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Suicide, Terrorism, and Suicidal Terrorism: Basic Assumptions

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Abstract. This article provides a statistically deviant perspective (among many self-professed counter terrorism experts) on the novelty and value of suicide, terrorism, and suicidal terrorism.

The United States Government (USG)-led war on terrorism with global reach is currently under fire for its focus on military intervention against Iraq. Although some opponents of military intervention advance arguments on the immorality of war, the evil of violence, and the morality and ethics of pacifism, other opponents embrace war and violence--but not in the case at hand. Instead, they aver that military intervention against Iraq will impede the war against the strategic perpetrators of 9/11, remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda, and other formidable practitioners of terrorism who have myriad targets among East and West, North and South, and the sacred and the secular. Still other oppositional arguments comprise assertions that a military intervention against Iraq will exacerbate global terrorism and impede more dangerous threats from North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran.

Most supporters and opponents of the focus on Iraq knowingly or unknowingly embrace certain assumptions about suicide and terrorism as the two constructs coalesce in suicidal terrorism--the last a successful tactic of 9/11 and, as well, a long-term strategy whose success seems to have at least been achieved in the mid-term. (This latter success can most easily be observed in significant changes in government budgets bearing on security and intelligence that leave less resources for other government responsibilities, the passing of security and intelligence legislation that constrains civil and human rights, the quest for profits by corporations and contractors within the military-industrial complex that may trump objective security needs, and a sense of anxiety and malaise among segments of national and ethnic populations.)

It is a contention of this article that majority assumptions about suicide, terrorism, and suicidal terrorism may stand in the way of an understanding of suicidal terrorist perpetrators and of developing an implementing a successful counter-strategy.

One majority assumption about suicide is that it indicates psychopathology and/or extreme psychic pain. According to this majority assumption, suicide is also immoral, unethical, and unadaptive. As well, life is to be protected and its length desired and sought for in and of itself. Thus, people who take their lives are to be mourned and pitied.

Instead, a minority assumption is that suicide can be self-constructing even as it is body-destructing. According to this minority assumption, suicide can be desired and sought for in and of itself. People who take their lives are to be respected and their acts to be emulated. Suicide can be moral, ethical, and even the apotheosis of all that is the best of being human and of human life.

A majority assumption about terrorism is that it is an act of the cowardly that victimizes the innocent. According to this majority assumption, terrorism violates internationally accepted rules of war and conflict.

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A minority assumption is that terrorism is the apotheosis of any decision to engage in the threat or actualization of material destruction and the ending of life. Terrorism is an act of the courageous at least as much as are acts of violence supported by terrorism's opponents. And there are no innocent victims because all people are part of the problem or part of the solution in political conflict.

A majority assumption about suicidal terrorism is that it is an act of the brainwashed, of the True Believers (in the sense of misguided dogmatism), of the subhuman or less than human, of those whose moral and ethical compasses have imploded.

A minority assumption is that suicidal terrorist acts are symbols of loyalty to the political cause, of the non-narcissistic deference of the individual to the collective, and of giving one's life as much or as more than taking one's life.

A majority assumption of suicide, terrorism, and suicidal terrorism leads most counterterrorist authorities to engage in a war of attrition. In such a war, however, for every one aspiring suicidal terrorist cut down, others spring up to fill terrorist causes--even causes antithetical to those of the deceased terrorist of interest.

Instead, a successful counterterrorist war should be based, not on a body count of terrorists incarcerated or corpses and body parts buried or lying about, but on hearts, minds, and spirits dissuaded. Ultimately, more counterterrorist authorities must learn that in the world of suicidal terrorism love and hate can be interchangeable. (See Dale, S.F. (1988). Religious suicide in Islamic Asia: Anticolonial terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 32, 37-59; Hazani, M. (1993). Sacrificial immortality: Toward a theory of suicidal terrorism and related phenomena. In L. B. Boyer, & R. M. Boyer (Eds.). The psychoanalytic study of society, Vol. 18: Essays in honor of Alan Dundes. (pp. 415-442). Analytic Press, Inc.; Lachkar, J. (2002). The psychological make-up of a suicide bomber. Journal of Psychohistory, 29, 349-367; Stein, R. (2002). Le mal comme amour et liberation: L'etat d'esprit d'un terroriste religieux kamikaze. Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse, 66, 897-921; Waldman, A. (January 14, 2003). Suicide bombing masters: Sri Lankan rebels. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com.) (Keywords: Suicide, Terrorism.)