The Logic of Suicide Terrorism

Mark Harrison*

Professor of Economics
University of Warwick

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 recent rise of suicide terrorism is often explained 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.

To tackle the issue of suicide terrorism at an individual level requires us to try to understand it as the outcome of a rational choice based on self–interest. Clearly, the suicide aspect of this choice is more difficult to explain than the terrorism aspect. How can a choice for self–destruction be self–interested? Does self–interest not preclude self–killing?

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. If the value of life is not what matters to them, 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.

Like anything else that has a durable value, a distinct 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. We know that people will do many things to protect the value of their identity; they will even die for it. 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 enhance 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.

The Martyr's Identity

Why should someone willingly adopt the identity of a religious warrior detached from humanity and destined for premature death under terrible circumstances? It seems that three elements are involved: 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.

Second is a social environment so oppressive that it has partly crushed the innate will of the child to find a creative, life–loving identity capable of sustaining enduring attachments to other human beings. Of course, not every young person in such a society goes to the extreme and selects the identity of a warrior martyr; most do not. But the probability is dramatically increased that some will. This association of suicide terrorism with 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 expected to choose identities that emphasise family and other social attachments. Young men

are limited to more rigid, introverted roles that may prove more fragile and less resilient to the pressures of adolescence.

- 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. Or, 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 thing that is necessary for suicide terrorism to flourish is an organised terrorist faction. Groups like Hamas or al–Qaeda flourish in a conflicted, oppressive environment, compete for power within it, collude with oppression by enforcing their own controls on social behaviour, and exploit the consequences in order to enhance their own power. Specifically, they offer incentives to young people to invest in the identity of a warrior martyr, an identity that will be rendered more valuable by death, and devalued by continuing to live. These incentives are also extended to the young person's family, which then colludes in the child's choice.

From an economic point of view the relationship between the suicide attacker and the terrorist organisation may be understood as a voluntary transaction of mutual benefit. The volunteer agrees to trade life for identity. In return for the promotion of its terrorist objectives, the organisation 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.

Counter–Measures

How can suicide terrorism be limited? Counter–measures may affect supply and demand. On the supply side 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 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 it may become increasingly difficult to recruit new suicide attackers.

More generally, it would seem that a long–term essential for reducing the supply 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 that kind of communal polarisation is a necessary condition for suicide terrorism to emerge. This is something that the western sponsors of the various parties should note.

The demand for suicide attackers comes from the militant factions that organise it. Therefore the weakening of organisation and the removal of financial means are clearly of the utmost importance. However, many of the repressive measures aimed at weakening a terrorist organisation directly may also raise the background level of oppression in society that indirectly stimulates the flow of volunteers and contributions. This suggests that regardless of the efficiency of modern methods of intelligence and policing there may be limits on the effective power of states to repress suicide terrorism without addressing underlying fundamental conflicts.

Reference

Merari, Ariel (1998). "The Readiness to Kill and Die: Suicidal Terrorism in the Middle East." In Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, 192–207. Second edition, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press.