

What makes a martyr?

Why do people become suicide bombers? Religion? To find an identity? Chris Arnot talks to the professor of economics at Warwick who has a new theory

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Opportunities for economic advancement are not immediately evident if you happen to be young and reasonably well educated in a Palestinian camp, or what remains of a heavily bombed Iraqi city. There is no careers officer to suggest a training scheme with a firm of chartered accountants or computer analysts. More likely a representative from your local branch of Hamas, Hizbullah or al-Qaida will whisper in your ear: "Have you considered being a warrior martyr?"

For some of the more fanatical recruits to terrorist organisations, the destruction of what they see as illegal occupiers of their homeland might be compensation enough for their own deaths. But is that explanation enough for the phenomenon of the suicide bomber?

Professor Mark Harrison, of Warwick University, thinks not, and his paper, the Logic of Suicide Terrorism, is causing some interest among academics in the UK and the Middle East, particularly Israel, since it was published on the internet. Harrison is an economist, not a psychologist nor a sociologist of religion.

He is sceptical of the notion that Muslim martyrs believe they can leave the squalor of the West Bank or a technical education in Saudi Arabia for the pleasures of being attended by 72 virgins in paradise. "If the promise of a better after-life was the prime motive," he muses, "then how did the human race survive the middle ages? There must be more to this than religious belief. Religion is only part of someone's identity. It's a symptom rather than a cause." He goes on to point out that suicide bombing has been a factor in parts of the world, such as Chechnya, where the primary motivation is nationalism.

Harrison began to dwell on the issue of "warrior martyrs" in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, by far the most spectacularly horrific, devastating and far-reaching event in 20 years of suicide terrorism. "The existing explanations are all about communities being occupied and traumatised," he says. "But that can only be part of the story.

"It doesn't tell us why individuals put themselves forward. There are cases where young people are bamboozled into taking part, but that can't be the sole explanation for the many hundreds of cases that there have been over the past two decades.

"As an economist, I try to understand the world in terms of people following their self-interest," he adds, before going on to point out that we all have an interest, when growing up, in establishing an identity. So is he saying that suicide bombing stems from an identity crisis?

"It's hard to construct an identity in a society where nothing works and opportunities are severely restricted. In communities like this, a man is expected to be the provider. Young women have the option of motherhood."

There have been exceptions, women who, for one reason or another, step outside their traditional caring roles to become suicide bombers themselves. But Harrison suggests that young men are generally more vulnerable to offers that will give them not only an identity but a place in community history for themselves and their families. "I see it as a contract between the young person and the terrorist faction to exchange life for identity."

For obvious reasons, the bomber is not going to be around to see that the other party has carried out its side of the bargain. "So as a way of enforcing the contract, there are pre-suicide ceremonies or rituals that can go on for several days. A video is made in which the would-be martyr says how happy he is to spill the blood of the occupiers as well as himself. Letters are written to friends and, once they're sent out, there's no going back.

"Community pressures are very strong, and you have to remember that families collude. I've seen many TV clips of parents sending off a son." They know that his name will be immortalised, and a substantial cheque from a government that sponsors terrorism will, in some cases, go some way to ease the pain of his passing.

"The Israelis say they've found that punishing families can have a deterrent effect. If a young man thinks that his parents' home is going to be bulldozed after he's gone, they maintain, then he might think twice about going."

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Harrison believes that the long-term solution in Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya or any other cradle of warrior martyrs is not punitive but economic. "The objective must be to offer more positive alternatives to young people," he says. "If our markets are made more accessible to poor countries then investment will flow there.

"Also, we have to make it easier for people to move. All the political pressure at the moment is to make it more difficult. But

if we free up the prospects of people in poor countries, reducing their frustrations, then ultimately we'll gain from it."

Since his paper was published, Harrison has been contacted by Professor Ariel Merari, director of the political violence research unit At Tel Aviv University, one of the best known empirical researchers in the field. Even he has struggled to build up a profile of a stereotypical warrior martyr.

"From a psychological point of view, they have very little in common," he said after investigating 34 case studies. "Few are likely to have been compelled to act by a desire for personal revenge. Of the 34, only three had a family member killed by the Israeli army." None were suicidal in the pathological sense, he added.

Acquiring an identity through suicide bombing is one thing. Trying to define the identity of a typical suicide bomber, it would seem, is quite another.

Professor Mark Harrison's paper, the Logic of Suicide Terrorism, was published in the Royal United Services Institute Security Monitor, vol 2, no 1 (2003). It can also be viewed at <http://makeashorterlink.com/?C4AC12334>

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