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What goes on in the mind of a suicide bomber?

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By Richard Ingham

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PARIS — Political leaders and the media usually portray suicide bombers as crazed, impoverished, murderous or fanatically religious, and generally the loner type.

NEWS

Experts say the truth is far less gothic and, as a consequence, strangely more terrifying. The typical profile of a suicide attacker is someone who comes from a good home, often has a good education, has friends and holds down a steady job.

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OPINIONS

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In other words: The man who blows himself and innocent people apart on a London train could also be that nice young man who lives next door. "Study after study shows that suicide attackers and their supporters are rarely ignorant or impoverished," says Scott Atran, a research leader with France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.

"Nor are they crazed, cowardly, apathetic or asocial. The common misconception underestimates the central role that organisational factors play in the appeal of terrorist networks."

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Claude Berrebi, an economist at Princeton University, carried out a study of Hamas and Palestinian martyrdom attackers from the 1980s to 2003 and found that more than half of them had a college education. Fewer than one in seven were raised in poverty, compared with a third of the Palestinian population in general.

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Israeli psychologist Ariel Merari of Tel Aviv University studied the backgrounds of martyrdom attackers in the Middle East from the early 1980s, when the contemporary era of the phenomenon began in Beirut. "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 suicide," Merari told Britain's New Scientist.

A unifying factor among suicide bombers is a sense of deep injustice or humiliation, a sense of immovable despair that can be addressed only by self-sacrifice.

Among Palestinian "martyrs", Gaza mental health expert Eyad El Sarraj found that witnessing humiliation of their fathers by Israeli troops was a common source of trauma and the desire for revenge.

E-GREETINGS

Among Muslims born outside areas of conflict, such as the Britons of Pakistani origin suspected to have carried out the London bombings, a

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 Yes

 No

 Not Sure

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common perception is that Islam and its followers are under attack.

The plight of the Palestinians has long been a deep grievance for many Muslims, to which that of Muslim Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya and now Iraq can be added.

Atran, in a paper published last year in The Washington Quarterly, said organisers of suicide attacks eagerly look for "able and committed" recruits — not loners — who are willing to give up their lives for a cause.

Someone who has invested in education and training has signalled a willingness to sacrifice today's satisfactions for tomorrow's rewards and is able to realise commitments, he said.

Having found the recruit, the next step is to coax him (or her) along the path to "martyrdom."

This requires social, cultural and political guidance to help them along the way, and success lies with having good organisation, says Atran.

The would-be kamikaze is thus enclosed by a disciplined, well-organised group which forges and promotes the cult of the suicide bomber.

It places an austere "brotherhood" around him, glorifies his acts within the community and promises the recruit that by his death, he can gain freedom for future generations or eternal bliss in paradise. A typical point of no return is when the recruit — by now enclosed in a culture of death and reward — makes his farewell testimony in a letter or video. — AFP

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