

The Logic of Suicide Terrorism

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Abstract

Suicide terrorism is the outcome of an individual rational choice. In the context of an oppressive society, a terrorist organisation that competes for resources provides young people with an incentive to invest in an identity that is rendered more valuable by death. From this viewpoint acts of suicide terrorism are analysed as the outcome of a self-enforcing contract between the young person and the terrorist organisation that recruits him or, less commonly, her. Solutions to a number of empirical puzzles are suggested. Finally, the phenomenon of suicide attacks is placed in the wider context of terrorism.

Acknowledgements

This paper was presented to the Conference on “Weapons of Catastrophic Effect: Confronting the Threat” sponsored by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, London, 12 to 14 February 2003. I thank all the participants for discussion, especially Uri Halperin and Malise Ruthven. I also thank Adil Farooq, Koen Lamberts, and Peter Law for advice and comments. I am solely responsible for remaining errors of fact and interpretation.

The Logic of Suicide Terrorism

Some Puzzles

Why do some young, healthy males kill themselves in order to kill others? The logic of actions that are simultaneously murderous and self-destructive is hard for us to comprehend. In the West, public opinion commonly perceives suicide terrorists as both bad and mad; thus, the aircraft hijackers who attacked New York and Washington on 9/11 and the attackers who have repeatedly bombed commuters and shoppers in the streets of Israel have left many baffled as well as devastated.

The specialist in political violence Ariel Merari (1998: 194, 196) has suggested that in cases of suicide terrorism the willingness to kill others is less surprising than the willingness to die. Moreover, suicide terrorism is at one extreme of a continuum of willingness to die. This indicates that the logic of suicide should be at the primary focus of an investigation. We should try to understand suicide as the outcome of a rational choice based on self-interest. Yet how can a choice for self-destruction be self-interested? Does self-interest not preclude self-killing?

As a first pass at an explanation it is widely held that suicide terrorism results from a “fundamentalist” interpretation of Islam that recognises those who give their lives in this way as martyrs and promises them an inside track to paradise. But the idea that suicide attackers are acting out religious convictions, although plausible at first sight, is weakened by three facts. First, most religions, including most versions of Islam, specifically prohibit both suicide and wanton killing. Second, the idea of suicide troops and the cult of a warrior’s glorious death are not confined to Islam: in the closing stages of World War II they were promoted in both Germany amongst the SS and Hitler Youth, and in Japan in the case of the notorious *kamikaze* pilots, although only in actions against military targets. In a study of suicide bombings in Lebanon between 1983 and 1986 Merari (1998) has shown that the attackers identified themselves with secular organisations more frequently than on religious grounds. Third, the voluntary giving up of one’s life is encountered frequently in many cultures, including our own, but often it has nothing to do with religion; when we encounter it, we are more likely to regard it as tragic or heroic than mad or bad.

The recent rise of suicide terrorism is sometimes explained more generally in terms of the hurt religious or national feelings of communities in the Middle East that have been humiliated or shamed by western military alliances, Israeli occupation, or other un-Islamic institutions. Although clearly part of the picture, such explanations are obviously incomplete. They apply first to populations rather than individuals and entirely neglect the question of how the individual suicide attacker is selected or selects himself from the community that is involved.

An existing economic literature stemming from Hamermesh and Soss (1974) associates the individual propensity to suicide with various factors influencing the value of life foregone such as an person’s age, which determines residual life expectancy, and economic status. Thus suicide should become less likely as life becomes more valuable. This does not seem a very promising approach to the present problem, given that most suicide attackers in the Middle Eastern context are young, male, and at least partly educated; at least, they are not drawn from the poorer strata or older cohorts of society.

Perhaps of greater interest is the literature on adolescent suicide. A recent study by Cutler, Glaeser, and Norberg (2000) interprets suicide and attempted self-killing or “parasuicide” by young people as strategic action to resolve conflicts within oneself or with others. A problem is that for many young people in families who attempt suicide an attempt that fails may be a success in strategic terms, whereas for the suicide attacker a failed attempt is just a failure. However, the concept of payoffs to an individual’s strategic behaviour seems more promising than an approach that restricts consideration to purely circumstantial economic factors.

The Value of Identity

In many of the cases in which young people throw away their lives, they clearly do not think of the value of life as a major consideration. “Such a shame”, we say, “with their young lives ahead of them”. If the value of life is not what matters, perhaps we need a more powerful concept of what does.

Think of what is at stake in acts of self-killing, not as life in the raw, but as life processed through a person’s identity. Before a person can value their own life they must first know who they are: they must have an identity. Without a distinct identity we cannot undertake many of the social transactions that give our life a value; thus identity itself is valuable. For the most part our identity is concerned with how we are expected to live, but not exclusively; it may also define how we should die. In particular circumstances an identity may be made more valuable by our death and devalued or completely destroyed by our continuing to live; when those circumstances obtain, we choose to die.

We choose our identities. Something that defines us as humans is our capacity for playing roles. From the earliest age we try out different roles in our search for a self that we can call our identity. Each of us decides eventually on one identity that we expect will pay better than others. By adopting a particular role consistently in the variety of situations that we encounter as we grow up, we create something that is valuable to us: our identity, made up by the set of roles that we have adopted. This identity has a value because it enables us to function in society.

The value of identity is not a new idea. Economists since Carl Shapiro (1983) have analysed “reputation” as an asset. Reputation is related to identity in the following way: it covers those aspects of my identity that I make visible to others through my actions. Why is reputation valuable? The Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stigler (1961) wrote: “Reputation commands a price [...] because it economizes on search”. He had in mind the search for products or suppliers of given quality in the market place; the same may be applied to individuals in society as they search for other people of given qualities with whom to engage in social and political transactions. However, when I take into account my reputation not just with others but also with myself, I deal with something deeper, my identity, or sense of myself.

Like anything else that has a durable value, identity is an asset. We can invest in it and trade on it. “Investing” means the things we do not just for immediate advantage but for long-term expected gain, because they contribute to our sense of self and promote the identity we wish to sustain. In doing so we respond to the specific incentives that happen to be available to each of us at a particular time and place. For example, one person learns to turn up on time so that she will win both respect and self-respect as a reliable, dependable person; another learns to be habitually abrasive because he sees himself and wishes to be seen as a strong, silent person upon whom others may not to make demands.

Because of the variation in individual circumstances and predispositions, and also because each person’s choice is influenced by the choices that others have already made, each of us acquires an identity that is distinct in some way: regardless of cultural differences every society turns out to contain people who have learnt that it pays to be nice, nasty, honest, manipulative, self-reliant, dependent, reliable, roguish, and so on. Despite or because of this variation the identity of each is always very precious to that person; when damaged or destroyed, it leaves a sense of irreplaceable loss; without it, people may be completely deprived of enjoyment derived from income, physical health, marriage, or friendship.

The logic that drives voluntary acts of self-destruction is therefore as follows. Each person who chooses the death of the self does so because at the given moment death will maintain her most valuable asset, the identity that she has selected and invested in through her life, but living on will damage it irreparably. The moment is such that by choosing life she must abandon this identity.

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. A father kills his wife and children to stop them leaving him, then kills himself to protect his identity as a family man. A teenager kills herself fearing that she has failed her exams, or that she has contracted a sexually transmitted disease, for the sake of her identity as a scholar and loving, responsible child of her parents. A soldier dies, falling on a grenade to save others, thereby safeguarding his identity as a brave comrade. A defendant unjustly condemned kills himself to prove his innocence because his identity as an innocent man has been taken from him. A witness to a faith accepts a death sentence rather than recant her faith, so valuable to her is her religious identity. A witness to a faith kills others and himself because he could not live and maintain the identity of a religious martyr. In every case the person died self-interestedly so as to defend the value invested in their self-identification.

The Martyr's Identity

What leads people voluntarily to adopt an identity that will end in self-destruction? None of us is born that way. As the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1995) has argued, natural selection has programmed in all of us a powerful love of life, sex, and children. Why should someone willingly adopt the identity of a religious warrior detached from humanity and destined for premature death under terrible circumstances? To grasp the logic of the suicide terrorist, therefore, we need to comprehend the forces that drive someone to abandon the life-loving identity for which we are selected and instead invest in one that can only be sustained by premature death.

It seems that three elements are involved in this: young people growing up, a conflicted, oppressive environment, and a terrorist faction. The first element is *young people* growing up. What young people do as they mature is this: through a long process of painful choices they acquire their adult identities. Every parent sees their child asking herself basic questions like "Who am I?" and struggling with the answers. Even in loving families and pluralistic, open societies, young people make mistakes and are brought repeatedly crashing down by them.

The possibility of mistakes appears essential to adolescent suicide. Life provides information about the world and ourselves, but we must make some choices before we have all the information we need. In the fraught process of selecting an identity some children will make mistakes; they invest in identities that turn out not to be viable because they aren't pretty or clever or strong enough to carry them off. In effect they choose an identity that is based on wrong information or defined too narrowly or rigidly to cope with information that is new. At some point it becomes apparent that they must lose some part of their precious investment and, accepting the loss, undertake the difficult task of rebuilding an identity on a new basis that is more attuned to circumstances; otherwise they may perpetuate themselves as the person they intended originally, but only by dying now, and so they commit suicide.

Mistakes alone, however, cannot fully account for suicide terrorists, who may form a conscious intention to die some time, perhaps years, before the act. Another factor that appears necessary is a *social environment* that is conflicted and oppressive to the point that it has partly crushed the life-loving aspects of the child's nascent personality, eroding his capacity to sustain enduring relationships with other human beings. I have in mind the kind of pervasive oppressions and social restrictions that affects not only minority communities that suffer discrimination or a element of siege, but also family structures within these communities and specifically the options open to young people of either sex within them. Of course, not every young person in such a society becomes a suicide terrorist; most do not, and even of those who tell journalists that that is their ambition most will not. But the probability is dramatically increased that some will.

Even without further analysis this connection between suicide terrorism, an oppressive society, and the adolescent choice of identity suggests possible solutions to several of the things that puzzle us:

- Why are suicide terrorists not old? Because their choice emerges from a crisis of the young person. Those who take a wrong turn at this point do not grow old.
- Why are suicide terrorists mainly men? Perhaps the range of possible identities available to them was preselected by their gender. Young women are often expected to invest in identities that emphasise their attachment to the rest of humanity through caring and nurture. Young men are limited to more rigid, introverted roles that may inhibit the formation of adult attachments and so prove more fragile and less resilient under the pressures of growing up.
- Why has the proportion of women risen recently among Palestinian suicide terrorists? By hindering normal family life and the normal formation of new families, renewed Israeli occupation may have lowered the opportunity costs facing adolescent women who choose to step outside the caring and nurturing roles prescribed by their traditional identities. Alternatively, with the rising number of male attackers the relative distinction of the identity to be won by young men may have declined, prompting a widening of recruitment to young women for whom the distinction of the first few volunteers may be higher.
- Why are suicide terrorists not uneducated? These young people have sometimes made substantial efforts to get an education but the efforts invested by each have failed to pay off in some way that is valued, which seems particularly likely in an oppressive environment; thus, suicide terrorism may be a specialisation of the partially educated and unemployed.
- Why may the shame or humiliation imposed by Israel on its occupied territories become a motive for suicide terrorism? Because shaming is another word for devaluation of the identity without which an individual has no status in society; this is why death is preferred to dishonour in many cultures.
- Finally, why may suicide terrorists behave irreligiously before they die, for example by drinking and smoking? Because their identity will be affirmed by how they died, not by how they lived.

Trading Life for Identity

The third element that is necessary for suicide terrorism to become established as an outcome of the adolescent identity crisis is the presence of an *organised faction* under a leader willing to exploit terror to build power in society. Thus terrorist factions such as Hamas or al-Qaida flourish in an oppressive environment, compete for resources and influence within it, collude with oppression by enforcing their own controls on social behaviour, and exploit the consequences in order to enhance their own power.

Recent research by Merari (reported by Sprinzak, 2000) concludes that the terrorist faction does not create the young person's predisposition to die, but it creates the conditions that convert this predisposition into action. At the very moment that the young person is receptive to the idea of the death of the self, the faction presents an alternative: to become a religious warrior and so die, winning a glorious new identity in the act. Thus the faction's indispensable role in the process is to create the specific incentive for young people to invest in an identity that will be rendered more valuable by death, and devalued by continuing to live.

From an economic point of view suicide terrorism is the outcome of a contract between consenting parties. The suicide attacker and the terrorist faction enter voluntarily into this contract in the expectation of mutual benefit. Under the terms of the contract the volunteer agrees to trade life for identity. He will die to promote the faction's terrorist objectives. In return the faction agrees to affirm the volunteer's identity in the community as a warrior martyr, and also provides the means of

destruction and self–destruction to distinguish this identity through violence. As a result the faction can make an impact, and the volunteer can achieve a distinction, that would be beyond their reach without this agreement.

A problem remains that has not received any attention so far: the scope for default, which puts into question the implementation of the contract. Since implementing the contract is costly to both sides and since it involves the voluntary death of one party who, having died, cannot then observe its fulfilment by the other party, it is clearly possible that either side might choose to default. Lacking means of enforcement, the contract is not credible.

To solve this problem requires a mechanism to make the contract self–enforcing. This mechanism exists and the evidence for it is to be found in Merari’s research (reported by Martin, 2001). The mechanism is the promotion of the “living martyr”. A few days before the event the bomber records a final statement of joy at becoming a martyr in photographs, videos, and letters to friends and relatives and from then on is considered to be gloriously dead, only temporarily still among the living. When the recording has been distributed and the letters and photographs have been sent each side is fully committed and neither can draw back since each will now lose more by breaking the contract than by implementing it.

The promotion of the “living martyr” may also meet the need of the suicide attacker for an audience, noted by Merari (1996): the audience is assembled in advance, before the event.

Payoffs to Terrorism

While suicide may be more difficult to understand than terrorism at the level of individual self–interest, the activity of terrorism also demands close analysis, especially since it very seldom appears to achieve its professed goals, for example a united Ireland, an independent Basque state, or destruction of the state of Israel.

How may suicide attacks promote the terrorist objectives of a militant faction? Suicide terrorism does not end with the death of the terrorist, but is a process that feeds the faction and is sustained by it. In the organisation of suicide terrorism a key role is played by the leaders who intend not to die but to profit from the deaths of their soldiers. These are also motivated by rational self–interest.

It appears that in an open, pluralistic society the payoffs to political violence are usually low. But they may rise in a society that, although initially peaceful on the surface, is characterised by some fundamental faultline. The purported issue typically involves ethnic, racial, national, or religious claims to ownership of a wider territory, but this is often no more than a vehicle for an attempt by an organised faction to monopolise power across a more limited locality on which is settled a part of the community in whose name it operates.

Thus the effects of terror are rarely to win the territory that is claimed. Rather terrorist attacks, often reinforced by repressive counter–actions, polarise opinions, partition the territory, and cause the civil society to disintegrate into fragments each locally isolated by fear of violence and of ethnic strangers. A terrorist leader may then more efficiently monopolise power and extract rents in a locality that has been forcibly broken away from the wider society.

As well as promoting the power of the terrorist faction this process results in well known losses of a deadweight character that must also diminish the potential rents that are available for the monopolising faction to extract. Spatial isolation impoverishes the community by impeding specialisation and market exchange. In addition, security counter–measures may directly raised transaction costs further and also physically shrink the locality within which the terrorist may safely operate.

Thus the terrorist faction must be guided by a delicate calculus. On one side the monopolistic power of the terrorists within the space available rises with the level of terror. Against it must be traded the impoverishment of the space available to the terrorists and the physical pressures on it that result from counter–measures; these also rise with the level of terror, most likely at an increasing rate. However, the

terrorist faction itself only bears a proportion of such costs; the remainder is born by the community in which it has settled. Thus it was the invasion of Afghanistan rather than its impoverishment that eventually prompted al-Qaida to take flight.

An implication is that under some circumstances the level of terrorism may find a local equilibrium. Since repressing terrorism is also costly it may be that some conflicts will result in violence that persists at a low, stable level for quite long periods of time. On the other hand the calculus involved can hardly be an exact one, and is likely to involve great uncertainties and many opportunities for unintended consequences; therefore, low level steady states may be disrupted and higher levels of violence may not find a steady state at all. This appears to correspond with a stylised historical fact: political violence is volatile.

Another implication of a different nature is that, while terrorists may increasingly have access to global networks, they do not aim at global power. There is something intrinsically local about the power they seek to build. Even when they strike at targets thousands of miles away, the effect they aim to achieve is at home.

What is the role, specifically, of the suicide attacker in this process? For a terrorist leader the suicide attacker is simply an asset of his organisation, an input into the process of creating a local monopoly of power. By investing in the recruitment, indoctrination, and training of the suicide attacker, the leader augments his assets. These assets will one day be used up by new symbolic acts of violence. The actions create the payoff to the organisation. The violence intensifies the fear in the community that promotes the power of the terrorist leader. Incidentally it reinforces the oppression that stimulates new ranks of potential recruits. The symbolism draws them towards the organisation.

Thus a suicide attack pays off by promoting the terrorist faction's accumulation of power. If it does so by more than is lost through impoverishment and counter-action, then the organisation can grow despite the repeated self-destruction of its most committed cadres.

Counter-Measures

How can such a cycle be broken? It seems that counter-measures must change the payoffs to both individuals and leaders. For the long run, some good news is that there may be some natural limits to suicide terrorism. Merari (1996: 206) explains the waning energy of suicide attacks in Lebanon in the second half of the 1980s as follows: at a given time the number of potential attackers is small in proportion to the limited population from which they are recruited, and the supply was used up.

Another possible mechanism would have the same effect: each new martyr must compete for distinction with all existing martyrs who are currently remembered. Thus the distinction attached to a martyr's identity may diminish with the number of recent martyrs. Diminishing returns may gradually depress the incentive to invest in a martyr's identity. As a result, particularly in the absence of political results it may become increasingly difficult to recruit new suicide attackers. On the other hand some responses to suicide attacks, particularly those that increase repression of the whole community, may raise the incentive again and renew the supply.

For the terrorist organisation, widening the sphere of recruitment to entirely new communities and categories of recruits such as women and children would seem to be an especially promising response. The number of female suicide attackers may have grown recently because, being few in number in the past, they may expect to attract special distinction in their communities. Moreover, in a globalising world the recruitment of suicide attackers may leap community frontiers with increasing ease.

More generally, it would seem that a long-term prerequisite for reducing the potential for recruitment of suicide terrorists is the easing of communal oppression in the societies from they may be recruited. The social conventions and political controls common to many Middle Eastern societies that restrict and stifle the emerging personalities of young people should be recognised as especially negative. Resolving fundamental conflicts such as the Palestinian issue should be a positive goal because

reducing communal polarisation must lower the organisational gains from terrorism. This is something that the western sponsors of the various parties should note.

In the short run there are only difficult choices. Once recruited, a suicide terrorist cannot be deterred by the threat of individual punishment, which only strengthens his sense of self as a martyr. Thus counter-measures must be aimed at the incentives afforded to the volunteer and his family members by the recruiting organisation rather than at individuals. There is evidence (Halperin, 2003) that measures to punish the families of previous suicide attackers have helped to deter recruitment of new ones.

The ability of a terrorist organisation to recruit suicide attackers ultimately relies on its capacity to promote the identity of the martyr by supplying both military means and means of distinction in society. Therefore the weakening of organisation and the removal of financial means are clearly of critical importance. In World War II Japanese suicide pilots stopped their attacks when there was nothing left to fly and their emperor ordered them to lay down their arms. The will of the most fanatical Japanese nationalists and German Nazis was eventually eliminated only by the military destruction of the criminal organisations for which they had fought, followed by its judicial exposure in war crimes trials. More recent experience appears to show that impoverishment and isolation of the communities from which terrorists operate alone are not enough to destroy a terrorist faction; occupation is better, but at first may only reduce activity to a lower level.

At the same time, military occupation and other repressive measures aimed at weakening a terrorist organisation may also raise the background levels of polarisation and oppression in society that stimulate the flow of volunteers and contributions and promote the terrorists' monopolisation of power in the locality. To that extent, in the long run they may bolster indirectly the same activities that they are designed directly to curtail. This suggests that 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 underlying the fundamental conflicts from which they spring.

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