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Brian Hendler

Israeli bomb disposal experts check the body of a Palestinian suicide bomber following a 2002 Jerusalem attack that killed one bystander.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Suicide bombing is here to stay, professor predicts in new paper

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON, May 8 (JTA) — The phenomenon of suicide bombing “is going to be around for a long time,” a British professor predicts in a new paper.

But despite the fact that two Britons were responsible for a suicide bombing last week that killed three Israelis in Tel Aviv, Britain is not likely to produce a wave of suicide bombers, according to Mark Harrison, an economic historian at the University of Warwick.

Harrison is the author of “The Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” which argues that suicide often occurs when a person’s identity becomes more important than his or her life.

Under normal circumstances, such deaths can be seen as heroic or tragic, it says.

“A mother perishes, entering a burning house to save her children, because if she did not she would have to live on without her identity as a loving parent,” Harrison writes. “A witness to a faith accepts a death sentence rather than recant her faith, so valuable to her is her religious identity.”

But in the case of suicide bombing, more sinister forces are at work.

Harrison began studying suicide terrorism after the Sept. 11 attacks.

As he struggled to understand what could motivate such terrorism, he expanded his research to include Palestinian suicide bombings against Israelis.

He identified three critical factors that can lead to suicide bombing: the search for an adult identity; an oppressive environment; and a terrorist faction.

Harrison's paper argues that the first two factors explain why so many terrorists are reasonably well-educated, unemployed young men: Their circumstances limit the possible identities available to them.

The third factor, a terrorist faction, is then able to shape them into suicide bombers.

The first British suicide bomber to strike Israel blew himself up in Tel Aviv on April 30.

Asif Muhammad Hanif, 21, set off his explosives at a popular beachfront café called Mike's Place, killing three and injuring about 50.

A second British man, Omar Khan Sharif, 27, fled the scene when his own suicide bomb did not explode. Israel is looking for him.

Harrison said British Muslims face particular problems of identity.

"The question of what it means to be a Muslim in a Western society is unresolved. It invites the kind of identity confusion that can make them vulnerable," he told JTA.

But he said he did not expect to see "a huge wave of British nationals attempting" suicide attacks, because of the obstacles to recruiting them.

"Recruitment is a process, not an act. Organizing these things at long range is very difficult," he said.

Magnus Ransdorp, a professor at the Center for the Study of Terrorism at the University of St. Andrew's in Scotland, agrees that recruiting suicide bombers is a complex task.

"It's a very deliberate exploitative process," he said.

Terrorist organizations such as Hamas engage in "talent spotting at certain radical mosques and at universities," Ransdorp said.

"They do extensive background checks, then ask people to perform tasks to see if they can follow through," he said. "Certain characteristics, such as staying psychologically calm under stress, make people suitable."

Structuring its thesis in economic terms, Harrison's paper says an implicit contract is drawn up between the suicide bomber and the terrorist leader.

"Under the terms of the contract, the volunteer agrees to trade life for identity. He will die to promote the faction's terrorist objectives," Harrison writes. "In return, the faction agrees to affirm the volunteer's identity in the community as a warrior martyr, and also provides means of destruction and self-destruction."

Ransdorp agrees that identity "may explain the ultimate act" of suicide bombing, but he points out that money often plays a role as well.

"There is the issue of financial compensation for the family," he said.

Hamas, for example, pays the families of suicide bombers between \$4,000 and \$8,000, he said.

In addition, former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein made payments of up to \$25,000 to the families of suicide bombers, and the Palestinian Authority also provides financial benefits to the families the bombers leave behind.

That money may be well spent if another aspect of Harrison's thesis is correct: Terrorist leaders may not be interested in winning territory as much as in maintaining a semi-lawless environment where they have power and influence, he said.

"You must distinguish between the overt and actual aims of terrorism," Harrison told JTA.

"Establishing a Palestinian state may not be the aim," he said. "There are clearly figures within Palestinian society who gain from there not being a peaceful settlement."

Regardless of the actual motivation for suicide bombing, Harrison said he expected the tactic to "be around for a long time."

"It's an invention. Once it's been invented, you can't un-invent it," he said. "You have to create the kind of conditions where it's not going to be profitable."

His paper makes several recommendations. On the tactical level, it advises weakening terrorist organizations and removing their financial means.

But strategically, it argues, oppression must be eased in the societies where suicide bombers originate.

"Regardless of the efficiency of modern methods of intelligence and policing, there are limits on the effective power of states to repress suicide terrorism without addressing the underlying fundamental conflicts from which they spring," the paper concludes.

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