Does Islam Have a Role in Suicide Bombings?

by A.J. Caschetta

When journalists, historians, psychologists, and experts in group dynamics, organizational structures, and criminal justice write about the unique set of circumstances that lead to suicide terrorism, they share the view that Islam has little to do with it. Most analysts either downplay or ignore altogether the role of Islam in suicide terrorism while some attempt to refute the connection and condemn others for not doing so.

This reluctance to countenance the role of Islam and Islamism in suicide terrorism has led to some fantastical and far-fetched theories that blur the nature of the deed with euphemisms and neologisms ("tactical martyrdom,"[1] "sordid pleasure,"[2] "altruistic murder") and blame the victims, especially Israelis, for their unhappy fate. And far too often, the causes of suicide terrorism are said to be the policies of the West.

Between the end of World War II and the Iranian revolution, there were no suicide attacks in the world. However, following the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini built a culture of martyrdom and suicide attacks. On October 30, 1980, Mohammed Hossein Fahmideh, a 13-year-old boy, allegedly crawled beneath an Iraqi tank and exploded a grenade. Khomeini had a special monument dedicated to Fahmideh, shown above, intended to appeal to children, and thousands of children were conscripted as suicide bombers.

---

[1] Jeffrey William Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), p. 1.

[2] Ariel Glucklich, *Dying for Heaven* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), p. 64.

The Islamic Context

Suicide terrorism has become so commonplace that it is easy to overlook how relatively new and suddenly popular the phenomenon is. Between the end of World War II and the Iranian revolution, there were no suicide attacks in the world. Yet only months after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini solidified power and formed the Pasdaran and Basij, suicide attacks began to appear in conflicts involving Shiites (Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq war) and then took root among Palestinian Sunni groups.[3] It eventually became the preferred tactic of Islamist terror organizations.

Khomeini selected specific passages from the Qur'an and hadith (canonical collections of Muhammad's alleged sayings and actions) to craft his suicidal version of radical Islam. His two-part rhetorical plan necessitated convincing Muslims that suicide is not suicide and that death is not death. Capitalizing on—or perhaps fabricating—the case of Hossein Fahmideh, a 13-year-old boy who on October 30, 1980, allegedly crawled beneath an Iraqi tank and exploded a grenade, Khomeini built a culture of martyrdom. Thousands of children were conscripted for his new invention—the "human wave attack"—and spread the tactic of suicide bombing. Khomeini had a special monument dedicated to Famideh, intended to appeal to children. He then used Famideh's image on book bags, murals, posters, and stamps to inspire children to follow him and drink "the nectar of martyrdom."[4] The tactic spread quickly to Lebanon where the Iraqi

embassy was struck on December 15, 1981, in what is generally considered the first documented suicide attack of the modern era. As terrorism expert Matthew Levitt points out, Iran's influence was greatly increased in 1982 when "1,500 IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] advisers set up a base in the Bekaa Valley as part of its goal to export the Islamic revolution to the Arab world."[5] Then in 1983, U.S. interests were subjected to suicide terrorism for the first time when the U.S. embassy in Beirut was bombed in April, killing sixty-three. Later, on October 23, 1983, the U.S. Marines barracks in Beirut were bombed with a loss of 299 lives.

Khomeini and fellow radical Shiite clerics framed the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) as a modern incarnation of the Battle of Karbala, portraying the Iranian people as Muhammad's grandson and Shiite martyr Hussein ibn Ali and Saddam Hussein as his nemesis Caliph Yazid. They understood that Shiite veneration for the self-sacrifice of Hussein's followers, who died willingly along with their leader, could be leveraged. Khomeini also relied on passages from the Qur'an extolling the virtue of "one who sells himself to seek the pleasure of Allah."[6] Yet most authors of books on suicide terrorism ignore how Khomeini and Amal's Musa Sadr carefully manipulated Islamic tradition, preferring the simple and uncritical assertion that Islam prohibits suicide.

Accepting the cliché that "Islam prohibits suicide" is much easier than explaining exactly where or how Islamic tradition makes suicide prohibited (*haram*). It

---

[3] Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*: *A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), chap. 3, "Marketing Martyrdom."

[4] "The martyrdom of Mohammed Hossein Fahmideh, the 13-year old student," Islamic Republic Document Center, Tehran, Oct. 30, 1980.

[5] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah, The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 12.
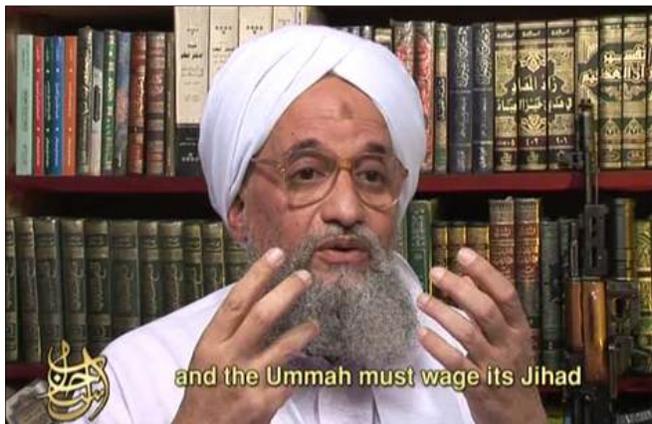
[6] Qur. 2:207.

---

is certainly the popular view, authorized by the Islamic Supreme Council,[7] the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR),[8] and Wikipedia.[9] On the rare occasions that Islamic texts are examined, few authors delve into the hadiths, but some cite the Qur'an. The cited passage is always sura 4:29, which they claim means "do not kill yourself."

Yet the issue is far from settled. At best, one might argue that sura 4:29 appears to contain a prohibition against

Current head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has become the leading theoretician of suicide terrorism, blurring the line between suicide and martyrdom. Zawahiri differentiates the two on the basis of intention: Ending one's life "out of depression and despair" is suicide, but ending one's life "to service Islam" is martyrdom.

self-slaughter. This view hinges on the word *anfusakum*, most often translated as "oneself" or "yourself" while an equally convincing argument can be made that it be translated as "others like one." An examination of the three most common English translations of the Qur'an, those of Ahmed Raza Khan, Marmaduke Pickthal, and Yusef Ali, alerts readers to potential discrepancies.[10] The phrase in question from 4:29 is the imperative *wa-la taqtulu anfusakum*: Khan's translation reads, "do not kill one another," Pickthal's reads, "kill not one another," and Ali's reads, "Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves."[11]

As long ago as 1946, Arabic scholar Franz Rosenthal concluded that "there is no absolutely certain evidence to indicate that Muhammad ever discussed the problem of suicide by means of divine revelation."[12] He argued that the oft-cited Qur'anic prohibition against suicide in 4:29 is in fact a mistranslation resulting from a misapplication of the reflexive pronoun. His 1946-era list of "available translations" of the Qur'an includes eight that treat 4:29 as a prohibition against suicide, five as a prohibition against killing fellow Muslims, and seven that point out the ambiguity through notes or double translations.

[7] Sheikh Hisham Kabbani, "Jihad, Terrorism and Suicide Bombing: The Classical Islamic Perspective," The Islamic Supreme Council of America, Fenton, Mich., accessed Jan. 30, 2015.

[8] "Myths, Stereotypes of Islam Hide the Truth," Council on American Islamic Relations, Washington, D.C., July 14, 2012; Hassan Ali el-Najjar, "Suicide and Mass Shooting: An Islamic Perspective," *al-Jazeera* (Riyadh), Jan. 27, 2013.

[9] "Religious views on suicide," *Wikipedia*, Jan. 3, 2015.

[10] See, for example, "The Qur'an," The Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement, University of Southern California, accessed Jan. 30, 2015; "Welcome to the Multimedia Qur'an," The Multimedia Qur'an, accessed Jan. 30, 2015.

[11] "Qur'an Chapter 2: Al-Baqara (The Cow), Verse 207," The Multimedia Qur'an, accessed Jan. 30, 2015.

[12] Franz Rosenthal, "On Suicide in Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, July-Sept. 1946, pp. 239-59, p. 243.

Nevertheless, the claim that "Islam prohibits suicide" appears in one form or another in the work of analysts Christoph Reuter, Mia Bloom, Barbara Victor, Robert Pape, Adam Lankford, Rosemarie Skaine, Diego Gambetta, Stephen Holmes, Luca Ricolfi, Mohammed M. Hafez, Joyce M. Davis, Ariel Merari, and more.[13] To demonstrate how deeply-rooted the belief has become, three cases deserve special attention. First, when Bruce Hoffman's venerable *Inside Terrorism* was revised and expanded in 2006, a new chapter on suicide terrorism was included.

> **The claim that "Islam prohibits suicide" appears in one form or another in the work of many analysts.**

It begins with the recognition that in "no area of contemporary terrorism has religion had a greater impact than in propelling the vast increase of suicide attacks that have occurred since 9/11" but also includes the sentence: "The Qu'ran, however, expressly forbids suicide."[14] Second, Assaf Moghadam's *The Globalization of Martyrdom* is perhaps the best book on the topic, its very title proclaiming the connection between suicide bombing and religion. And yet among nearly 300 pages of unflinching analysis of the Islamic components to suicide terrorism is the assertion that "Islam prohibits the taking of one's own life."[15] And finally, even Daniel Pipes, in a 1986 article that posited state support as the most immediate cause of the then-new phenomenon, wrote that "suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam"—though his claim is qualified by "A Qur'anic verse, 'Do not kill yourselves' (4:29) is commonly understood to condemn suicide."[16] Not Hoffman, Moghadam, or Pipes sought to disconnect Islam from suicide bombing, yet each repeated the claim.

More recently, the Egyptian born physician and current head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has become the leading theoretician of suicide terrorism by rhetorically blurring the line between suicide and martyrdom. In essays such as "Jihad, Martyrdom, and the Killing of Innocents," among others, Zawahiri differentiates the two

---

[13] Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*, p. 42; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 2-3; Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Books, 2003), p. 30; Robert Pape, *Dying to Win* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 91; Adam Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 52, 67; Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland and Company, 2006), p. 17; Diego Gambetta, "Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions?" in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 295; Stephen Holmes, "Al Qaeda, September 11, 2001," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, p. 137; Luca Ricolfi, "Palestinian 1981–2003," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, p. 119; Mohammed Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2006), p. 64; Mohammed Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 129; Joyce M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance and Despair in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 112; Ariel Merari, *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 129.

[14] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 159.

[15] Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al-Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 45.

[16] Daniel Pipes, "The Scourge of Suicide Terrorism," *The National Interest,* Summer 1986.

on the basis of intention: Ending one's life "out of depression and despair" is suicide, but ending one's life "to service Islam" is martyrdom.[17] Ideologues from Hezbollah (Fadhalla, Nasrallah) and Hamas (Yassin, Rantisi) have argued along similar lines.[18]

For the second part of Khomeini's plan—convincing Muslims that death is not death—the Qur'an proved very helpful. Along with the oft-cited verses of the sword, there are a number of Qur'anic passages wielded as staples by suicide-terror recruiters. Several excoriate those who believe Muslims killed while fighting the enemy are actually dead: Both 2:154 and 3:169 claim "those who are slain in the way of Allah ... are alive" and are provided "sustenance." Other passages elaborate on this promise, such as 4:74 and 9:111 where, depending on the translator, the reward is named "Paradise" or "the Garden." And various hadiths elaborate even further. As Zawahiri puts it:

> The Martyr is special to Allah. He is forgiven from the first drop of blood [that he sheds]. He sees his throne in Paradise where he will be adorned with the ornaments of faith. He will wed the *Aynhour* [wide-eyed virgins] and will not know the torments of the grave ... And he will couple with seventy-two *Aynhour* and be able to offer intercessions for seventy of his relatives.[19]

Providing examples of suicide in pre-Islamic cultures seems a publishing house prerequisite for books on the topic.

The number of analysts who simply dismiss the Islamic concept of *shahada* (martyrdom) is distressing. Some, like Joyce M. Davis, are so invested in the notion that Islam prohibits suicide that they are led to unsubstantiated and simplistic solutions, such as the conclusion that the 9/11 hijackers were "terrorists distorting their religion's true teachings ... not martyrs."[20] These "true teachings" are often proclaimed but seldom produced, and each of the nineteen terrorists saw himself as a martyr.

On par with Davis's shallow handling of martyrdom is the evasive treatment characteristic of recently-deceased Palestinian psychiatrist Eyad El-Sarraj.[21] In an interview about Umm Nidal, a woman who would ultimately see three of her sons become suicide bombers,[22] Sarraj explained that any grief she felt at the deaths of her sons was short-lived and "supported by the cultural belief that whoever dies as a martyr is not really dead."[23] Sarraj is partially correct in identifying the cultural component of Palestinian suicide terror, but he refuses to acknowledge the Qur'anic origins of that culture.

Analysts who disregard the ways that Islamic tradition is used to recruit, promote, justify, extol, and mythologize self-immolation as martyrdom must close their minds to mountains of evidence in order to conclude that the 9/11 terrorists' "deviations from reason were not necessarily the result of their religious beliefs"[24] and that "mainstream interpretations of Islamic texts do not

---

17 Raymond Ibrahim, ed. and trans., *The Al Qaeda Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 157.

18 Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*, pp. 115-29.

19 Ibrahim, *The Al Qaeda Reader*, pp. 143-4.

20 Davis, *Martyrs*, p. 202.

21 *The New York Times*, Dec. 18, 2013.

22 Ibid., Mar. 20, 2013.

23 Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 172.

24 Holmes, "Al Qaeda, September 11, 2001," p. 172.

support"[25] their actions. When they mention Islam, they do so in a guarded, often euphemized way: "the belief in some kind of afterlife may attenuate the psychological costs of commitment."[26] Reasonable analyses of the reverence for martyrdom in Islam are tempered by admonitions that "secular groups can resort to these attacks, too."[27] With blinders on, many assert that nearly anything can cause suicide terrorism—except Islam. The will to equivocate is so strong that it prompted Navid Kermani to advise those looking to understand the 9/11 attacks to ignore the Qur'an and blame Nietzsche[28] and Scott Atran to argue that "Islam and religious ideology per se aren't the principal cause of suicide bombing and terror in today's world—at least no more than are soccer, friendship, or faith for a better future."[29]

Distorting the Numbers

One popular method of demoting Islamism to a secondary or even irrelevant factor in suicide terrorism is to point to non-Islamic suicide killers as evidence to disconnect Islam from suicide terrorism. Providing examples of suicide in pre-modern and pre-Islamic cultures (such as the Jewish Zealots and Hindu Thugs) seems a
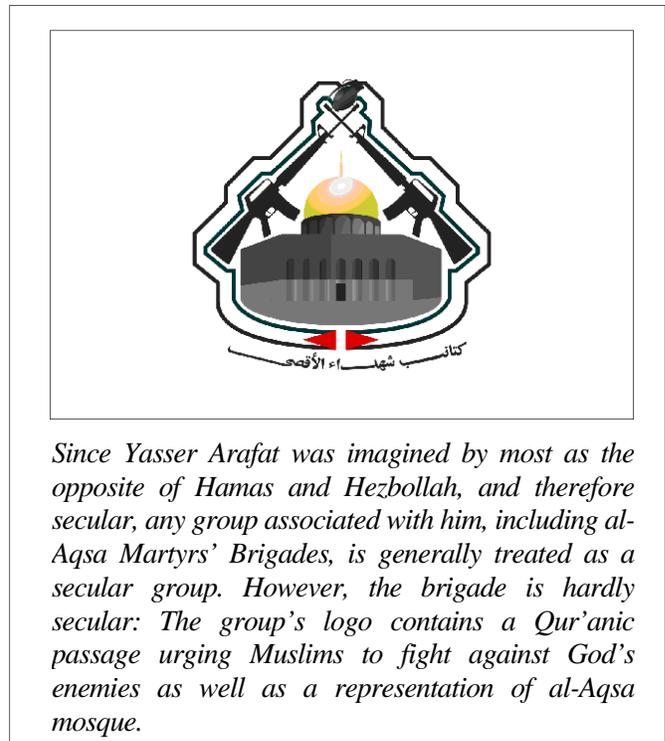
Since Yasser Arafat was imagined by most as the opposite of Hamas and Hezbollah, and therefore secular, any group associated with him, including al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, is generally treated as a secular group. However, the brigade is hardly secular: The group's logo contains a Qur'anic passage urging Muslims to fight against God's enemies as well as a representation of al-Aqsa mosque.

publishing house prerequisite for books on the topic. Even the thirteenth-century Muslim Assassins are generally presented as an "offshoot" of Islam and, therefore, not genuinely Islamic, certainly not as Shiites killing Sunnis in an internecine sectarian battle.

The boldest of these numerical distorters is Robert A. Pape, who leads the charge with his own personal brand of statistical pettifogging. Seeking to portray a cultural and religious diversity where none currently exists, Pape writes in *Dying to Win* that "the presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is misleading" because "the data show that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism."[30]

---

[25] Davis, *Martyrs*, p. 18.

[26] Jon Elster, "Motivations and Beliefs in Suicide Missions," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 243.

[27] Gambetta, "Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions?" p. 293.

[28] Navid Kermani, "A Dynamite of the Spirit," *The Times Literary Supplement* (London), Mar. 29, 2002.

[29] Scott Attran, *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un) Making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2010), p. 425.

[30] Pape, *Dying to Win*, pp. 3, 4.

Pape's numbers add up only through dubious choices that becloud any claim to statistical relevance. For example, including nearly four thousand Japanese Kamikaze pilots in the pool of data provides a strong numerical push in favor of Pape's argument. But in a study of suicide terrorism, Kamikaze pilots are irrelevant: They represented a nation state, flew airplanes clearly marked with the Rising Sun, and targeted military vessels of a declared enemy during wartime. Likewise, those who served in the so-called "Sapper Units" of the Viet Minh and Viet Cong campaigns against French and U.S. troops were high-risk insurgents who carried their bombs in satchels and detonated them at close range while attempting, sometimes unsuccessfully, to escape the blast. Since their deaths were not requisite for success of the mission, they do not qualify as true suicide terrorists.[31]

Another group that is included to dilute the numerical evidence of Islam's dominance of suicide terrorism is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan (LTTE). Its elite sub-group, the Black Tigers and Black Tigresses (the female suicide squadron), engaged in suicide bombing in a decades-long uprising against the state of Sri Lanka and its Sinhalese Buddhist population. Because LTTE members are mostly Hindus, their hundreds of suicide attacks are often cited to disconnect suicide terrorism from Islam. Stephen Hopgood takes the largest leap, observing that since religion cannot explain suicide terror among Tamils, it

> **In a study of suicide terrorism, Kamikaze pilots are irrelevant: They targeted military vessels of a declared enemy during wartime.**

"means that no religion, let alone a specific one like Islam, is a necessary part of explanations for SMs [suicide missions]."[32] But a fuller picture is revealed by the LTTE's contact with Islamist groups, including translation of their manuals into Tamil,[33] and by the fact that the LTTE did not engage in suicide terrorism prior to its contact with Hezbollah.[34]

Secular-Religious-Cultic

Another way to divert attention from Islam is to label some groups that participate in suicide terrorism as secular and to accept the view that secular groups employ suicide terrorism. Mia Bloom declares, "It is a mistake to assume that only religious groups use suicide terror. Many of the groups engaged in equivalently lethal campaigns are decidedly secular."[35]

Unfortunately, most authors present "religious" and "secular" as binary opposites and as the only two options for terrorist ideology. Yet the secular status is misleading. Since Yasser Arafat is imagined by most as the opposite of Hamas and Hezbollah, and therefore secular, any group associated with him (Fatah/Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO], Tanzim, Force 17, even the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades) is generally treated as a secular

[31] Leonard Weinberg, "Suicide Terrorism for Secular Causes," in *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism*, ed. Ami Pedahzur (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 108-21; Robert J. Bunker *Body Cavity Bombers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 3-5.

[32] Stephen Hopgood, "Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 43-76.

[33] Rohan Gunaratna, "Questions and Answers," *Countering Suicide Terrorism* (Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2000), p. 93.

[34] National Public Radio, May 21, 2009.

[35] Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, p. 79.

group. In fact, Arafat was a devout Muslim, associated in his early days with the Muslim Brotherhood, as were other founding fathers of Fatah, the PLO's foremost constituent organization. And while the new generation of Fatah leaders in the territories may be less religious, they, nevertheless, have a draft constitution for a prospective Palestinian state stipulating that "Islam is the official religion in Palestine" and Shari'a (Islamic law) is "a main source for legislation."[36] Nor is there anything secular about al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades; the group's logo even contains a Qur'anic passage (9:14) urging Muslims to fight against God's enemies. Of the three parts of the group's name, only "Brigade" is not a religious term, and considering that the noun "brigade" is modified by "al-Aqsa" and "martyrs" there is nothing secular whatsoever about the name. Yet remarkably, it is the norm to read, "The group's ideology is based in Palestinian nationalism, not in political Islam."[37]

Likewise, Human Rights Watch considers the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) a secular group because the organization "calls for a Palestinian state encompassing Israel, though not an Islamist one."[38] It may be that when George Habash formed the group in 1968, spouting Marxist rhetoric, it was genuinely a secular terrorist group. However, when the PFLP decided to carry out suicide bombings,

> **PKK commanders claimed that those who killed themselves in attacks were martyrs who would go to paradise.**

recruited and dispatched killers for its newly renamed Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, and then extolled them as Islamic martyrs killing Jews in "occupied Jerusalem" in the name of Islam, it forfeited any claim to secularism.[39]

Like the Tigers of Tamil, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is also frequently offered as evidence of non-Islamic, secular suicide terrorism. The PKK committed a total of fourteen suicide attacks (a fraction of the LTTE's hundreds[40]) and is not generally cited for its statistical value in offsetting Islamic suicide bombers with non-Islamic ones. Rather its Marxist rhetoric is used as evidence of its secularism even though the group's commanders lauded its suicide terrorist squad as fedayeen and claimed that those who killed themselves in attacks were martyrs who would go to paradise.[41]

But the LTTE and the PKK are still relevant to the discussion, and aside from their direct contact with Islamic terrorist groups,[42] share interesting and overlooked similarities to the Islamic terrorist organizations that dominate today's suicide

---

36 Efraim Karsh, "Palestinian Leaders Don't Want an Independent State," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2014.

37 Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland and Company, 2006), p. 123.

38 *Erased in a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks against Israeli Civilians* (New York: Human Rights Watch Report, 2002), sect. III.

39 Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, pp. 30-1; Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, pp. 20-3, 46-7; "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Dept. of State, 2014).

40 See, Paul Moorcraft, *Total Destruction of the Tamil Tigers* (Yorkshire, U.K.: Pen and Sword Books Limited, 2012), p. 101; Rohan Gunaratna, *The New York Times*, Apr. 9, 2002.

41 Dogu Ergil, "Suicide Terrorism in Turkey: The Case of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan," in *Countering Suicide Terrorism* (Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2000), pp. 73-88.

42 Ibid., p. 73.

terrorism. Both groups functioned like cults, dependent on an all-encompassing fanaticism and strident obedience to a central all-important figure: Vellupillai Prabhakaran of the LTTE and Abdullah Öcalan of the PKK. As Israeli scholar Ami Pedahzur pointed out in *Suicide Terrorism*, both the LTTE and the PKK were "headed by charismatic leaders who were responsible for the sect-like features of their organizations," each of whom "served as the principal source of inspiration for the suicides" and was personally "responsible for adopting the idea of suicide attacks ... [and] devising strategic guidelines for activating bombers."[43]

When Öcalan was captured and called for an end to PKK terrorism, it stopped, though some despondent PKK members subsequently committed conventional suicide, killing only themselves.[44] After 1981, Prabhakaran required all LTTE members to carry cyanide capsules in order to commit suicide in the event of their capture[45] and was frequently photographed with his own capsule suspended around his neck.[46] He was killed in 2009, and the LTTE effectively ceased to exist. While many use this evidence to refute connections between Islam and suicide terrorism, the same evidence suggests that Islamists display cult-

> **Millenarianism, utopian ideals, and eschatological narratives are important aspects of both cults and Islamism.**

like behavior. What Peter Olsson calls "malignant Pied Pipers"—those whose "rigid fundamentalist mentality requires everyone to think and believe exactly as they do, or die"[47]—fit the Islamist mindset. As Daniel Pipes puts it, this mindset supports the view that "whatever your question, private or public, Islam offers the answer."[48]

Perhaps radical Islam is best conceived of as a cult. This would explain the commonality among all suicide terrorists and most suicide cults: coercion, cultural approval, and the belief that suicide is not the end but the beginning. Millenarianism, utopian ideals, and eschatological narratives are important aspects of both cults and Islamism. Only instead of merely killing themselves (like those in the Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, and Falun Gong cults), Islamists have found a way to weaponize their deaths to serve the cause of their leaders: Khomeini, Yassin, bin Laden.

The Sanity Question

Most psychological approaches to suicide terrorism focus on the suicidal component and ignore the terrorism and Islamism. Even Adam Lankford, whose revisionist book *The Myth of Martyrdom* sets out to demolish the view that suicide bombers are essentially normal people, free

---

43 Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 70-1.

44 Dogu Ergil, "Questions and Answers," in *Countering Suicide Terrorism* (Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2000), pp. 96-7.

45 Rohan Gunaratna, "Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka," in *Countering Suicide Terrorism* (Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2000), p. 68.

46 *BBC News*, May 18, 2009.

47 Peter Alan Olsson, M.D., *The Cult of Osama: Psychoanalyzing Bin Laden and His Magnetism for Muslim Youths* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 3.

48 Daniel Pipes, interview: "Militant Islam," *Conversations with History*, Institute of International Studies, University of California, UC Berkeley, accessed Feb. 25, 2015.

---

of the "personal pathologies and psycho-logical disorders"[49] that motivate most suicide attempts, downplays the role of religion in suicide terrorism. Lankford, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama, battles against the myopia of many analysts (Scott Atran, Robert Pape, James Feldman, Riaz Hassan, Robert Brym, Mohammed Hafez, Ellen Townsend, Larry Pastor, and Jerrold Post), all of whom have argued that suicide terrorists "have no appreciable psychopathology"[50] and are "much like ordinary soldiers with a strong sense of duty and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good."[51] These terrorists are "psychologically normal,"[52] "psychologically stable,"[53] and "not significantly different from other rebels or soldiers ... willing to engage in high-risk activism."[54] These analysts claim that suicide terrorists are "not truly suicidal,"[55] "qualitatively similar to countless people throughout history who have given their life for a higher cause,"[56]

> **Some analysts claim that suicide terrorists are "similar to countless people throughout history who have given their life for a higher cause."**

and "normal."[57] Palestinian psychiatrist Sarraj takes it a step further and claims that suicide terrorism is so far from a psychological aberration that "the amazing thing is not the occurrence of the suicide bombings but rather the rarity of them."[58]

But in arguing that suicide terrorists are suicidal people exploited and motivated by organizations that train and equip them, Lankford's own myopia betrays him. In analyzing a Muslim suicide bomber or attempted bomber, he asserts that "Islamic fundamentalism became the vehicle for his anger and suicidal impulses"[59] but that "even if he had never stumbled across that path, it was only a matter of time before he killed himself or harmed others."[60] Lankford also seems to misunderstand the role of suicide terrorism in the asymmetrical warfare carried out by these organizations, at one point insisting that the suicide bomber's death "does not increase the likelihood of success nor the expected magnitude of destruction."[61] This is clearly wrong: Individual bombers perform the role of precision guidance at a cost far lower than other "smart" weapons. Lankford's argument rests with the assertion that "the terrorists' broader cause is potentially *harmed* by the death of these attackers because they cannot return to fight another day."[62] This misses the point. No organizational leaders, recruiters, or

---

[49] Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom*, p. 4.

[50] Scott Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science*, Mar. 2003, pp. 1534-9.

[51] Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 218.

[52] Riaz Hassan, "What Motivates the Suicide Bombers," *Yale Global* (New Haven), Sept. 3, 2009.

[53] Robert Brym, "Six Lessons of Suicide Bombers," *Contexts*, Fall 2007, pp. 40-5.

[54] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 6.

[55] Ellen Townsend, "Suicide Terrorists: Are They Suicidal?" *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, Feb. 2007, p. 47.

[56] Larry H. Pastor, "Countering the Psychological Consequences of Suicide Terrorism," *Psychiatric Annals*, 34 (2004): 704.

[57] *Voice of America News*, Oct. 4, 2006.

[58] Eyad el-Sarrah, "Why We Have Become Suicide Bombers?" quoted in Davis, *Martyrs*, p. 105.

[59] Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom*, p. 55.

[60] Ibid., p. 55.

[61] Ibid., p. 45.

[62] Ibid. Italics in original.

---

dispatchers see suicide bombers as precious resources to be con- served. Rather they are cheap weapons to be wielded brazenly, whose deaths confer a degree of operational impunity to the organization.

The Socio-Technological Approach

One sub-field of analysis considers the effects of technology on the social groups from which suicide bombers emerge. This is often stretched to the point where technology and social groups are said to cause suicide terrorism rather than facilitate it. Mia Bloom's *Dying to Kill* analyzes how terrorist organizations recruit, train, and dispatch suicide killers. Bloom is the originator of the theory of "competitive outbidding," which explains the sudden appearance and proliferation of suicide terrorism by claiming that terrorist organizations emulate and compete with each other and try to out- perform one another. In her view, when "multiple insurgent groups are competing for public support, bombings will intensify in both scope and number as they become both the litmus test of militancy and the way to mobilize greater numbers of people within their community."[63]

Bloom's theory is interesting but can only be true when the multiple insurgent groups compete among a population already predisposed to the idea of martyrdom. The first true suicide bombing on record occurred on March 1, 1881, when Ignaty Grinevitsky of the Narodnaya Volya attempted the assassination of Czar Alexander II. Subsequently, the Narodnaya Volya had only limited success with the new tactic, mainly because of its genuine secularism. Worldly

---

Only the promise of eternal rewards in paradise has motivated people en masse to kill themselves in order to kill others.

---

renown, the appreciation of one's peers, and the satisfaction of completing a job are apparently not sufficient to compel most people to kill themselves. Only the promise of eternal rewards in paradise has successfully motivated people en masse to kill themselves in order to kill others. Bloom's theory underestimates the significance of this predisposition. Today's terror groups do not create the circumstances that enable suicide terror but take advantage of circumstances created by Islamism.

Jeffrey William Lewis' *The Business of Martyrdom* also focuses on social and technological aspects and approaches suicide terrorism as "a dynamic process that takes on some of the characteristics of the cultures employing it yet also has some common elements observable across societies."[64] But, like Bloom, Lewis often assigns primary motivational status to secondary forces as when he claims the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine turned to suicide attacks in 2002, "likely motivated by a desire to avenge the group's leader, Abu Ali Mustafa … killed by Israeli forces in 2001."[65] Revenge is a common human tendency. Suicide terror is not. Lewis can barely bring himself to acknowledge "posthumous rewards were undoubtedly an important factor for religiously motivated recruits."[66] His conclusion that "the global jihadi movement has remained marginal because it offers nothing of substance to the majority of the world's Muslims"[67] is disproved every day by residents of Raqqa and Mosul as they join the movement in order to

---

[63] Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, p. 78.

[64] Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom*, p. 7.

[65] Ibid., p. 170.

[66] Ibid., p. 181-2.

[67] Ibid., p. 220-1.

navigate ISIS repression, pre-ferring to become aggressors rather than victims. The same pattern occurred with the citizens of the Sunni Triangle when ISIS's predecessor and quasi-founder Abu Musab Zarqawi was their tormentor a decade ago and to the citizens of Khandahar and Kabul in the mid-1990s under the Taliban.

"The Occupation Made Me Do It"

Attempting to disconnect modern-day suicide terrorism from its Islamic context, many authors shift the focus from Islamist perpetrators of suicide terrorism to their victims. In most cases, this means Israel. Given the fact that Israelis have been targeted by suicide bombing more than any other Western people and considering the popularity of anti-Zionism (often just a "safe" form of anti-Semitism), it should come as no surprise that the mere existence of the State of Israel is often portrayed as the chief root cause of suicide terrorism.

The usual narrative begins with the Oslo accords, when, as Jeffrey Lewis puts it, Arafat "recognized Israel and renounced terrorism"[68] while the "majority of Palestinians at the time were supportive of the peace process."[69] Then Jerusalem stalled and slowed the turnover of land, angering the Palestinians who turned to suicide terror as revenge for unfulfilled promises. As terrorism against Israelis increased

Many claim that foreign occupation causes suicide bombing worldwide. But no French or Dutch suicide bombers targeted Nazi occupiers in the early 1940s. The Irish Republican Army's Bobby Sands (above) starved to death during a hunger strike, but the group never adopted suicide bombing as a tactic against British occupiers. No Palestinian suicide bombers targeted Egyptian and Trans-Jordanian occupiers in the Gaza Strip and West Bank from 1948 until 1967.

dramatically from pre-Oslo sniper fire and knife attacks to post-Oslo suicide bombings, the Israeli government fought back and eventually restricted movement from newly autonomous Palestinian Authority-governed areas into Israel. The argument that Israeli checkpoints humiliate Palestinians to such an extent that they become suicide bombers in retaliation is common. Shalfic Masalqa, a psychologist and a Hebrew University professor, boldly states that when "an adolescent boy is humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint, from that moment on, a suicide bomber is created."[70] Robert Pape claims that foreign occupation causes suicide bombing worldwide, and "what mainly motivates individuals to become suicide terrorists is not the existence of a terrorist sanctuary for indoctrination and training, but deep anger at

---

[68] Ibid., p. 144.

[69] Ibid., p. 152.

[70] Quoted in Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 28.

---

the presence of foreign combat forces on territory they prize."[71]

History does not concur. No French or Dutch suicide bombers targeted Nazi occupiers in the early 1940s. The Irish Republican Army's Bobby Sands and nine others starved to death during a hunger strike in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, but the group never adopted suicide bombing as a tactic against British occupiers. No Palestinian suicide bombers targeted Egyptian and Trans-Jordanian occupiers in the Gaza strip and West Bank from 1948 until 1967. And no Palestinian suicide bombers targeted Israelis from 1967 until the Oslo accords ended most Israeli control. Pape's thesis cannot solve this dilemma, and his reductionist assertion that "occupation causes suicide bombing" conflates opportunity with cause.

Among the various victim-blaming explanations for suicide terrorism, one idea stands apart, the so-called retaliatory explanation, which Bloom describes as a "school of thought [which] traces Palestinian suicide bombings to Israeli provocations beginning with the Hebron massacre by Baruch Goldstein in 1994."[72] The most prominent devotee of this canard is perhaps Islamist apologist John Esposito of Georgetown University, who describes the facts of the massacre and then writes: "In response, Hamas [Islamic Resistance Movement] introduced a new type of warfare in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, suicide

> **No Palestinian suicide bombers targeted Israelis from 1967 until the Oslo accords ended most Israeli control.**

bombing."[73] Esposito's fable runs into problems with the eight Palestinian suicide attacks against Israelis in 1993 before Goldstein's assault. The first was a Hamas attack on April 16, 1993. It was followed by three attacks in September 1993: one by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and two by Hamas. Both PIJ and Hamas carried out suicide attacks on October 4 and November 2.[74] There was no cause and effect, but sadly the lie is found in many places, including important textbooks on the subject.[75]

The Term "Occupied Territories"

After the 1948 Israeli war of independence, the lands that were called Palestine were indeed occupied, but by Egypt in Gaza and the Hashemite Kingdom of Trans-Jordan in the West Bank. Analysts who refer to these lands as "occupied" today have a responsibility to stipulate that the occupiers were not Israelis until after the Six-Day War in 1967. Until the first intifada in 1987, it was a notably calm period in the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis.

As Mohammed Hafez admits, after the Oslo accords, "the majority of Palestinians in the territories were living under full PA administration."[76] Therefore, the term "occupied territory" no longer applies. Even the Hamas members meeting in Philadelphia in 1993 acknowledged that

---

[71] Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 29.

[72] Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, p. 20.

[73] John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 124.

[74] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 79.

[75] See, for example, Gus Martin, *Essentials of Terrorism, Concepts and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014), p. 150.

[76] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 55.

Oslo put an end to their jihad against Israel and thus threatened the continued existence of Hamas. The FBI's tapes of that meeting reveal one Hamas member bemoaning, "There is no occupation now ... this will be classified as terrorism in America."[77] Yet analysts (Hafez included) and journalists especially continue to misuse and overuse the term. In an echo of a frequent bin Laden trope, Pape goes so far as to invent something called "indirect occupation" to claim, as he does repeatedly, that the fifteen Saudi 9/11 terrorists "attacked America in response to U.S. military presence on the Arabian Peninsula."[78]

The most absurd use of the term, showing how meaningless it has become through thoughtless repetition and semantic contortion, comes in journalist Barbara Victor's *Army of Roses*. Victor writes of the "ray of hope" she felt in Hanan Ashrawi's 2002 call for an end to suicide bombings, only to concede that it was "distressing" because Ashrawi did not object to the ethics of suicide terror but rather feared that it "provided the Israelis an excuse to reoccupy the occupied territories."[79] The territories were either occupied or they were not occupied. Victor is so accustomed to referring to Gaza and the West Bank as occupied territories, she apparently cannot conceive of them in any other way.

The ultimate "blame the victim" calumny comes in the form of Zeev Ma'oz's conspiracy theory accusing Jerusalem of behavior reminiscent of that in the libels

<aside>Israelis negotiate with people who preach in now-sovereign territories that the people of Israel must be pushed into the sea.</aside>

about Jews in medieval Europe. Bloom approvingly sums up Ma'oz's theory and states that Jerusalem employs a "deliberate baiting strategy to force a Palestinian reaction in response," which gives it the excuse to employ "heavy handed tactics."[80] The Israelis, the theory implies, do not truly want peace with the Palestinians. They only want to destroy the Palestinians. But because of its treatment by the U.N. and EU and the ever-present danger of boycotters, divesters, and sanctioners, Jerusalem needs political cover to kill Palestinians, so it taunts and slyly lays traps to conceal its murderous desires.

As Bloom puts it, "when Hamas has ostensibly shifted from targeting civilians (albeit temporarily) or has made pronouncements of its intention to do so (e.g., declaring a *hudna* or ceasefire), Israel's targeted assassination of a Palestinian leader provided them the justification to renew attacks against Israeli civilians," which is exactly what Jerusalem wants. Bloom's qualifiers speak volumes ("ostensibly" and "albeit temporary"). Her equation of *hudna* with ceasefire ignores the Islamic context of *hudna* as a respite, historically used to buy time until a ceasefire is no longer advantageous at which time it is summarily and unceremoniously broken, as in Arafat's numerous comparisons of the Oslo accords to the Treaty of the Hudaibiya. Ma'oz's conspiracy slur ignores the giant leap of faith the Israeli government took in the Oslo accords and continues to take by negotiating with people who deny its right to exist and preach in now-sovereign territories that the people of Israel must be pushed into the sea.

---

[77] Government Exhibit Philly Meeting — 11E, 3:04-CR-240-G, US v. HFL, Shukri Abu Baker, et al., p. 2.

[78] Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*, pp. 21, 45.

[79] Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 201.

[80] Bloom, *Dying to Win*, pp. 92-4.

Samira Jassam, al-Qaeda's preeminent recruiter of female Iraqi suicide bombers, arranged for girls to be raped, then presented herself as their advisor and confessor, leading them from the path of stained family honor. Jassam worked with Sunni militants from the Ansar al-Sunna group and is alleged to have recruited 80 women to act as bombers, 28 of whom went on to launch attacks. She is also known as Um al-Mu'minin, "the mother of the believers."

Female Suicide Bombers

A lively debate rages over why women become suicide bombers. Some authors acknowledge the motivational role of Islamism while simultaneously denying it; admitting there are no rewards mentioned in the Qur'an for female martyrs necessitates at least tacitly acknowledging those promised to men. Barbara Victor[81] and sociologist Rosemarie Skaine[82] emphasize the importance of Palestinian nationalism and suggest that women suicide bombers are an expression of Palestinian feminism. In

Victor's telling, suicide bombers are always "martyrs," and their recruiters, dispatchers, and helpers are "activists." Her portrayal of suicide terrorism posits that it is one of very few forms of feminist expression allowed to women in Palestinian culture.

The title of Victor's book is taken from Arafat's January 27, 2002 speech in which he called for something unknown in the conflict at the time, a *shahida*. This Arabic neologism is a feminization of the noun *shahid*, literally "witness," but almost universally translated as "martyr." Later that day, Wafa Idris became the first (probably inadvertent) female suicide bomber. Most analysts now believe that Idris was attempting to pass the bomb to her brother and that it exploded prematurely. Victor writes as though the female Palestinian suicide bombers (a half dozen successful and more failed) and their families are heroic feminist figures, manipulated into waging war against a patriarch that, after all, has it coming.

Terrorism expert Anat Berko punctures this myth, explaining, "Superficially it might seem that female terrorists are feminists, standard-bearers in the struggle," but "they will never achieve equality."[83] Yoram Schweitzer of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies goes to considerable lengths to refute representations "of the female Palestinian suicide terrorists as independent women with strong opinions ... who decided to take their fate into their hands with a feeling of completeness and

---

81 Victor, *Army of Roses*, pp. 80-1, 103-6.

82 Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers*, pp. 31-40.

83 Anat Berko, *The Smarter Bomb: Women and Children as Suicide Bombers* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), p. 10; idem, *The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), pp. 96-124.

destiny."[84] He shows how these women have been manipulated by their handlers, who make opportunistic, post-hoc claims of their "special noble personal qualities" and use newly-minted myths to motivate men into following their steps. Mira Tzoreff of the Moshe Dayan Center also documents the predatory methods used by Arafat's Tanzim whereby Palestinian girls and young women are seduced, impregnated, threatened with exposure, and then offered a means of escape through their own "martyrdom."[85] Former CIA officer Robert Baer refers to this as an opportunity to "wash away dishonor"[86] brought on by perceived sins. The most grisly version of this tactic is surely Samira Jassam, al-Qaeda's preeminent recruiter of female Iraqi suicide bombers, who arranged for girls to be raped, then presented herself as their advisor and confessor,[87] leading them from the path of stained family honor to what Tzoreff calls "a cloak of authentic Islamic feminism."[88]

> **There are no suicide bombing campaigns in the name of any religion other than Islam.**

Ignoring One's Own Evidence

Another odd tendency among analysts of suicide terrorism is the exploration of Islamist components of martyrdom that are subsequently discounted in their conclusions. For instance, in the concluding chapter of *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, Hafiz contradicts evidence he presents in the previous five chapters with this profoundly disingenuous statement: "There is nothing inherent in Islam—or any other religion, for that matter—that inclines people toward death and murderous violence."[89]

The qualifying clause "or any other religion, for that matter" is entirely irrelevant since there are no suicide bombing campaigns in the name of any religion other than Islam. Hafiz's statement also ignores evidence he himself presents, such as the accurate claim that Hamas and Islamic Jihad "draw on the abundant Islamic texts concerning jihad and martyrdom in the Qu'ran and prophetic traditions."[90] Moreover, his calls for all parties involved to fulfill a moral "obligation to debunk the myth of the heroic [suicide] bomber"[91] are canceled by his admonition against tinkering with "religious notions" that will be perceived as "an attack on their [Muslim] creed" or an attempt "to 'rewrite the Koran' or 'subvert the will of God.'"[92] The most important thing that Western nations need to do, Hafiz argues, is to stay out of the way and "allow this deadly phenomenon to run its

84 Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* Yoram Schweitzer, ed. (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), pp. 25-41.

85 Mira Tzoreff, "The Palestinian *Shahida*: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis," in Schweitzer, ed., *Female Suicide Bombers*, pp. 13-23.

86 *Cult of the Suicide Bomber*, film directed by Kevin Toolis (New York: The Disinformation Company, 2008).

87 *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2009; *BBC News*, Feb. 4, 2009.

88 Tzoreff, "The Palestinian *Shahida*," pp. 13-23.

89 Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 73.

90 Ibid., p. 37.

91 Ibid., p. 73.

92 Ibid., p. 74.

course and implode under its own contradictions."[93] No such implosion is in sight. The only things that curbed the daily suicide attacks in Israel were a sustained military effort and a wall built to keep bombers out.

Journalist Christoph Reuter's thorough documentation of the phenomenon of suicide bombing in *My Life Is a Weapon, A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* likewise focuses a great deal on Islam. He explores the Shiite-Sunni split that solidified the concept of martyrdom; Iran's ideological takeover of Lebanon in the 1980s when "more than 1,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards … arrived in Lebanon via Syria in order to erect a beachhead for the Islamic Revolution;"[94] the Palestinians' embrace of the tactic, and finally its global post-modernization by al-Qaeda.

But Reuter's text undercuts itself with non sequiturs and milky bromides such as "Islam as such is not the cause of terrorism and suicide attacks" and "[p]articular aspects of Islam do, however, lend themselves to being interpreted to justify a declaration of outright war against the West and against any opponents among their own peoples. They can equally be used to construct a democratic society."[95] Of course, he neglects to elucidate which aspects of Islam are democratic and completely ignores the paucity of genuinely democratic Islamic states.

Some, like journalists Terry McDermott and Reuter, strive to contradict the allure of sex—clearly an important recruiting tool—in Islamic portrayals of paradise. Analyzing the motives of 9/11 terrorist Muhammad Atta, McDermott portrays a man who "would stare stonily in the presence of women." When Atta's master's thesis at Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg was submitted and found to be poorly written, his advisor assigned a female professor to help him rewrite it. After six weeks, Atta protested that "he could
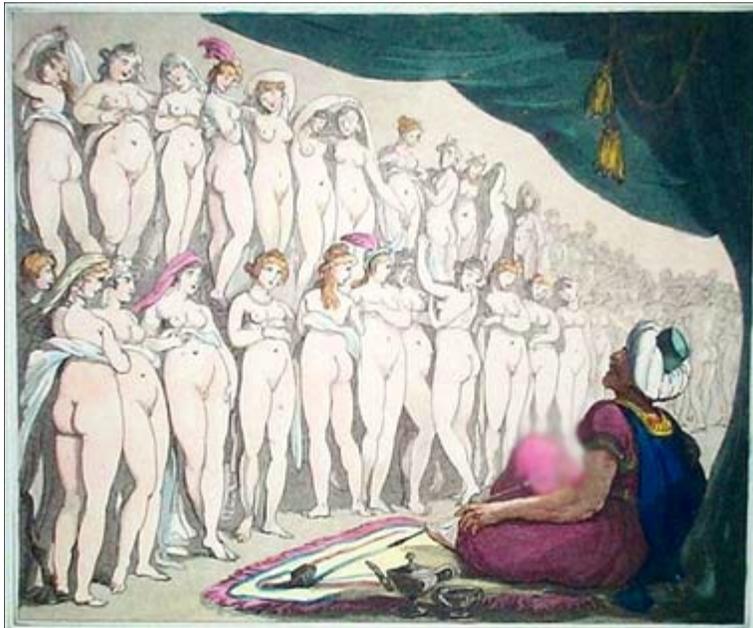
An artist's rendition of the martyr's reward. According to al-Qaeda's Ayman Zawahiri, the martyr in paradise will couple with seventy-two virgins. Recently, the imam of al-Ahmady mosque in Jeddah, Columbia University-educated Muhammad Ali Shanqiti, announced that the number of virgins awaiting the martyr is actually far greater than the oft-cited seventy-two. His formula puts the total as high as 19,604.

---

[93] Ibid., p. 75.

[94] Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*, p. 57.

[95] Ibid., p. 32.

no longer bear to be in such close proximity" to her.[96]

But then, alluding to the seventy-two dark-eyed virgins promised the martyr in Islamic tradition, Reuter asks "what use would Muhammad Atta have for them? This was a man so terrified of women that in his will, he decreed that no woman be allowed to visit his grave, that his corpse was to be prepared only by women wearing gloves, and that no one should touch his genitals. A man with such a pathological fear of women aspiring to endless sex in heaven? Unlikely."[97] When it comes to Atta's sexuality, the jury is still out,[98] but focusing on one man's motives does not negate the proven fact that recruiters rely on the attraction of a highly sexualized paradise. Anat Berko documents the bait used to lure female suicide bombers who are told that they will become one of the harem of seventy-two virgins awaiting the male suicide bomber: "After each sexual encounter with a *shaheed*, their hymens miraculously grow back, and they are pure again."[99]

Recently, the imam of al-Ahmady mosque in Jeddah, Columbia University educated Muhammad Ali Shanqiti, announced that the number of virgins awaiting the martyr in paradise is actually far greater than the oft-cited seventy-two. His formula puts the total as high

> **Recruiters of suicide bombers rely on the attraction of a highly sexualized paradise.**

as 19,604.[100] As the mother of Izzedrine Masri, the Sbarro Pizzeria bomber, put it:

I don't believe that my son went as an act of revenge because no one in our family was ever directly hurt through the occupation. But I think that someone put into his head that this was a way to go to paradise. He wanted to go to paradise.[101]

Conclusion

Before Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy, he ruminates on the possibility of suicide as a way out of his predicament. He stops short, however, because "the Everlasting [has] ... fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter." For the world's Islamists, this is not the case; in fact, from the Islamist perspective, the Everlasting actually rewards self-slaughter under the right circumstances.

Far too many analysts and scholars ignore this truth, giving Islam a free pass, perhaps because it is the path of least resistance; perhaps, like John Esposito, because their research is paid for by Islamists;[102] or perhaps because they actually

---

96 Terry McDermott, *Perfect Soldiers, The 9/11 Hijackers: Who They Were, Why They Did It*, (New York: Harper, 2005), pp. 27, 60, 77.

97 Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*, p. 8.

98 See, for example, Corey Robin, "The Way We Live Now: Closet-Case Studies," *The New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2001.

99 Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, p. 166.

100 "Saudi Based Cleric Muhammad Ali Shanqiti," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Washington, D.C., Special Dispatch no. 5452, Sept. 20, 2013.

101 Um Iyad, quoted in Davis, *Martyrs*, p. 106.

102 Martin Kramer, "Dr. Esposito and the seven-percent solution," *Sandbox*, Apr. 9, 2008; Robert Spencer, "Saudi-funded pseudo-academic John Esposito obscures the truth about jihad terror in *Washington Post*," Jihad Watch, June 6, 2013; Stephen Schwartz, "John L. Esposito: Apologist for Wahhabi Islam," *The American Thinker*, Sept. 18, 2011.

believe, contrary to the evidence, that suicide bombing is inimical to Islam. Today the world is full of disillusioned youths, alienated from their societies and confused about their identities, and there is no shortage of women who believe that their respective societies have socially and economically marginalized them. According to popular academic opinion, this enormous pool of human beings constitutes the population from which suicide bombers will emerge. But popular academic opinion is wrong, for only when Islamism is part of the equation does disillusionment lead to murderous self-detonation. A foreign military presence may offer a depressed, crazed, suicidal person the opportunity to commit suicide while killing the enemy, but only the promise of a heavenly reward can offer the opportunity for martyrdom. The "vast reward"[103] offered to the martyr is the single most important incentive for suicide bombers.

Until academics and journalists can shed their mind-forged manacles and acknowledge that the post-1979 bloom of suicide bombings is all but unthinkable without Islamic tradition, confusion will reign. Until scholars can at least stop ignoring what the terrorists themselves say and write about their goals and motivations, policymakers who look to academics for guidance will remain in the dark, blaming the scourge of suicide terrorism on Nietzsche, the post-modernizing self, or soccer.

A.J. Caschetta is a senior lecturer in English at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a fellow at the Middle East Forum.

---

[103] Qur. 4:74.