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Author(s): Daniel Pipes

Source: *The National Interest*, No. 4 (SUMMER 1986), pp. 95-99

Published by: Center for the National Interest

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894438>

Accessed: 13-04-2017 13:29 UTC

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The Scourge of Suicide Terrorism

—Daniel Pipes—

SUICIDE MISSIONS are by no means peculiar to the Middle East. What British and French soldiers did in World War I—leave their trenches to climb over dead comrades and march into machine gun fire—was a form of mass self-sacrifice that exceeds by far anything witnessed recently in the Middle East. Similarly, when ten Irish Republican Army members starved themselves in 1981, taking 50 to 60 wrenching days, they endured a much more agonizing death than that involved in the brief, almost painless acts of the suicide bombers in Lebanon. Contrary to what many believe, Europeans are willing to give up their lives for a cause on occasion. Suicidal acts are not unknown in the West.

Nor are they common among Muslims. Quite the reverse: suicide is as strictly forbidden in Islam as in Judaism and Christianity. A Koranic verse, “Do not kill yourselves,” is commonly understood to condemn suicide. The Prophet Muhammad said that a suicide cannot go to paradise, and Islamic laws firmly oppose the practice. Religious leaders today continue to reject suicide. Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, leader of the radical fundamentalist Shiites in Lebanon, remarked

Daniel Pipes is the author of *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* and director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

about the recent spate of bombings, “suicide in such a way is forbidden in our religion.”

Religious prohibitions have had effect; according to modern scholarship, “suicide was of comparatively rare occurrence” in traditional society. Notwithstanding the famous expectation that a Muslim who dies in the service of God goes to paradise, Muslims were not more likely to end their lives than other people. The only significant exception were the *fida’is* (soldiers prepared to sacrifice themselves) sent out by the Assassin sect in the 12th century.

These points need emphasis to correct a mistaken tendency to ascribe suicide bombings in the Middle East to Islam, fanaticism, or some other cultural trait. In fact, suicidal warfare in the Middle East, as in the West or Japan, takes place only in specific historical circumstances. British and French soldiers sacrificed their lives in World War I not because of the British character or the French religion but because of the nature of trench combat; IRA starvations reflected the politics of Ireland in 1981, not the nature of Celtic culture. Similarly, suicide bombings in the Middle East result from specific historical developments, not the permanent verities of Islam.

What are those developments? The fact that several states, starting with Iran, now

sponsor suicide terrorism. Governments, not individuals willing to die, make this a potent force. Without state support, suicide acts would be infrequent and ineffectual.

Ayatollah Khomeini claims his radical version of fundamentalist Islam is suitable for all Muslims. The Iranian Constitution, passed right after the radical fundamentalists came to power, codifies "trying to perpetuate [the Islamic] revolution both at home and abroad" as the regime's highest priority. Tehran initially hoped its example would inspire like-minded Muslims to overthrow existing governments. It quickly became apparent, however, that exhortation alone would not suffice. By late 1979 the Iranian leadership adopted a second approach: it funded and armed subversive efforts throughout the Muslim world, from Egypt to the Philippines. But the outbreak of war with Iraq in September 1980, which absorbed nearly all Iran's money and arms, put an end to this effort. A third tactic was then adopted, one that would spread the revolution inexpensively: terrorism, specifically suicide terrorism. And, instead of dissipating their meager resources in many regions, the Iranian leaders chose to concentrate these in Lebanon, the country that seemed most likely to see the establishment of an Islamic republic.

The first major instance of suicide terrorism was the December 1981 destruction of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut, killing 27 and wounding over 100. Suicide bombing acquired major political importance with the assassination of Bashir Gemayel in September 1982; it went international with the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut in April 1983, killing 63. The largest explosion took place in October 1983 when a truck bomb killed 241 U.S. servicemen. The unceasing campaign that took place between 1983 and 1985 against Israeli troops in southern Lebanon was perhaps its outstanding success, for, unable to cope with this assault, Israel retreated almost entirely from Lebanon. Suicide bombs have also gone off in Kuwait, Syria, and many times in Iraq.

The superiority of suicide missions over rival forms of terrorism needs little emphasis. The eviction of Israeli forces from Lebanon stands in dramatic contrast to the Arabs' total lack of success in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; indeed, no one had ever before driven the Israelis out of an area. It is clear that a person willing to give up his life can adopt measures not available to someone trying to stay alive. A car bomb destroyed the Israeli military headquarters in Tyre in November 1983, killing 80—more casualties than the PLO had claimed during the previous five years.

Little can be done to deter would-be suicides, especially if they have state backing. As Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger noted, "In the final analysis, if one or two people are prepared to die in the attempt, they can do a great deal of damage." Although radical fundamentalist Muslims attacked 11 targets in Kuwait on one day in December 1983, the only strike to have a real impact was that carried out by a suicide bomber, who blew up the U.S. embassy.

Iran's efforts had such success that the other major sponsors of terrorism in the Middle East—Qaddafi, Asad, and Arafat—quickly began to imitate its methods. (Although Arafat's PLO is not, of course, a government, its financial, military, and institutional capabilities are closer to that of an established state than to that of other irredentist movements.) The Iraqis too apparently adopted suicide terrorism.

LEST THERE be any doubt that states sponsor the great majority of suicide missions, the proof is worth noting in some detail.

First, the shadowy nature of the organizations that claim responsibility for suicide actions points to the involvement of government intelligence organizations. While terrorist organizations want to become known and feared, states wish to stay out of the limelight. Doubts about the existence of Islamic Jihad, an organization first heard of in May 1982 and widely associated with suicide ac-

tivities, are in themselves reason to suspect it of being a front for Iranian intelligence.

Second, the intricacy of plans points to government involvement, for these go beyond the capabilities of small organizations. Car-bombings against American and French installations showed enormous sophistication. In almost every case, the vehicle went unerringly to the most vulnerable spot of the building under attack. The strikes took place at the right moment and took exact advantage of weaknesses in the defense system. Such mastery suggests extensive intelligence connections, weeks of planning, elaborate model-building, and careful training.

Third, the explosions themselves betray state sponsorship. The truck that destroyed the U.S. Marine barracks, for example, contained the equivalent of over 12,000 pounds of TNT; the explosion it caused was called in the Long Commission Report "the largest conventional blast ever seen by the explosive experts community." So massive was the blast, the Report states, it would have caused major damage and many casualties even if it had exploded on the open road 330 feet away from the building. To mount such capabilities into a Mercedes truck that carries considerably less than 12,000 pounds, TNT was mixed into a complex of gas and other substances. The difficult and delicate task of gas-enhancement requires the sort of specialized skills and wealth of experience possessed by a state, not an outlaw organization. Further, the use of such highly controlled explosive materials as hexogen and PETN indicates the involvement of intelligence agencies.

Fourth, the price of these operations puts them out of the reach of small organizations. Safe houses, explosives, and Mercedes trucks are expensive in themselves, but timely and accurate intelligence is the most costly. According to sources cited by Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times*, a single bit of information for the April 1983 embassy bombing cost about \$30,000.

Fifth, some of the suicides acknowledge allegiance to the leaders of states. Before

driving to her death in a booby-trapped car, a 16-year-old Lebanese girl sent greetings to "the leader of the liberation and steadfastness march, Lt. General Hafiz al-Asad." One of Amal's leaders, Mahmud Faqih called Khomeini "our legitimate leader" and called Iran "our shield and source of support . . . the source of our conceptual, ideological, and political strength." The same goes for Hizbullah. Abbas Musawi, leader of this group, states that Khomeini "spells out the movement's line and issues Hizbullah directives." When asked about the financing of Hizbullah, Musawi admits that "the money comes mainly from Tehran."

Sixth, intelligence information indicates links to states. Iran is known to have dispatched a special plane to Damascus with 50 operatives on board a few weeks before the Marine barracks explosion. Tehran gave the signal to attack the 11 installations in Kuwait in December 1983 by sending a special courier. In some cases, the names of individuals carrying out Iran's orders to the suicide attackers, their activities, and the pay they received are known. Senator Jesse Helms has released information showing that the Iranians helped plan the logistics of the TWA hijacking in June 1985, trained at least one of the hijackers in Iran, and provided money for the operation. Documents made available by the Iranian opposition indicate that the Iranian government has official organizations devoted to promoting suicide terrorism.

Seventh, the testimony of a number of participants in suicide bombings provides first-hand reports on the involvement of states. Muhammad Ali Aryafar, an Iranian navy captain who defected, told a news conference in August 1984 that "Islamic Jihad is backed by the Khomeini regime." According to him, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards sent several units to train and advise the terrorists in Lebanon—a fact confirmed by American officers in congressional testimony. Unwilling suicide bombers have provided similar evidence. The Lebanese man who set off a massive explosion in Damascus told Syrian television that his career as a suicide

bomber began with a traffic accident. A truck driver, he accidentally killed an Iraqi army officer in Baghdad last November and was imprisoned for 50 days. Iraqi intelligence officers then gave him a choice between execution or going to Damascus with a car bomb. He decided on the latter and was dispatched to destroy the Syrian army officer club on its most crowded night.

Eighth, states profit from suicide attacks. Tehran extends its influence in Lebanon with this instrument. Similarly, the Syrian government uses suicide bombings to show that its ideology—a mixture of pan-Syrianism and pan-Arabism—has vitality and support in Lebanon. The PLO and Libya, whose terrorist credentials have diminished from a decade ago, use suicide missions to reassert their reputations.

Lastly, political leaders admit to terrorism. The Iranian government supported the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and has since made no effort to disassociate itself from a great number of terrorist incidents in Lebanon, Kuwait, and elsewhere. The PLO claims almost every day to execute terrorist actions against Israel. Early this year, Qaddafi declared he would train suicide squads “for terrorist and suicide missions and allocate trainers for them and place all the weapons needed for such missions at their disposal.” Walid Jumblat, the Druze leader of Lebanon, recently promised to send suicide squads to help Qaddafi—against the United States. Only the Syrian government denies its role in support of terrorism.

STATE SPONSORSHIP takes the mystery out of suicidal actions. It removes these acts from the realm of aberrant pathology, religious fanaticism, and political extremism, and places them instead within the scope of institutional power and intelligence activities.

Many of the actions which appear to be undertaken suicidally turn out not to be. Some drivers—such as the Lebanese engaged as a result of a traffic mishap in Iraq—were blackmailed. A 16-year-old Lebanese,

Muhammad Mahmud Burru, stated in April 1985 that he had been recruited under duress. According to Burru’s account, he was working for Amal, the Syrian-supported Shiite organization, when he one day rode his motorcycle into the back of a car. Responding to Burru’s request, Amal officials got him out of this problem. A few months later, his father too caused a car accident, injuring himself and a young woman. Burru was threatened shortly after: if he did not undertake a suicide mission for Amal, the file on his motorcycle accident would be reopened, his father would go without a needed operation, he and his father would lose their jobs, and his whole family would be persecuted by the woman’s relatives. After days of agonizing indecision, he reluctantly chose the mission and was assigned a car packed with 400 pounds of explosives to drive into an Israeli military headquarters.

Muhammad an-Nasir, who was to drive a rigged car to a southern Lebanese sentry station in September 1985, was the most obviously unwilling suicide. He acted in so untrustworthy a fashion that a car followed him to make sure he followed orders. But just before reaching the designated checkpoint, Nasir left his vehicle to try to convince the driver of the second car to exchange places with him. The latter refused; and while the two were engaged in argument, both were arrested.

Others retained hopes of escaping alive. One assailant was told to drive his bomb-laden truck against a specific part of the U.S. embassy and then escape to an accomplice’s car before the explosion went off. Another was assured that a flak jacket and a special plating around the driver’s seat gave him a 50 percent chance of surviving the explosion. In one case, it appears that the suitcase a young girl was carrying to a checkpoint was exploded by a man at some distance away. Some cars are rigged to explode if the suicide driver turns the engine off or opens a door.

These are not the hallmarks of “fanatics,” but of individuals dragooned into service. Analysts who see the suicide attackers as

fanatics miss the point: anyone unfortunate enough to get into a traffic collision can find himself days later driving a bomb-laden car. Inmates on death row, political dissidents, members of ethnic minorities—under the proper conditions, any of these can be coerced to undertake a suicidal attack.

State involvement broadens the pool of potential assassins. States cannot depend on finding individuals prepared to discard their lives, for these are far too few to be relied upon for regular operations. If only extremists could be recruited for suicide missions, these would have limited potential; but bringing in vulnerable persons from the general public means that anyone might end up a suicide attacker. The resources of the state are more than ample to produce a steady supply of non-fanatical suicide bombers. What had hitherto required a special fervor has become routinized and institutionalized.

This analysis has two major implications. First, because suicide missions have no necessary connection to Islam, they can be employed by brutal regimes of any ideological stripe. The Syrian regime has best demonstrated its versatility. Of the 15 suicide attacks it sponsored against Israel in 1985, 6 belonged to the Ba'th Party, a secularist

pan-Arab organization; 5 belonged to the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, espousing secularist pan-Syrianism; 2 belonged to Amal, the Shiite organization aligned with Syria; and one each belonged to the Communist Party and to an Egyptian opposition group. One of the suicides was a Druze, 4 were Shiite Muslims, and 10 Sunnis. At least 2 were Syrian nationals and 2 Egyptian, the rest coming from Lebanon.

Suicide bombing has already spread throughout the Middle East; it could be adopted in other regions too as other governments do as Damascus and imitate Iran's tactics. Although the Soviet Union appears not to have adopted them yet, it may well do so; why ignore a weapon of such potency? The same goes for other totalitarian and authoritarian states. Suicide bombings may prove to be the great and enduring monument of the Khomeini regime.

Second, the involvement of states points to the proper response of the United States and its allies. It is futile to mount a defense by concentrating on the terrorist actor himself; even if one falls, he can be easily and quickly replaced with another. The way to combat the scourge of suicide terrorism is by punishing the states that sponsor this violence.