

INTRODUCTION

Let me die with the Philistines. — Samson (Judges 16:30)

Could Samson, the Nazirite in the ancient land of Canaan, have been the first suicide militant? The story of Samson, which comes to us from chapters 13–16 in the book of Judges of the Bible, is intriguing, not least because his ultimate act of sacrifice took place in what is today Gaza, a place that has produced many suicide bombers since the early 1990s. Captured by the powerful Philistines, who oppressed the Israelites, Samson was tortured, blinded, and forced to toil in prison. One day he was beckoned to entertain the leaders of the Philistines in their temple, where they were to offer a sacrifice unto their god, Dagon. Unable to see, Samson asked a servant that he be moved to the pillars of the temple so that he could lean on them for rest. In an act of faith and vengeance, he summoned all his strength to bring down the two central pillars holding up the temple, killing himself and his tormentors, “so the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”

The tale of Samson and the Philistines shows us that the allure of martyrdom is not a recent development. Throughout history one finds the willingness to die for a cause or higher purpose. Early Christian martyrs willingly endured some of the most gruesome tortures humankind has been able to muster, rather than renounce their faith to please the powers that be. We have seen similar determination to die in Islamic history: in the early battles of the Prophet Muhammad against the unbelievers of Mecca; in the fight waged by eleventh-century Persia’s Shia sect, known as the Ismalis-Nizari, or, more commonly, *hashibiyun* (assassins); and in the struggles of Muslim communities in southwestern India, Aceh in modern-day Indonesia, and Mindanao in southern Philippines against Western colonial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹

One may object that the story of Samson is inappropriate in a discussion of suicide bombers because he hardly qualifies as a suicide terrorist. After all, he killed those in power, who had tortured him and would probably have killed him, and he did not target ordinary civilians, women, and children. A faithful “martyr” fighting oppression would be a better depiction.

But how one describes acts of self-immolation committed in order to kill others is a task fraught with controversy. Those who support these acts of violence prefer to call them “martyrdom operations,” and their perpetrators “heroes” and “freedom fighters.” Those who oppose them prefer to call them “homicide bombers,” “suicide terrorists,” or “suicidal murderers.”

These are highly charged, normative terms that do not aid in the effort to analyze and explain this deadly phenomenon. Therefore, in this book I choose the more descriptive and commonly used term “suicide bomber,” or “human bomb,” which I define as *an individual who willingly uses his or her body to carry or deliver explosives or explosive materials to attack, kill, or maim others*. These attacks usually target civilians, but they can be used alongside conventional battlefield attacks against soldiers, as witnessed in some operations by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and, more recently, insurgents in Iraq and Israel. Key to this definition is the requirement of self-immolation in order to execute an operation—the death of the bomber is a necessary part of carrying out an attack. This is different from a high-risk operation, wherein the death of the attacker is likely but not necessary to the execution of an attack. Moreover, suicide bombings are different from operations in which the attackers fight until the end in the hope of achieving martyrdom. In the latter, while the intent is still to die, the death of the individual is not necessary for the operation to take place. These distinctions may seem overly academic, but it is necessary to have a strict conceptual definition of this phenomenon in order both to collect precise and comparable data across the universe of cases and to analyze its underlying causes.

The introduction of suicide bombings in the modern world, as defined in this report, is most commonly associated with the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II.² At Okinawa alone, in 1945, more than one thousand suicide pilots were used to kill nearly five thousand American service personnel.³ The widespread use of suicide operations reemerged during the 1980s. In Iran, tens of thousands of young boys volunteered for the Bassidj organization, which promoted self-sacrifice to defend the revolution from the invading Iraqi army. Young men rushed headlong into minefields, using their bodies to clear the way for the advancing Iranian forces. In Lebanon, Shia militants in Islamic Jihad organized the suicide bombings of the U.S. embassy and U.S. and French barracks in Beirut during 1983.⁴

From 1983 to 1986 there were 29 additional suicide missions in the Middle East, most of which were carried out in 1985 (22 attacks) by secular pro-Syrian groups. This form of violence continued into the 1990s, mainly by Hezbollah against Israeli targets in southern Lebanon.⁵

Outside the Middle East, suicide bombers emerged in Sri Lanka. The “Black Tigers” of the Tamil Tigers have led the pack in the number and sophistication of suicide missions, which succeeded in killing a defense minister in March 1991, chief of naval staff in November 1992, former prime minister of India in May 1991, and president of Sri Lanka in May 1993.⁶ According to one estimate, since July 5, 1987, the date of its first suicide operation, the LTTE has carried out at least 250 such attacks. Unlike the groups that preceded them, the Tamil Tigers have no moral qualms about using children and women in their operations.⁷

Suicide terrorism was also deployed by the Marxist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey and by ethnonationalist and Islamist Chechens in Russia. In both instances, women bombers played a major role in these attacks. Perhaps the most intense deployment of suicide bombers has occurred in Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Hardly a day passes without news of one or more suicide attacks. These attacks have targeted American soldiers, United Nations and humanitarian centers, Iraqi police recruitment centers, Shia mosques, Kurdish politicians, and ordinary civilians at election booths. In at least one instance, insurgents sent as many as nine suicide bombers in one day.

Since the 1980s we have seen suicidal attacks in Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestinian territories, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Yemen.⁸ Indeed, since the 1980s, while the phenomenon of international terrorism has seen a general decline, suicide terrorism’s share of the total attacks has been on the rise, resulting in more casualties per terrorist attack than in previous decades.⁹ Suicide bombings are an increasingly accepted mode of violence among some groups in Muslim societies, particularly in the Palestinian territories, Chechnya, and, more recently, Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

The widespread use of suicide attacks suggests that terrorism has become more lethal in its intent and now constitutes a major threat to national and international security. The specter of an attack combining suicide bombing

with weapons of mass destruction concerns many intelligence analysts in Europe and the United States.¹⁰ The attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States have resulted in two wars, a coordinated international effort to fight terrorism abroad, and domestic legislation that curtailed civil liberties at home. Suicide attacks in Russia have resulted, at least in part, in a rollback of democratic reforms as President Vladimir Putin consolidated power in his office, presumably to strengthen his ability to fight terrorism. Suicide bombers in Israel have killed and injured hundreds of people and effectively derailed the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis, and could derail the entire ongoing effort to solidify a fragile truce between Palestinians and Israelis.¹¹

This book sheds light on the campaign of suicide attacks that took place in the second Palestinian uprising, known as the al-Aqsa Intifada, which began in September 2000. Research on Palestinian suicide bombers shows that the phenomenon is a complex one that cannot be explained by a single overarching motivation. To understand this form of extreme violence, we must tackle the problem at three levels of analysis: individual motivations, organizational imperatives, and societal conflicts. At each level of analysis different variables explain why individuals, organizations, and societies embrace suicidal violence.

At the level of the individual, as the Palestinian case study shows, appeals rooted in religious redemption, national salvation, and community ties create psychological and cultural inducements to take the leap toward a “heroic” end. Organizations may be able to manipulate some individuals to carry out suicide attacks, but when suicidal violence reaches such high levels as those witnessed in the Palestinian, Chechen, and Iraqi insurgencies, we must go beyond simple notions of “brainwashing” or religious indoctrination and explore how militant groups can persuasively frame acts of self-sacrifice as legitimate and necessary means to achieving liberation. Suicide bombers are not significantly different from other rebels or soldiers around the world who are willing to engage in high-risk activism out of a sense of duty and obligation to their families, comrades, communities, and God. The leap from high-risk activism to self-sacrificing violence is not a gigantic one. Militant groups frame suicide attacks as acts of unparalleled heroism, as means to religious and national salvation, and as opportunities

for empowerment and vengeance, and in doing so they foster the myth of the “heroic martyr,” which inspires future volunteers for suicide attacks.

At the level of organizations, the Palestinian case suggests, strategic calculation in asymmetric warfare is the primary motivation for deploying human bombs. While many individual bombers find in religion, nationalism, or community the inspiration to carry out a suicide attack, organizational leaders are primarily motivated by the tactical advantages of suicide bombings.¹² Asymmetry in power compels the weak to innovate in order to surprise opponents and circumvent their stronger capabilities. Human bombs are smart bombs that are versatile, accurate, and extremely lethal. They are also relatively inexpensive, and their psychological impact on the enemy is potent. In some instances, the use of suicide bombings is intended to muster organizational support in the face of factional competition among insurgent groups. In such cases, the intended effect of suicide bombings is not liberation per se, but organizational maintenance or survival. Whichever the case, religious and nationalist appeals are merely instruments of organizational imperatives. The culture of martyrdom is intended not for its own sake but for the purpose of generating volunteers to fulfill organizational strategies.

At the level of society, as the Palestinian case shows, societal support for suicidal violence stems from a convergence of polarizing conflicts and legitimizing authority. Extreme violence can be facilitated by groups or communities feeling overwhelming threats by external enemies in the course of political conflict. In Palestine, intense feelings of victimization underpin societal support for suicide bombings. In the opening two months of the al-Aqsa uprising, before the sustained deployment of suicide attacks by Palestinian factions, the tactics employed by the Israeli occupying authorities to quell Palestinian rioting and shootings served to polarize the conflict rather than contain the violence. Confronted with what they saw as excessive use of force, Palestinians began calling for just retribution against Israelis. When militant factions such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad dispatched human bombs, the Palestinian communities in the occupied territories felt empowered in the face of Israel’s superior military capabilities. Suicide bombings created an existential crisis for Israel and forced it to respond with harsher measures, resulting in a security dilemma in which

actions by one party to enhance its security deepened feelings of insecurity on the other side.

The violence, however, was not driven solely by the security dilemma—legitimizing authorities promoted or acquiesced to extreme violence. Suicide bombers and their organizers can be constrained by religious and political authorities that choose to resist the culture of martyrdom and exercise repressive measures to halt suicide attacks. The failure of these authorities to take measures that raise doubts about the legitimacy of suicide bombings is important for this phenomenon to grow. In this case, the Palestinian Authority, headed by Yasser Arafat, failed to unequivocally denounce the bombings and indeed promoted a culture of martyrdom through its media. Religious authorities inside Palestine and in the larger Muslim world also failed to condemn attacks against civilians but instead conferred the status of “martyrs” on Palestinian human bombs. In doing so, they fed the culture of martyrdom and gave legitimacy to recruiters of suicide bombers.

These findings tell us that the study of suicide bombers cannot be reduced to individual motivations, organizational strategies, or societal contexts. The case of Palestinian suicide bombers in the uprising illustrates the complex nature of suicide terrorism. Although the findings of this book are derived from a thorough study of the Palestinian case, the three-level analytical framework is instructive for studying suicide terrorism and extreme political violence in other contexts, such as Iraq and Chechnya. It may well be that one cannot develop a complete and convincing explanation of suicide terrorism without investigating why individuals, organizations, and societies embrace martyrdom.