



What "Rational Fanatics" will Deliver the Bomb?



By Ed Rudin, MD

Suicide bombings are simple and low cost, but have a big impact on the public and the media.

FIRST CAME JOHN LOOFBOUROW'S E-MAIL telling me he would be reporting on the conference he had attended on biochemical terrorism. (Please see Physicians and Terrorism.) A few hours later an article by Ehud Sprinzak, Dean of the Lauder School of Government, Policy, and Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzlia, Israel, intriguingly titled "Rational Fanatics," stared out at me from the pages of the September-October 2000 issue of Foreign Policy.

The next evening, while the Medical Society was ending its annual Awards and Installation dinner, a late-arriving guest, Assemblywoman Helen Thomson, reported that the legislature had just been evacuated from the Capitol because of a fire. Soon after, we learned that the fire resulted when an 18-wheeler plowed into the south side of the Capitol, starting a series of explosions and killing the driver.

A suicidal terrorist?

No. We learned the next day that the driver was not a "rational fanatic" but another irrational victim of a failed mental health system.

According to Professor Sprinzak, for two centuries terrorists, although ready to risk their lives, preferred to survive their attacks so they could benefit from their achievement.

That changed on October 23, 1983, when two massive explosions destroyed the barracks of the US and French contingents of the multinational peacekeeping force in Beirut. Muslim extremists had driven into the target area, detonating bombs with no intention of surviving. In the process, they killed 241 US servicemen and 58 French paratroopers.

Similar attacks soon followed against US and Israeli targets in Lebanon and Kuwait, confirming a new repertoire in modern terrorism: the planned death of the perpetrator.

Within six months Presidents Mitterand and Reagan pulled their troops out of Lebanon - a tacit admission that all known counterterrorism measures were useless. Concrete barriers around the White House, and sealed tunnels under the Pentagon, reassured few.

The press quickly labeled the bombers irrational zealots. More temperate counterterrorism experts argued that suicidal terrorism offered a tactical advantage over "conventional" terrorism.

It was simple and low cost, requiring no escape or rescue planning, and guaranteeing mass casualties and extensive damage. The suicide bomber could choose the time, place and circumstances of the attack without fear of being caught and interrogated. Best of all, it

had an immense impact on the public and the media.

Professor Sprinzak quotes Dr. Ramadan Salah, secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, who summarized the tactic with chilling logic: "Our enemy possesses the most sophisticated weapons ... (and an army) trained to a very high standard We have nothing with which to repel killing and thuggery ... except the weapons of martyrdom. It is easy and costs us only our lives"

The last two decades saw Hezbollah's successful suicide attacks against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the mid-1980s; Hamas's suicidal bus bombings in 1994-96 that stopped the Israeli-Palestine peace process; suicidal Kurdish attacks against Turkey in 1995-99 ; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil's suicidal killing of hundreds of civilians, soldiers and high-ranking officers since 1987 and their suicidal assassination of two heads of state: Rajiv Gandhi (India, 1991) and Ranasinghe Premadasa (Sri Lanka, 1993); and the simultaneous 1998 suicide bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed nearly 300 civilians as reprisal for past "thuggery." All are testimonials to this "ultimate terror." Most recently, the suicidal attack on the USS Cole killed 17 US sailors.

Is it really new, though? Really invincible?

Sprinzak traces suicide terrorism to the 11th century Assassins, Muslim fighters of Northern Persia, who used it to advance the cause of Islam. In the 18th century, Muslim communities in India, Sumatra and the southern Philippines, seeing themselves as martyrs for God and community, resorted to suicide attacks to oppose European colonial oppression.

However, modern suicide terrorism is more than religious fervor, Islamic or otherwise. Martha Crenshaw, terrorism scholar at Wesleyan University, argues that the mindset of a suicide bomber is no different from that of a Tibetan self-immolator or an Irish political prisoner starving himself to death in prison. It is a martyrdom venerated by a cultural or religious tradition that others reject, although they may venerate another style of self-sacrifice.

Tel Aviv psychologist Ariel Merari has studied more than 50 Muslim suicide bombers serving in Hezbollah, Amal, Hamas, secular pro-Syrian organizations in Lebanon, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel. He suggests that there is no one psychological or demographic profile.

But Boaz Ganor, director of Israel's International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, says the typical shahid (martyr) of Hamas and the Palestinian Jihad is a religious, unmarried and unemployed male high school graduate between 18 and 27, with a relative or close friend who was killed, injured or brutalized by the Israelis.

Shahids do not volunteer; they are recommended by their religious teachers. Once selected, skilled field officers begin a highly regimented process of mental purification and military preparation.

The candidates, often from modest social backgrounds, are showered with rewards, confirming their long-established expectation that their suicide act will instantly upgrade their social status - and their family's. Indeed, the shahid's family is consistently awarded honors, praise and even generous sums of money.

The Tamil Tigers, seeking a state independent of the government of Sri Lanka, are also young, unmarried and unemployed, but they are trained to be more than "human bombs." Rohan Gunaratna, of Saint Andrews University, reports that the Tigers select male and female volunteers from its toughest combat battalions for their combat record, not from any religious rites or recommendations. Already fully socialized into a culture that glorifies death in action for the Tamil cause, they form fully integrated suicide units within the organization's secular nationalist army.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PPK), seeking an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey, conducted 15 suicide bombings between 1995 and 1999. All but four were by women age 17 to 27. They had no professional skills and were generally from large, poor, rural families steeped in a tradition of discrimination against women.

Most seemed motivated by devotion to their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and by the communal prestige they would earn, despite being women. The PPK prefers female bombers because bomb concealment is easier and women in the ranks do less well than men in the treks across the mountains.

According to Merari, no organization can create a person ready to die, but recruiters can identify and reinforce this predisposition by exploiting religion or cultural beliefs, including patriotism, hatred of the enemy and a profound sense of victimization.

After nine months of inconclusive fighting against the Russian military, Chechen rebels launched suicide bombings. One noted rebel leader reportedly declared, "I am going willingly to my death in the name of Allah and the freedom of the Chechen people."

In such instances, the institutionalization of suicide terrorism is temporary and conditional, prompted by an intense sense of crisis, conviction about the effectiveness of the tactic, and enthusiastic endorsement by the religious or ideologic community. Once the tactic becomes counter-productive, they have little difficulty suspending or ending it.

The perceived strength of suicide bombers is that they are lone fanatics who cannot be deterred; their weakness is the same. The key to countering suicide terrorists is to make the costs too high for their sponsoring institutions.

Sprinzak recommends political and economic sanctions against the terrorist organizations and their sponsoring communities along with coercive diplomacy. However, such political counterterrorism takes a long time to implement and the results are never certain.

Therefore, he suggests "enhancing" the political and economic battles with an "aggressive operational campaign" - a war adapted to exploit the Achilles heel of suicide terrorism: the large, operational infrastructure to which the terrorists belong.

Security services target the commanders and field officers who recruit and train the assailants and plan the attacks. Such counterterrorism requires networks of informers, constant monitoring of potential collaborators, close cooperation among international intelligence services, unrelenting harassment and attack on the terrorist infrastructure and interference with their sources of funding.

Erecting concrete barriers may seem ludicrously inadequate, but physical protection of potential target areas is said to serve two essential objectives: to reduce the suicide bomber's effectiveness and to deter future attacks.

Without evidence - and contrary to other things he says - Sprinzak contends that field commanders hesitate to risk losing such a precious resource against a target of reduced benefit (unless its psychological effect, as noted below, warrants the loss). Roadblocks, checkpoint guards, inspection teams, and dogs and artificial sniffing devices all are said to deter organizations from using suicide terrorism.

More important, perhaps: such measures reassure the public. Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare, and suicide terrorism, its ultimate expression. Therefore, counterterrorism must convince ordinary people that what is being done will protect them against being sitting ducks.

The belief that suicide bombers are ready to do anything and lose everything has fueled widespread fear that terrorists might acquire weapons of mass destruction, like those John Loofbourow discusses. Sprinzak calls that "hysteria." But he also says that terrorist organizations are cold and rational, and will continue to use lethal violence - including

weapons of mass destruction, if available - and suicide terrorists, if available, to achieve narrow political objectives.

Growing cooperation among worldwide intelligence agencies will have to counter the growing desperation of organizations that have little to lose but the lives of their martyrs.

Ed_Rudin@macnexus.org

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved