

SUICIDE BOMBERS
IN IRAQ

THE STRATEGY AND IDEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

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MOHAMMED M. HAFEZ



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For peace in the land of the two rivers

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Suicide bombings in Iraq are among today's most pressing and puzzling issues. The number of attacks is extraordinarily high: Although hard to pinpoint, the total is certainly greater than all such incidents in other conflicts, including Israel-Palestine and Sri Lanka, combined. The attacks, most of which are by car bombs, are primarily directed by violent Islamists against fellow Muslims, and civilians are the targets of choice. The bombers are mostly foreign, not Iraqi, although we still do not know who is behind most attacks (the identity of 58 percent of the perpetrators is unknown). Clearly suicide bombing in Iraq is largely an imported phenomenon.

Although suicide bombings constitute only a part of the broad-based insurgency—whether or not it is a civil war—they are a critical part of the dilemma the U.S. government faces. The bombings both represent and provoke sectarian violence that has disrupted Iraq's state-building process and spread fear and insecurity. Approximately half of all suicide bombings occur in and around Baghdad, the center of power. Ironically, both the major group organizing them, al Qaeda in Iraq, and the U.S. government agree that the war in Iraq is an integral part of a global struggle and that what happens there will affect the future of Islamism and terrorism worldwide.

The author of *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, Mohammed Hafez has extensive experience as both a scholarly researcher and an expert adviser to many organizations and government agencies. *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* reflects his impressive knowledge and research. His extensive use of texts in Arabic is indispensable to the persuasiveness and authenticity of a carefully presented and documented argument. The phenomenon of suicide bombing has attracted immense attention, but his is the first in-depth study of the Iraqi experience. It is a particularly timely contribution to our understanding of contemporary political violence.

Hafez uses a social movement approach to explain in convincing detail the dynamics and complexities of the mobilization process behind suicide bombings. He emphasizes the way suicide attacks have been framed as martyrdom operations and how the sponsoring organizations have relied on existing social networks to recruit volunteers in the region and in Europe. He shows that although all the Sunni insurgent groups use the

language of Islam, only two (al Qaeda in Iraq and Ansar al-Sunna) make suicide bombings the hallmark of their campaigns. The ideological basis of both groups is jihadi Salafism, not Iraqi nationalism, and these organizations are not rooted in Iraq's Sunni community. They seek state collapse in order to establish an Islamic regime that will replace the safe haven they lost in Afghanistan after 2001. Thus suicide attacks do not occur at random but follow a pattern; they are timed to coincide with both military and political initiatives by coalition forces and the Iraqi government.

The study reveals the heavy weight of the past, something those unfamiliar with history have not always appreciated. The legacy of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, is still very much with us. The foreign networks on which al Qaeda in Iraq and Ansar al-Sunna depend—indeed the groups outside the country from which they sprang—grew out of the dispersion of the al Qaeda organization in Afghanistan. Without these contacts, few suicide bombers would have gone to Iraq. The strength of the jihadi Salafist movement in Iraq and elsewhere also results from the historical deficiencies of Middle Eastern Muslim regimes that have failed to provide effective or legitimate governing structures and, in the eyes of Islamists, failed to defend Muslims against Western encroachments. By suppressing dissent at home rather than trying to solve the problems that lay behind it, they drove radical Islamists abroad—a displacement of discontent that they did not discourage. Furthermore, suicide terrorism in Palestine provided an important basis for the legitimization of the tactic in Iraq. The practice of “martyrdom” had become normalized and accepted by many Muslims in the Middle East, facilitating its adoption under different circumstances in Iraq.

Another significant contribution of Hafez's analysis is its emphasis on the emotional as well as the ideological justifications of violence. What he calls the mythology of martyrdom historically has been associated with Shia, rather than Sunni, Islam. But in Iraq the jihadists have managed to develop a compelling narrative that justifies and venerates both self-sacrifice and the killing of civilians in the name of religion. They tell a story of humiliation and redemption through the heroic acts of a small band of defenders of the faith. Moreover, the religious story is grafted onto traditional values in Iraqi society, such as defense of honor and masculinity. Hafez shows how hatred of the Shia, regarded by jihadi Salafists as apostates, heretics, and collaborators since the very beginning of Islam, can justify violence that seems inexplicably cruel to outsiders.

Obviously the abuses at Abu Ghraib played directly into the hands of the jihadists. Disseminated via satellite television and the Internet, their videos appeal to susceptible audiences across the globe. The images they convey are a powerful recruiting tool.

This study's prognosis is a sober one. However well-intentioned U.S. actions might have been in 2003, by intervening in Iraq the United States has made the "near" and "far" enemies of Islamism into one. Mohammed Hafez ably explains how and why suicide terrorism has contributed to the "slide toward chaos" observed by the Iraq Study Group in 2006.

Martha Crenshaw
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This book would not have seen the light of day without the generous support of the United States Institute of Peace. In 2003 the Institute awarded me a two-year grant to study the tragic phenomenon of suicide bombers in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As I was beginning that research, war broke out in Iraq and suicide bombers exploded, literally and figuratively, onto the scene. This book tries to make sense of the appalling violence in Iraq since 2003. I am indebted to Steven Riskin, Kay Hechler, Linda Rabben, and other Institute staff for helping bring this volume to the public in a timely fashion.

This book also benefited tremendously from individuals who contributed resources, access, and insights. First and foremost, I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to Ami Pedahzur for inviting me to present my research at two conferences on suicide terrorism at the University of Texas at Austin in 2005 and 2006. More significantly, Dr. Pedahzur shared with me valuable data that would have taken me months to collect, even with the help of several research assistants. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Ryan Alsabagh for working with me on creating relevant charts of the quantitative data. He was most obliging and efficient. I owe him a special acknowledgment for his hard work. Three anonymous reviewers significantly enriched the content of this book with their valuable feedback.

I want to thank Nicole Argo and John Tirman at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for inviting me to present my research on Iraq at the “Transnational Violence in the Persian Gulf” workshop at MIT’s Center for International Studies on April 20–21, 2006; Payam Foroughi, Hakan Yavuz, and the Hinckley Institute at the University of Utah for inviting me to give the plenary address on Iraq for the Middle East and Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference, September 7–9, 2006; and Professor Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University for providing valuable feedback on chapter 3.

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As any writer who is married with children would confess, such a labor of love can put a strain on relations with those whose love truly

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matters the most. I am fortunate to have an understanding wife, Abby, who contained her frustration at the seemingly endless hours I spent reading, writing, and “zoning out” at the dinner table. She gave me the time and space to do what I am passionate about; to her I owe a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid fully.

To my two boys Omar and Kareem: I have been away too much from your playtime. You are too young to read this book and too innocent to contemplate its content. I hope one day you will understand.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

1920 RB	1920 Revolution Brigades of the Islamic Resistance Movement
AI	Ansar al-Islam
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
ASG	Ansar al-Sunna Group
CA	Conqueror Army (also known as Conquest Army [<i>Jaysh al-Fatihin</i>])
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
DST	Territorial Surveillance Directorate
FS	Fedayeen Saddam
GCMAF	General Command of the Mujahidin of the Armed Forces (Baathists)
GIA	Armed Islamic Group
GICM	Moroccan Islamic Combatants Group
IAI	Islamic Army of Iraq
IED	Improvised explosive device
JCB	Joint Coordination Bureau for Jihad Groups
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (also known as Tamil Tigers)
MA	Muhammad's Army
MAI	Mujahidin Army in Iraq
MCC	Mujahidin Central Command (Baathists)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSC	Mujahidin Shura Council
OSC	Open Source Center
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
RA	Al Rashidin Army
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SDAB	Salah al-Din al-Ayoubi Brigades of the Islamic Front for Iraqi Resistance
SVBIED	Suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device
TWJ	Al Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad, later AQI)

I finished writing this book in October 2006. However, data collection for the majority of charts that appear in chapter 3 ended in February 2006. As a result, some developments that occurred after February 2006 are not reflected in these charts. This limitation is unfortunate, but it is also inevitable. Sorting through press reports and other source materials to update charts with reliable data would have delayed publication by several months, during which time events in Iraq would have necessitated further data collection and, thus, further delays. I have tried to compensate for this shortcoming by including some of the most recent data from other sources in the main text.

The data in the descriptive charts are based on open-source information and papers of record. These resources include the Open Source Center (OSC, previously Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS), which can be located at www.opensource.gov. However, this is a password-protected Web site and requires U.S. government permission for access. Other sources include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other news agencies accessible through the LexisNexis Academic search engine. Chart 2 draws from data in the Brookings Institution Iraq Index (www.brookings.edu/iraqindex).

I checked each data point for accuracy by seeking specific information on the date and location of an attack, as well as the casualty rate and group claiming responsibility. A news report that did not include at least the date and location of the attack was left out of the data. This selection process undoubtedly will raise objections that this book underestimates the number of suicide attacks in Iraq. That may be the case, but the procedure was necessary to ensure the reliability of the data.

This book refers to many documents and videos produced by insurgents in Iraq. They were downloaded from their Web sites or the sites of their supporters. Unfortunately, many of these sites regularly disappear and reappear under different Web addresses. Therefore, it is very likely that some of the Web sites in the notes cannot be accessed. I have downloaded all the insurgent video clips referred to in chapters 4 and 5, as well as all the Arabic documents from the *Tawhid wal Jihad* Web site referred to repeatedly in chapters 4 and 5. This Web site is frequently down. Readers interested in a specific document for research purposes may send an e-mail request to me at hafezm@umkc.edu.

The source data for appendix 2, which contains the names of 102 known suicide bombers in Iraq, came from insurgent materials such as al Qaeda in Iraq's *Biographies of Eminent Martyrs*, an online publication distributed through jihadi forums; video clips of suicide operations distributed by insurgent groups; and a 157-page document entitled *Martyrs in Iraq*, featuring the names of 394 volunteers (mostly Arabs) who perished in that country. The document was distributed on the Majdah Forum (www.majdah.com/vb).

I transliterated Arabic words phonetically so that the reader may pronounce them as an Arabic speaker does. As a result, I did not always adhere to the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* transliteration system customarily used by specialists on the Middle East. I also did not use diacritic marks to denote the Arabic letter *ʿayn* (‘a, ‘u, or ‘i) except in rare instances when it might be confused with the letter *alif*. Finally, specialists usually distinguish the collective noun *Shia* from the singular or adjectival *Shii* (for example, “the Shia in Najaf attended a Shii shrine”), but I use Shia throughout to avoid confusing nonspecialists.