Trends. Facts and Fantasy on Suicidal Terrorism

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses perceptions of suicidal terrorism.

A political science professor at the University of Chicago (Pape, 2003) has recently and rightly compared common perceptions about suicidal terrorism with contrasting and uncommonly perceived facts. For example, a common perception is that there is a necessary linkage between suicidal terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. An uncommon fact is that the most frequently practiced suicidal terrorism in contemporary politics has been that by an anti-religion group—the Tamil Tigers—who were largely raised in Hindi families. Another common perception is that the goal of suicidal terrorism is to achieve some religious end or endpoint. The non-corresponding fact is that the goal of suicidal terrorism is most often to induce the withdrawal of military forces from territory deemed by the terrorists to be the terrorists’ homeland.

As to the best approach to be taken by the political states under attack by the perpetrators of suicidal terrorism, Pape’s approach to focus on domestic security and support for the least militant forces on the terrorists’ side may be incomplete. First, there may not be any significant difference between the so-called most and least militant. Second, there may need to be an intelligence component to proactively identify suicidal terrorist operations, planning, and support personnel and then a counterterrorist component to remove them as threats. Taking only a defensive posture may facilitate terrorist operational success and a corresponding belief in the ultimate political success of suicidal terrorism.


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