



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." ♦

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