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Suicide Terrorism and Islam

Matthias Küntzel

Abstract

Suicidal killing was not seen in the first 1,360 years of Islam. It is a recent phenomenon that has provoked doubt, questioning, and revulsion. This analysis argues that such killings will end when Muslim religious and political leaders, as well as survivors of the innocent killed in deadly assaults simply because they were unfortunate enough to be nearby, react to attacks meant to kill indiscriminately in order to fan terror. It urges them to speak out for the innocent and persuade the United Nations to outlaw suicide terrorism as a crime against humanity.

A Culture of Death

Suicidal terror is reaching every corner of the world and threatens the everyday life of European, American, Asian, and Middle Eastern citizens alike: Suicide killers hit cafés, hotels, restaurants, engagement parties, government institutions, the media, mosques, churches, means of transport, and funerals. Whereas war is supposed to be an extraordinary means that is limited in time and space, suicidal terror, in contrast, has no existence outside ordinary life. Its main aim is to make the exception of the “emergency rule” into the norm.

Suicide terror is frightening because its perpetrators behave like robots who seem to be devoid of that very instinct that normally unites all human beings: the survival instinct.

Those who are ready to sacrifice their lives are able to perpetrate every conceivable crime. Moreover, it is frightening because every form of deterrence is inoperable, and the foundations of democracy—freedom and trust—are systematically undermined. Also, it is frightening because Al Qaeda’s catchphrase, “You love life; we love death,” has already infected entire societies. The Hezbollah TV station recently broadcast a children’s show in which a little girl thanks God for hearing her prayer and letting her father be killed in battle with the Israelis. The mother of the Palestinian who blew himself up in Eilat explained that she said goodbye to her son before he left and wished him success and that she was happy that God had heard her prayers.¹

This culture of death, in which the child celebrates the loss of her father and the mother celebrates the loss of her son, is something beyond imagination: It is something George Orwell was not able to write about. Nevertheless, 322 suicide bombings were carried out in Iraq from January to the end of August 2007, up from 179 in 2006. In Afghanistan, Taliban terrorists perpetrated 103 such attacks in the first 8 months of 2007, a 69 percent increase over the same period last year.

The type of world in which we are going to be living in the future depends on whether we defeat this surge of irrationality. In order to develop a successful strategy against suicide terrorism we need a correct understanding of its origins. Do hopelessness and desperation lie at the root of suicide murder, as is so often claimed? My answer is no.

Not Desperation but Joy

There are many people in the world who have every reason to feel desperate about their wretched lives. They do not, however, enter overcrowded buses or hijack planes with the sole purpose of blowing themselves up and killing as many innocent people as possible. That is definitely not a normal response to misery. Suicide attackers do not opt for paradise out of despair. If they did, their actions would be considered criminal and blasphemous. As Sheikh Qaradawi, one of the most prominent television personalities of the Muslim world and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, reminds us: "These are heroic martyrdom operations, and the heroes who carry them out don't embark on this action out of hopelessness or despair."² Underscoring his judgment are the testamentary videos of the suicide bombers, which do not provide any evidence of desperation or hopelessness; on the contrary, they reveal an enormous amount of pride and even joy. Sheikh Qaradawi explains why: "He who carries out a martyrdom operation... sells himself to Allah in order to buy Paradise in exchange."³

Not Islam Either

If the suicide bomber is not acting out of despair, then is Islam to blame? Once again my answer is no. Look at the example of Mali: This African Muslim country is one of the poorest nations in the world, but there have been no Malian suicide bombers. Look at Bosnia where the majority of the population is Muslim. Despite the experience of Srebrenica, Bosnian Muslims reject suicide terrorism for good reasons.⁴

Suicide bombing is contrary to Islam in three respects. First, since Abraham spared Isaac, it has been forbidden in all three religions for human beings to be sacrificed for

any reason whatsoever. Yet those who advocate suicide terrorism are reducing human beings into tools of death. Second, no Jew, Christian, or Muslim is permitted to turn himself into a new god with the absolute control over life and death of civilians who just happen to be in a particular spot. Suicide killers, however, disregard the distinctions between a civilian and a soldier, between a minor and an adult, between a tank and an ambulance. Third, Islam strictly forbids suicide. Sura 2, verse 195 reads: "Cast not yourselves to destruction with your own hands." Sura 4, verses 29–30, still more explicit: "And do not kill yourselves.... Whoever does so in enmity and wrong, verily, we shall let him burn in Fire."

It is true that the Koran allows the killing of the unfaithful (4/89, 9/30, 47/4) and sometimes even demands it (4/74). Muslims can certainly find a religious justification for holy war in the Koran. It is true too that the Muslim doctrine of jihad advocates that a Muslim who finds himself in a hopeless situation in the struggle against the unbelievers should sacrifice his life as a *shahid* rather than surrender: "You must not think that those who were slain in the cause of Allah are dead," promises sura 3/169; "they are alive and well provided for by their Lord."

For a Muslim *deliberately* to be sent to *certain* death has been considered sacrilege within Islam. Even the founders of the Islamist movement—Hassan al-Banna, Abu Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutb—never recommended that form of jihad. That is why in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 not a single suicide attack took place.⁵ The systematic employment of Muslims as guided human bombs with the aim of killing as many people as possible was not seen in the first 1,360 years of Islam but was invented only 25 years ago.⁶

The Real Culprit

Suicide terror is a new development that is connected to the radicalization of a specific

current within Islam—a current that we call Islamism. Here we come to the real nub of the matter. Suicide terror has little to do with Islam and still less to do with individual despair but a great deal to do with the ideology of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was the first to develop a full-blown death cult and a new interpretation of the aforementioned sura 3/169 of the Koran. According to his theological worldview, life is worthless and death is the beginning of genuine existence. “The natural world,” Khomeini explained in October 1980, “is the lowest element, the scum of creation.” What is decisive is the beyond: the “divine world—that is eternal.”⁷ According to Khomeini's mind-set, martyrs' deaths are nothing but the transition from this world to the world beyond where they will live on eternally and in splendor. Whether the warrior wins the battle or loses it and dies a martyr's death, in both cases, his victory is assured: either a mundane or a spiritual one.

Khomeini did not restrict himself to words: The first victims of his ideology of death were Iran's children, hundreds of thousands of whom were sent across minefields and so to a certain death between 1982 and 1988 in the war against Iraq—a crime that the world has yet to acknowledge. Those children formed part of the mass *Basij* movement that was called into being by Khomeini in 1979. They consisted of short-term volunteer militias and represented about 30 percent of the personnel on the battlefield. Most *Basij* members were between 12 and 18 years young. They went enthusiastically to their own destruction. Before every mission a small plastic key would be hung around each child's neck. It was supposed to open for all of them the gates to paradise. “The young men cleared the mines with their own bodies,” a veteran of the Iran–Iraq War recalled: “It was sometimes like a race. Even without the commander's orders, everyone wanted to be the first.”⁸

The human wave tactic was implemented in the following way: The barely armed children

and teenagers had to move continuously forward in perfectly straight rows. It did not matter whether they fell as canon fodder to enemy fire or detonated the mines with their bodies. The important thing was that the *Basij* continued to move forward over the torn and mutilated remains of their fallen comrades, going to their death in wave after wave.⁹ That tactic produced some undeniable initial successes for the Iranian side. “They come toward our positions in huge hordes with their fists swinging,” an Iraqi officer complained in the summer of 1982. “You can shoot down the first wave and then the second. But at some point the corpses are piling up in front of you, and all you want to do is scream and throw away your weapon. Those are human beings, after all.”¹⁰

Nobody was more surprised by the effectiveness of his propaganda than Khomeini. “When Iranians go to war, they act as if they are going to a wedding,” he exulted in September 1982. “Even in the earliest days of Islam, we didn't have that.”¹¹ And indeed the history of Islam, although not lacking in atrocities, did not know acts like those of the *Basij*. Those children, honored as martyrs to this day by Ahmadinejad and the mullahs, were nevertheless the model for the first Islamically motivated suicide attacks against Israel.

Islamist Suicide Attacks Provoke Applause and Doubt

It is true that suicide attacks were launched against Israelis in the mid-1970s. But those were the work of Marxist-oriented groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-GC). The first Islamist suicide murder took place in southern Lebanon on November 11, 1982. The perpetrator was 15-year-old Ahmad Qusayr, a follower of the then just emerging Shia militia, Hezbollah. He had

been inspired by the model of the *Basij*. Khomeini personally consecrated the act of the 15 year old with a *fatwa*. Later he had a memorial built for Ahmad Qusayr in Tehran.¹²

Even in the jihadist camp, however, Khomeini's new instrument of jihad had to overcome considerable resistance to gain acceptance. The deviation from the Koran was too great and the break with tradition too sharp not to provoke a reaction. Even among Hezbollah's legal experts, suicide bombing was initially controversial. In 1993 the then spiritual leader of the group, Mohammad Husayn Fadlallah, expressed "reservations about resorting to suicidal tactics in political action" based on this reading of Islamic law. Is not the decision over life and death up to God alone? And was it not the case that inevitably an "innocent"—the bomber himself—would have to be killed?

More than 10 years passed before the Sunni Muslim Brothers in Palestine followed Ahmad Qusayr's example. Only in 1993 did Hamas's Al Qassam Brigades launch their first suicide missions. Two years passed before official approval was given. In 1995 Hamas founder, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, declared "martyr operations" indispensable "because they confuse the Jews and fill them with fear and dread." But even now doubts about their religious legitimacy have not disappeared. In 2001 the mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a *fatwa* condemning suicide attacks as contrary to Islamic law. In April 2007 two senior Saudi religious scholars again came out against the use of religious edicts permitting suicide attacks in general and the use of explosive belts in particular.¹³

Khomeini's distortion of Islam has nevertheless become the calling card of today's Islamist movements throughout the world. In 2002 Iran's current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei claimed: "A man, a youth, a boy, and a girl who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the interests of a nation and their religion is the symbol of the greatest pride, courage, and bravery."¹⁴ In one of his

first television interviews, Iran's President Ahmadinejad enthused: "Is there an art that is more beautiful, more divine, more eternal than the art of the martyr's death?"¹⁵ The "you love life; we love death" theme even appears in Ahmadinejad's letter to the president of the United States in May 2006, albeit in a somewhat watered down variant: "A bad ending belongs only to those who have chosen the life of this world. . . . A good land and eternal paradise belong to those servants who fear His majesty and do not follow their lascivious selves." In the same year, 2006, the Revolutionary Guard Corps announced that 40,000 Iranians were ready to carry out suicide missions against 29 identified Western targets.

The Struggle Between Islamists and Moderates

Suicide terrorism lies at the heart of a bitter struggle between two lines within Islam. The Islamists—Iran, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and Hamas—reject free speech and the modern world and support suicide bombing in pursuit of their aim of subjecting the whole globe to the will of Allah. The moderates reject suicide bombing and support modernity and reconciliation among religions.

In Pakistan, for example, 46 percent of the population in 2005 expressed their total rejection of suicide bombings; 44 percent considered it justified in certain circumstances. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, 66 percent were totally opposed, and 33 percent approved, reflecting a decline in the level of support for suicide bombing over the past few years.¹⁶

There is a chance of ridding the world of the nightmare of suicide bombing within the next decades. For this to happen, however, three things have to be done. First, we must not ignore the religious aspect of suicide bombing. The roots of this kind of terrorism are in the preaching and sanctification that extol it.

There are many moral and political reasons to outlaw suicide terrorism. Accordingly, Muslim religious leaders are obliged to use theological arguments to discredit and condemn those who justify suicide bombing. "Muslims have to get to understand that a death cult has taken roots in the bosom of their religion, feeding off it like a cancerous tumor" wrote *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. "If Muslim leaders don't remove this cancer—and only they can—it will spread, tainting innocent Muslims and poisoning their relations with each other and the world."¹⁷ Second, we must open our eyes and vigorously support those forces within Islam that are rejecting and fighting suicide terrorism in all instances. Third, suicide terrorism presents the most imminent threat to the foundations of politics and law in the free world. It is high time for the West and Muslim countries as well to take the initiative and get the UN General Assembly to define suicide bombing as a crime against humanity and take resolute steps to punish its advocacy.

About the Author

Matthias Küntzel, a political scientist in Hamburg, Germany, is a research associate at the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as well as a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East. He is the author of *Jihad and Jew-Hatred. Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* (Telos Press, 2007). It was awarded the London Book Festival's grand prize in December 2007. His new book about the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and (West) Germany will be published in 2009. Küntzel's essays about Islamism and anti-Semitism have been translated into 10 languages and published inter alia in *Policy Review*, *The New Republic*, *Telos*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Notes

1. See columnist Hassan Haydar: "Iran Spreads a Culture of Death," in *Al-Hayat* (English edition), February 1, 2007, in Memri, Special Dispatch Series no. 1455, February 8, 2007.
2. Antidefamation League, "Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Theologian of Terror," August 1, 2005; see: www.adl.org
3. MEMRI Special Dispatch Series, no. 542, July 24, 2003.
4. Scott Atran, "Who Wants to Be a Martyr," in *The New York Times*, May 5, 2003.
5. Waliullah Rahmani, "Combating the Ideology of Suicide Terrorism in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. IV, no. 21 (November 2, 2006). According to Rahmani, the first suicide attack in Afghanistan was in 1992 when an Egyptian fighter for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Kunar killed Maulvi Jamil Rahman, a Salafi leader who was against Hekmatyar.
6. The murders perpetrated by the Shia sect of the Assassins in the eleventh century were exclusively directed at individuals of the ruling elite.
7. Cited in Daniel Brumberg, "Khomeini's Legacy. Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice," in R. Scott Appleby, ed. *Spokesmen for the Despised. Fundamental Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago and London, 1997), 56.
8. Cited in Christiane Hoffmann, "Vom elften Jahrhundert zum 11. September. Märtyrertum und Opferkultur sollen Iran als Staat festigen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 4, 2002.
9. See the Basij report in Freidune Seheb-jam, "Ich habe keine Tränen mehr," Iran: Die Geschichte des Kindersoldaten Reza Behrouzi, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988.
10. Cited in Erich Wiedemann, "Mit dem Paradies-Schlüssel in die Schlacht," *Der Spiegel*, no. 31 (1982): 93.

11. Cited in Dawud Gholamasad and Arian Sepideh, *Iran: Von der Kriegsbegeisterung zur Kriegsmüdigkeit* (Hannover: Internationalismus Verlag, 1988), 15.

12. Joseph Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe. Die historischen Wurzeln des Selbstmord-attentats* (München: Hanser), 132.

13. Asaf Maliach, "Saudi Religious Scholars Come Out against Al-Qaeda's Use of Religious Edicts Permitting Suicide Attacks against Muslims," International Institute for Counter-terrorism, July 8, 2007.

14. Cited in: Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Suicide Brigades Terrorism Resurgent," *Middle East Quarterly* (winter 2007).

15. MEMRI, *Special Dispatch* no. 945, July 29, 2005.

16. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, Support for Terror Wanes Among Muslim Publics. A 17-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey, July 14, 2005.

17. Thomas Friedman, "At a Theater Near You,..." *The New York Times*, July 3, 2007.