

Is Suicide Terrorism A Novel Economic Phenomenon? Response to Mateucci*

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Aldo Mateucci reflects insightfully on the nature of suicide terrorism. He locates it within the broad spectrum of self-sacrificing behaviours, including martyrdom, and observes that self-sacrifice and martyrdom are hardly novel. This is not only true but important: to understand suicide terrorism, we must first understand suicide, which is a form of self-sacrifice.

Of the accusations that Mateucci levels against my article, some are material and others are philosophical. His main material criticism is that I have undervalued the role of communities in both the cause and the cure for suicide terrorism. Specifically, he argues, “By focusing on the immediate ‘contract’ between martyr and militant faction at the expense of the larger, unspoken contract between the martyr and the community as a whole Harrison does disservice to the subject matter.”

On the idea that suicide terrorism can be understood only in the context of the community that maintains it, we are actually in agreement. I wrote: “There are three parties to the transaction that ends in a suicide attack: a community, a militant faction, and a volunteer.” Mateucci writes: “It is not only or so much the militant group that is party to the ‘contract’, but the community at large. Once the community no longer is prepared to honour its side of the contract with the dead – martyrdom against fame – the crucial incentive disappears and the capacity of the militant group to recruit is fatally undermined.” I agree; I noted specifically that opinion polls showed overwhelming support for suicide terrorism in Israel’s occupied territories during the early years of the second *intifada*. In that context, I observed that many professed it but few practised it. Suicide attacks are carried out by individual persons – not by communities. The mechanisms and motivations that select those persons – and the failure of much larger numbers to volunteer or be selected –should therefore be of some interest.

In my article I described a contract for suicide terrorism, involving the exchange of life for identity – the volunteer’s life for the identity of a suicide martyr. Mateucci suggests that “To [Harrison] the conclusion of such ‘contracts’ is both necessary and sufficient for the terrorist suicide to go ahead,” and he implies that this is obviously wrong. But it seems right to me.

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A contract is *necessary* for the following reason. Economics suggests that, if there is a sequential exchange, a contract is needed to secure its completion. I argue that suicide terrorism is based on a sequential exchange. When we look for the contract, we find it in the empirical record. A contract is also *sufficient*: if it has been made, and is enforceable, its implementation must follow.

Mateucci suggests that my line of argument leads to two further mistakes. One is that my rational-actor framework, he argues, “imputes malign intentions to the instigators (they are wicked rather than merely fanatical).” My main purpose was to look for intentions that are rational; whether we would then call them fanatical or wicked is secondary. I am not sure that these two differ in any way that matters; possibly, they are observationally equivalent.

The other mistake that Mateucci detects in my argument is that “once such factions are established and are able to conclude such contracts only repressive counter-violence (punishment of families and leaders) would seem to do the trick.” But I do not think this. I wrote: “there is a vicious circle that will continue until the militant factions have been destroyed *or co-opted*, and this in turn seems likely to happen only in the context of an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict … there are limits on the effective power of states to repress suicide terrorism without addressing the fundamental conflicts from which it springs” (emphasis added). Mateucci suggests that my argument leads me to underestimate the “recuperative and regenerative capacity of a community to expel militant factions from its midst once an overall political settlement is achieved”; actually, we would seem to agree that an overall settlement of the community conflict in the Middle East is absolutely necessary for a turn away from terrorism. The problem that I noted is that the opposing forces do not seem to want such a settlement; that is a matter of judgement on which I would prefer to be wrong.

On the issue of the “living martyr” – the faction’s promotion of the volunteer’s identity before death – there is misunderstanding. Mateucci disputes its meaning on the grounds that “widespread prior publicity would in all likelihood defeat the attack”; he also doubts that “becoming a ‘living martyr’ … during the final days would be sufficient basis for voluntary decision – statistically this is in any case an unverifiable proposition.” But the “living martyr” does not require *prior* publicity; anyway, evidence of it is there or turns up later in a very high proportion of cases. Experts closer to the subject matter than me (e.g. Moghadam 2003) see it as a core element of the process.

Mateucci also offers some philosophical criticisms. On these grounds we are more in agreement than may appear at first sight. Mateucci urges me to read Amartya Sen (2006) on *Identity and Violence*, but Sen’s approach is similar to mine. He describes how a person’s identity is chosen, not endowed or discovered. That is also my story. Sen notes that “a sense of identity with others can be a very important – and rather complex – influence on one’s behavior which can easily go against narrowly self-interested conduct.” I add that self-interest takes on a new meaning if each person must first identify

the self. Finally, the process of a person's self-identification is influenced by the behaviour of others. For this reason, it can be manipulated.

Concluding, Mateucci suggests that "forcing the mind of martyrs into an economic straightjacket does not seem to add major insights to the analysis, nor does it have predictive value in Milton Friedman's terms." Friedman did not see prediction as the only value, however. In his essay on "The Methodology of Positive Economics" he defended the mental process of abstracting from reality; we should choose our assumptions, he wrote, "on the grounds of *the resulting economy, clarity, and precision in presenting the hypothesis*; their capacity to bring indirect evidence to bear on the validity of the hypothesis by suggesting some of its implications that can be readily checked with observation or by *bringing out its connection with other hypotheses dealing with related phenomena*; and similar considerations" (Friedman 1953; emphasis added).

My intention was in the same spirit. I wished not to force "the mind of martyrs into an economic straightjacket," but to isolate the factors capable of explaining the greater part of the variation in the data that we have and to show its vital connection with the wider subject of self-harming behaviour.

For my own conclusion, I must agree that suicide terrorism is not a "novel economic phenomenon," but that was never the issue. I wished to illuminate some economic aspects, the exchange that underlies it and the contract that completes it. I thank Mateucci for his criticisms and the opportunity to clarify my argument.

References

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