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Terrorism and Political Violence
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20

The Political Power of Martyrdom

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Published online: 15 Jun 2012.

To cite this article: Sophia Moskalenko & Clark McCauley (2012) The Political Power of Martyrdom, Terrorism and Political Violence, 24:3, 504-510, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2012.684596

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.684596

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Terrorism and Political Violence, 24:504–510, 2012
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 0954-6553 print/1556-1836 online
DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2012.684596

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Review Essay

The Political Power of Martyrdom

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Alice LoCicero and Samuel J. Sinclair. *Creating Young Martyrs: Conditions That Make Dying in a Terrorist Attack Seem Like a Good Idea.* Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008. xvii + 110 pp., notes to 113, references to 118, index to 122, $39.95 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-275-99690-1.

Jon Cole and Benjamin Cole. *Martyrdom: Radicalization and Terrorist Violence Among British Muslims.* London: Pennant Books, 2009. 312 pp., glossary xi–xvi, bibliography 313–317, £9.99 paperback. ISBN: 978-1906015206.

Assaf Moghadam. *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xi + 268 pp., appendix to 275, notes to 309, bibliography to 333, index to 343, $48.00 hardcover. ISBN: 10: 0-8018-9055-1.

Suicide bombings may not be the most common form of terrorist attack, but they probably draw the most attention. Here we review three books which aim to illuminate jihadist martyrdom as choice and tactic.

Creating Young Martyrs is an informal collection of the authors' memories, experiences, and ideas regarding terrorism in general and child soldiers of terrorism in particular. The preface lays out three memories that explain the roots of the authors' interest in terrorism. These roots, as for many Americans, reach back to the tragedy of September 11, 2001 as experienced through the mass media.

The first chapter takes the reader with one of the authors to Sri Lanka to collect first-hand accounts of children's experiences in war zones. The aim was to understand how children may join terrorist groups or become child soldiers in a civil

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conflict. The authors advance the idea that the constant danger and stress of war turns children into fighters. However, the children who were interviewed by the authors were not themselves soldiers or terrorists; in fact, they had a much better life than most Sri Lankan children, living in a boarding school with a very secure campus. Not one of them had been involved in any type of warfare.

Chapter 2 is titled ''The Social Science of Terrorism''; in it the authors describe a conference they attended in Spain, interleaving references to literature from psychology and psychiatry with the proceedings of the conference. An unfortunate section on ''biological determinism of aggression'' brings up Freud's theory of the aggression instinct, and uses terrorism and aggression interchangeably, to suggest that the effects of overpopulation on aggression point to birth control as a solution for terrorism.

Chapter 3 is about child development, and it reviews some classic psychological perspectives, including Piaget's, linking them to the authors' ideas about how children may become terrorists. Describing the Concrete Operational Stage, for example, authors note that ''It would be quite tempting to militias to recruit or kidnap children at this thought level, because they would be amenable to a strong belief in the rightness of the cause, the people, and the religion'' (p. 39).

Chapter 4 begins with the promise of some data collected by the authors in Sri Lanka, but instead turns to a thought experiment (the authors call it a model) exploring how a child might develop in a war-affected area. ''You may or may not be allowed to ask questions of the elders. You must be respectful. You do not expect grown-up people to be happy, and on the rare occasion when they are, it does not last long'' (p. 61). After following the imaginary child all the way to a militants' camp, the authors conclude, ''From all that we have read, all we have learned, all we have been told and witnessed for ourselves, this seems like a credible story of the development of a child soldier, who might volunteer for a militia. Once in the militia, this soldier might be persuaded to become a member of an elite suicide squad'' (p. 70).

Chapter 5 is titled ''Most Victims of War Are Civilians,'' a claim that is hard to argue with but that barely hints at the chapter's varied content. There are thoughts here about the dangers of nuclear threats, including the dangers to children of becoming aware of nuclear arsenals. ''We cannot say with certainty exactly how awareness of the possibility of nuclear disaster translates into an added element in the decisions of children who become terrorists, but we can say with some certainty that the possibility of a meaningless death looms large when one considers a nuclear attack. This may, for example, make planned death less unthinkable'' (p. 76).

The chapter goes on to describe some theory from ecological psychology and cross-cultural psychology, some material from interviews in Sri Lanka, another thought experiment about ''how distrust of news contributes to recruitment of children in war-affected areas,'' and then comes back to the nuclear threat in sections titled, ''Nuclear Taboo,'' ''Contemporary Nuclear Threat,'' ''Nuclear Threat,'' ''Some Evidence and Scenarios for Possible Nuclear Attack on the United States,'' ''Could a Terrorist Organization Acquire a Nuclear Weapon?'' and ''Could a Nuclear Weapon Be Transported to the United States?''

Chapter 6 provides the book's conclusion, and its subtitle suggests ''Envisioning a Nonviolent Path to Peace.'' Again a mixed bag, the chapter offers an experiential recollection of an interview with ''the Fisherman'' in Sri Lanka, then a discussion of the metaphor ''bad guys'' in children's play and as used in the title of an article in

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The Economist, then a section advancing the authors' proposal for "Winning Hearts and Minds." Here, however, the reader may find troubling the second sentence, "Child terrorists, however, as we have seen, are more like child soldiers than like adult terrorists" (p. 104). Having in fact seen neither child soldiers nor child terrorists in previous chapters, much less adult terrorists, the reader may find that similarities and differences among them remain unclear.

This final chapter concludes with a story recounted to the authors by a soldier who had on one occasion pointed a gun at a child, fearing the child was posing a threat. The soldier remained troubled by this experience. So readers may be troubled by the story, not least because the authors offer neither data nor a coherent theory with which to understand child terrorists.

Martyrdom: Radicalization and Terrorist Violence Among British Muslims is based on news accounts of 54 "British-born or -raised Muslims who have been convicted of acts of terrorist violence, preparing for such acts, as well as those who died in suicide-bomb attacks" (p. 8). It should be said immediately that the subtitle offers a more accurate description of this book. The authors interpret personal histories of these individuals with psychological concepts and theories, including alienation, social comparison, identity conflict, group dynamics, compliance, internalization, slippery-slope, groupthink, and socio-emotional and task leadership.

Their conclusions are generally consistent with current thinking about radicalization to terrorism. Terrorists are psychologically normal. The transition to radical thinking is usually gradual, although the turn to violence may be sudden. Experience of poverty, unemployment, and discrimination are less important sources of radicalization than violence in Muslim countries, but exposure to video representations of this violence appears in most of the personal histories reviewed. "Because terrorist recruitment in the UK is a 'bottom-up' process of radicalised individuals seeking to join the *jihad*, facilitators who can make the connections between would-be *jihadis* and established *jihadi* and terrorist groups play a key role" (p. 203).

Chapter 9, "Martyrdom" is the only chapter in the book that focuses on martyrdom. (The last chapter, Chapter 10, "Conclusion: The Rationality of Martyrdom," is a general overview of the book). Following Durkheim's typology, the authors see martyrdom as a form of altruistic suicide, an act of hope rather than an act of despair. Beyond the martyr's act, the authors appeal, *inter alia*, to ideas about how martyrdom is constructed by a community and about how a well-constructed martyrdom mobilizes new supporters for the martyr's cause.

"As it is the wider community that assigns the status of martyr to the individual rather than the individual themselves, the mainstream discourse within a community creates the conditions for martyrdom. Hezbollah ensures that their members who are killed during combat or in 'martyrdom' operations are remembered and revered by the community. Posters are put up and streets are renamed after those have been martyred. 'Martyrdom' videos are made and aired on news channels and the internet. ... acquiring this status could be a powerful motivation and therefore achieving such status will attract some individuals" (pp. 265–266).

Martyrdom also attracts more general support for the martyr's cause."... it becomes impossible to ignore what the martyr believes in. It [martyrdom] is also intended to have a shaming effect on those Muslims who realize that this act has been committed on their behalf. The act of martyrdom therefore also presents a challenge to those Muslims who have not joined the fight" (p. 260).

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These considerations leave the authors in a bit of a quandary, because they believe that UK Muslims do not support terrorist violence. "The so-called 'martyrs' are not celebrated within the Muslim population of the UK as they are in the Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka, and Lebanon. Indeed there is widespread renunciation from the majority of the Muslim population for acts of terrorism in the UK. Instead the memory of those who die is kept alive within the collective memory of the radicalized networks of which they were part and the *ummah*" (pp. 267–268).

But if only a local radicalized network is needed to valorize martyrdom, then what is to be made of the idea that "it is the wider community that assigns the status of martyr to the individual"? The first thing to notice is that the authors do not provide data about just how and to what degree the Muslim population renounces terrorists as well as terrorism. Perhaps community approval of the goal—defending Islam—is enough to support martyrdom despite community disapproval of terrorist violence as a means. Perhaps martyrs can see themselves as the vanguard of a community that does not yet fully recognize the danger Islam faces.

The strength of the book is in the details of personal histories of UK jihadi terrorists, and the use of psychological theory and research to understand how normal individuals make the transition to terrorism. If the conceptual apparatus is not always clear and consistent, the book at least points the way to better understanding of a complex phenomenon. It is a pity that the book does not include an index, which would have made it more useful for both students and scholars.

The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks is not easy to evaluate. The author offers case history material that is engaging and full of interesting details. The theoretical frame, however, is uncertain—first in relation to relevant data and finally in relation to the book's conclusion. A quick review of the chapters gives some sense of the difficulties.

A wide-ranging Introduction defines the behavior of interest as suicide missions, suicide attacks, and suicide operations (SMs) by non-state actors, offers some historical examples starting from the Old Testament story of Sampson felling the temple, and distinguishes individual, organizational, and environmental explanations of SMs. On page 26 a thesis is advanced: "This book argues that suicide attacks by Salafi Jihadist groups constitute an entirely new pattern of suicide attacks—the globalization of martyrdom . . ." The chapter ends with a critique of Robert Pape's *Dying to Win* idea that suicide attacks are mostly a response to foreign occupation (citing SMs without foreign occupation in Indonesia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia) and a critique of Mia Bloom's *Dying to Kill* idea that suicide attacks are a form of competition for communal support (citing Muslims killing Muslims).

Chapter 2 uses the University of Haifa database of 1269 suicide attacks from 1981 to April 2007 to show a large increase in SMs, from about ten in 1997 to nearly 300 in 2005 and in 2006. (Surprisingly, only 33% of targets are civilians, that is, only 33% of attacks would qualify as terrorism by most definitions.) Similarly, the number of organizations using suicide attacks increased from three in 1997 to eighteen in 2005. "The cause of this unprecedented rise in the number of suicide attacks, the number of organizations involved in suicide bombings, and their increasing lethality lies in two related and mutually reinforcing phenomena: the rise of Al Qaeda and its guiding ideology, Salafi Jihad" (p. 43).

The most natural interpretation of this claim is that the appeal of Salafi Jihad ideology grew in parallel with the rise of Al Qaeda, over the same time period. Against this interpretation, however, most observers would probably argue that

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Al Qaeda "Central" has been declining in reach and capability since the 9/11 attacks, whereas suicide attacks hit new highs in 2005 and 2007.

The author takes another tack. "In this book, I demonstrate the rise of Salafi Jihad by examining the groups that have employed suicide missions. To demonstrate the close links between Al Qaeda and Salafi Jihad, on the one hand, and the internationalization of SMs, on the other hand, I proceeded to code all forty-three groups that have employed SMs between 1981 and April 5, 2007, based on their guiding ideology or doctrine" (p. 49). This coding then shows that the number of SMs by groups with Salafi Jihadist ideology increased from about 20 in years 1996-2000 to 200 in years 2001–2007. Similarly the number of countries suffering suicide attacks increased from three in 1997 to fifteen in 2005 (but only nine in 2006).

One issue here is the coding of groups as Salafi Jihadist. Any *one* of four criteria was sufficient to code a group as Salafi Jihadist (AQ by name, uses violence aiming for transnational caliphate, labels other Muslims as *takfir* heretics, or "internalized the worldview of Al Qaeda and global jihad"). Conceptually, the category of *Salafi Jihadist group* is made somewhat unclear by a definition in which only one of four different criteria is sufficient for membership. It would be useful to know how well different coders agree in applying these criteria.

Perhaps more problematic is that Salafi Jihadist groups were not the only groups showing increased use of suicide attacks. Taken together, mainstream Islamist and nationalist separatist groups were responsible for about 90 SMs in 1996-2005 and about 180 SMs in 2001–2007. These other groups were thus responsible for nearly as many suicide attacks in 2001–2007 as Salafi Jihadist groups (180 vs. 200). Thus use of suicide attacks seems to have increased faster for Salafi Jihadist groups than for other groups. But the increase for non-Salafi groups suggests that "the cause of the unprecedented rise in suicide attacks" cannot be only "the rise of Al Qaeda and its guiding ideology, Salafi Jihad" (p. 43).

Nor is the increase in number of countries suffering suicide attacks clearly linked with Salafi Jihad. Demonstrating this link would require showing that Salafi Jihadist groups are using SMs in more countries over time, whereas mainstream Islamist and nationalist separatist groups are not. In the absence of this kind of analysis, it is premature to claim that "Whereas traditionally both religious and secular groups have perpetrated SMs, Salafi Jihadist groups have overwhelmingly planned and executed the new globalized SMs, as has been demonstrated earlier in the chapter" (p. 57).

The remaining chapters are not directly relevant to the thesis that the increase in suicide attacks is a new problem of globalizing attacks by Al Qaeda and other Salafi Jihadist groups. Chapter 2 tells the origins of Al Qaeda and its use of suicide attacks; Chapter 3 reviews Salafi Jihad ideology and its veneration of martyrdom; Chapter 4 recounts the transition from Al Qaeda "Central" to Al Qaeda "Franchise"; Chapter 5 describes Salafi-Jihad suicide attacks in eleven Muslim countries from Morocco to Uzbekistan; Chapter 6 focuses on the UK and the 7/7 bombings; and Chapter 7 focuses on suicide attacks in Iraq. These chapters offer good case material and some unusual details. Cited from the 9/11 Report, for instance, is the fact that the "muscle hijackers" for 9/11 received desensitization training: "Their trainer even had them butcher a sheep and a camel with a knife for training" (p. 92).

The Conclusion begins with a reprise of the thesis, "The rise of Al Qaeda and its guiding ideology are at the root of the globalization of SMs" (pp. 251–252), but then moves quickly to some surprising qualifications on pages 254–255. "Though

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ideology matters a great deal for the rising global appeal of Salafi Jihadist suicide bombers, there is no evidence—and no attempt to argue—that ideology is the cause of suicide attacks per se. The causes of suicide attacks are complex and must be found in the interplay of personal motivations, strategic and tactical objectives of the sponsoring groups, and the larger societal and structural factors affecting the bomber and the group. . . . If ideology is not the cause of suicide attacks per se, then what is its role? This study suggests that ideology plays an important role in that it helps reduce the suicide attacker's reservations about perpetrating the act of killing and dying. Specifically, ideology fills two roles: it helps the suicide bomber justify the act, and it helps the suicide attacker to morally disengage himself from his act and from the victim."

This is a very reasonable and we believe mainstream analysis of suicide attacks, but what is left of the author's thesis after these qualifications? The bottom line seems to be that ideology is not a cause but only a rationalization of suicide attacks. Indeed we have suggested the author's evidence does not support his claim that "The cause of this unprecedented rise in the number of suicide attacks . . . lies in two related and mutually reinforcing phenomena: the rise of Al Qaeda and its guiding ideology, Salafi Jihad" (p. 43). In his concluding chapter the author indicates that he does not accept this claim himself.

Taken together, the three books indicate that martyrdom makes a good title but analysis of martyrdom is scarce. LoCicero and Sinclair focus on children's participation in combat and terrorism; martyrdom appears in their title but gets little attention in their book. Cole and Cole focus on trajectories to terrorism, but only a few of the 54 individuals they studied were suicide bombers and only one of their chapters tackles the definition and veneration of martyrdom in Islam. Moghadam counts suicide bombers but his analysis is at the group level where he examines Al Qaeda's ideology of martyrdom as the key to understanding why suicide bombing has increased.

We suspect that martyrdom appears in titles because it attracts attention. The source of this attraction should be part of the analysis, which needs to engage three related issues.

First we need to understand how some individuals are willing to risk or give their lives in terrorist attacks. Second we need to understand how a particular death is constructed as martyrdom, that is, how a particular death comes to be seen as sacrifice for a cause rather than psychopathology, mistake, escape, or status-seeking. Finally, we need to understand how a successfully constructed martyrdom moves others to increased exertion and self-sacrifice for the same cause.

The first issue is about action; the second is about mass opinion, and the third is again about action. Most research on suicide bombers has focused on the individual level—how individuals can be persuaded to take on a martyrdom role. Much less is known about mass construction of martyrdom and its mobilizing power—the second and third issues. Least of all is known about the relationship between these two, how mass opinion accepting a particular death as a martyrdom can lead others to increase their commitment to the martyr's cause.

The three books reviewed here show the difficulty of engaging these issues in an integrated way. Two of the books, like most of the literature on terrorism, focus mainly on individual trajectories to self-sacrifice. LoCicero and Sinclair want to find the developmental origins of child-soldier terrorists. Cole and Cole work from case histories of UK jihadists, although they do get beyond individual psychology in their

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recognition that "it is the wider community that assigns the status of martyr to the individual" and in their concern for how much support UK Muslims offer Muslim terrorists. In the third book, Moghadam focuses on terrorist groups rather than individuals and brings in ideology as a factor in producing suicide bombers. It is however the ideology of terrorist groups that Moghadam is interested in, not the ideology of mass opinion.

In short, these books do not tell us much about how martyrdom is constructed or moves others, and tell us almost nothing about how the war of ideas relates to the war on terrorists. Consider a practical question about this relation.

Polling shows that about seventy percent of UK Muslims believe that the war on terrorism is actually a war on Islam.[1] Polling also shows that about fifteen percent of UK Muslims believe that suicide attacks on civilians are often or sometimes justified in defense of Islam.[2] Suppose a new intervention in the war of ideas were to cut these percentages by eighty percent, so that only fourteen percent of UK Muslims saw the war on terrorism as a war on Islam and only three percent of UK Muslims believed that suicide attacks on civilians are justified in defense of Islam. Suppose also that this decline in sympathy for terrorism in defense of Islam is perceived, more or less accurately, by UK Muslims. What would be the effect on UK martyrdom attacks? Would attacks go down or up?

This question is beyond the reach of research that focuses mostly on individual trajectories to terrorism and occasionally looks at terrorist group ideology and tactics. The unexplored link between radical opinion and radical action is the key to understanding how the war of ideas affects deployment of martyrs.

Notess

1. See Table 7 in ICM poll at http://www.icmresearch.com/pdfs/2004_november_guardian_muslims_poll.pdf.
2. See p. 57 in Pew poll at http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/253.pdf.

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