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Trends. Facts and Fantasy on Suicidal Terrorism

Editor

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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.

The good news may be that suicidal terrorism is not only or at all God's work. The bad news is that this fact can correspond to a more formidable threat. (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 & Boyer, R. Mc. (Eds.). *The psychoanalytic study of society*, Vol. 18: Essays in honor of Alan Dundes. (pp. 415-442). Analytic Press, Inc.; Kfir, N. (2002). Understanding suicidal terror through humanistic and existential psychology. In C. E. Stout, (Ed.). *The psychology of terrorism: A public understanding*. Vol. 1. Psychological dimensions to war and peace. (pp. 143-157). Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.; Pape, R.A. (September 22, 2003). Dying to kill us. *The New York Times*, p. A19.)

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