been on their own in the West, for as long as seven years, blending in with Western society while keeping within them like a laser beam their mission to give up their own lives while taking thousands of lives. They were fully formed adults who had subordinated their individuality to the cause of radical Islam as articulated by the destructive charismatic leader Osama bin Laden.

But for both groups it was the leaders, not the bombers themselves, who had made the strategic decision about the value of suicide terrorism—and those leaders seem unlikely to reverse that decision any time soon. As noted above, the withdrawal of Israel from the settlements in Gaza has confirmed for the leaderships of Palestinian terrorist groups the efficacy of their suicide bombing campaign.

The interdisciplinary approach that Hafez has advanced has important implications for countering this deadly strategy. The culture of martyrdom that he identifies is subject to very different interpretations by Muslim scholars, and moderate Muslim clerics have criticized the religious value of so-called "martyrdom operations" when the goal is killing innocents, emphasizing that the jihad of the sword is defensive, calling for taking up arms against those who take up arms against Muslims, and that there are plenty of Quranic and Prophetic sayings proscribing the killing of innocents: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits for God loves not the transgressor." But the voices of Muslim clerics challenging justifications for suicide terrorism have been all too muted, and need to be strengthened.

The organizational decision to employ suicide terrorism as a strategy is in part a strategy of desperation. Central to the IRA's decision to decommission its weapons was Sinn Fein's inclusion in the political process. Hamas has powerful support in the occupied territories and especially within Gaza. As Hamas enters and achieves representation within the political process, can this induce it to curtail its campaign of suicide terrorism, as the IRA's inclusion led to a curtailment of its campaign of terror? And the third element specified by Hafez, a political environment that produces a ready supply of recruits, argues for a strategy to inhibit recruitment, a difficult strategy to devise to be sure, but one that would rest on providing alternative pathways for youth to succeed, for at present all too many frustrated and alienated Islamic youth see their only recourse as striking out in despair.

Only by considering suicide terrorism in an interdisciplinary manner, as Hafez has done so well, can our understanding of this phenomenon be developed to serve as the foundation for an appropriate mix of interdisciplinary tools to counter this deadly strategy. But it will be a long march, a long campaign, for at this time, for all too many, "hatred has been bred in the bone," and that attitude will not easily be countered.

Acknowledgments

NOTE ON DATA COLLECTION

This book makes use of descriptive charts containing data on Palestinian suicide bombings since 1993, but especially since the second Palestinian uprising, which began in September 2000. I compiled the data on daily violent events between Palestinians and Israelis from September 1993 to February 2005 with the help of a team of graduate research assistants at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. The data were culled from the quarterly chronologies published in the *Middle East Journal*, which draws from several news sources, including the Associated Press, the BBC, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and many other reliable news services. We also collected data from the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Herzlia, Israel, which keeps detailed records of violent events in the second Palestinian uprising, and from LexisNexis searches using as our main sources *Ha'aretz* and *Jerusalem Post*, two Israeli daily papers that are published in English. Ancillary sources such as CNN and *New York Times* chronologies of suicide bombings in Israel and Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs chronologies of Palestinian attacks were used to provide more information on specific events, not as independent sources of data. The database is available for researchers upon written request to the author.

We encountered several challenges while collecting this data. First, we occasionally found discrepancies in news reports regarding the actual date of or number of persons killed or injured in an attack. In those instances we relied on Israeli sources because we assumed that they would have the most accurate information, given their stake in, and proximity to, the conflict. Second, in many instances initial reports of killed and injured were subsequently revised upward or downward by the authorities. When we became aware of those changes, we went back to revise individual entries in the database; however, we did not go back to verify every entry in the database, because of the time and effort required. Rarely do subsequent reports lead to substantial revisions in the number of killed or injured; rather, revisions typically result when one or two of those initially reported as injured die later from their injuries. Thus, our numbers of deaths and injuries may vary from those of other researchers or from those issued by Israel or the Palestinian Authority. Third, some events were difficult to

categorize because of conflicting Palestinian and Israeli claims about what actually happened. For instance, some episodes deemed to be targeted assassinations by Palestinians are contested by Israelis as "workshop accidents"—that is, the militants blew themselves up while preparing an attack. When in doubt, we excluded these events from our database or used the category "unknown." As a result, our aggregate numbers may be substantially lower than what Palestinian and Israeli sources report. We recognize this limitation, but it is necessary in order to ensure the reliability of the data. Finally, our data capture those events that receive media attention. Many episodes of violence, such as random shootings and roadside bombings, go unreported, usually because they did not cause any casualties. Consequently, our data significantly underestimate the level of violence during the al-Aqsa uprising. Our aim is not to document each episode of violence but to reflect patterns in violence.