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Rational, educated and prosperous: just your average suicide bomber

By Deborah Smith, Science Editor
May 14, 2004



Suicide bombers are not all poor, uneducated, religious fanatics or madmen, as many people believe.

Research on the social and psychological background of terrorists show they tend to be more prosperous and better educated than most in their societies, and no more religious or irrational than the average person.

A study of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad suicide terrorists from the late 1980s to 2003 found only 13 per cent were from a poor background, compared with 32 per cent of the Palestinian population in general, according to a *New Scientist* report.

Suicide bombers were also three times more likely to have gone on to higher education than the general population, Claude Berrebi, an economist at Princeton University in the US, found.

Ariel Merare, a psychologist at Tel Aviv University in Israel, said he had changed his view that most suicide bombers were mentally ill after studying the background of every suicide bomber in the Middle East since 1983.

"In the majority you find none of the risk factors normally associated with suicide, such as mood disorders or schizophrenia, substance abuse or a history of attempted suicide," he said.

Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago who studied 188 suicide attacks worldwide between 1980 to 2001, said the phenomenon had increased in that period not because of religious fundamentalism but because terrorists had learnt the strategy worked.

He said the leading perpetrators of suicide terrorism were the Tamil Tigers, a Marxist-Leninist group. Its members were from a Hindu background but were hostile to religion.

Rohan Gunaratna, head of terrorism research at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said the findings had overturned popular ideas about terrorists. "They are like you and me," he said.

The experts said resistance groups tended to adopt suicide tactics when they were losing political ground to rival groups, and used psychological techniques to ensure recruits went through with the act.

A sense of duty to a brotherhood was the most important way rational people could be persuaded to kill themselves, said Scott Atran, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan.

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