



Do Suicide Terrorists Have Personality Problems? A Review of: "Ariel Merari. Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism. Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin. The Banality of Suicide Terrorism: The Naked Truth About the Psychology of Islamic Suicide Bombing."

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Book Reviews

Do Suicide Terrorists Have Personality Problems?

Ariel Merari. *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010. 315 pp., \$42.95 cloth. ISBN: 978-0-19-518102-9.

Nancy Hartvelt Kobrin. *The Banality of Suicide Terrorism: The Naked Truth About the Psychology of Islamic Suicide Bombing*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2010. 165 pp., \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 978-1-59797-504-9.

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No one has studied suicide terrorists longer than psychologist Ariel Merari, who has had the advantage of working in Israel during three decades in which suicide terrorism has been all too common. It is impossible to summarize the rich evidence and insight in this book; instead we note the highlights of each chapter and then examine in more detail the startling possibility raised in Chapter 5 that there is a psychological profile that distinguishes suicide bombers from other terrorists.

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction to the book, and includes the author's definition of suicide terrorism: "... a person intentionally kills himself (or herself) for the purpose of killing others, in the service of a political or ideological goal" (p. 9). The emphasis on intention, purpose, and goals makes suicide terrorism necessarily a psychological phenomenon requiring psychological explanation.

Chapter 2 looks at a range of examples of suicide for a cause, beginning with Sampson and ending with Afghanistan. Consideration of Japanese kamikaze attacks in WWII brings out a limitation of the previous definition: kamikaze attacks "do not quite fit the definition of suicide terrorism, but can provide pertinent insights." Kamikaze attacks "were conducted in the framework of a conventional war as part of an organized, large-scale military activity, and within their unit formations rather than as individuals" (p. 22).

Given the author's later emphasis on organizational factors in suicide terrorism, and the fact that some jihadist attacks are team efforts carried out by multiple suicide bombers, the line between kamikaze psychology and suicide terrorist psychology may be even thinner than represented. Tamil Tiger suicide bombings, for instance, are included in the author's data base (Table 2.1), but "The Tamil Tigers reportedly selected the suicides from among their fighting forces, which were organized like a regular army" (p. 266).

Chapter 2 offers a variety of interesting data, beginning with a year-by-year accounting of 2,622 suicide attacks (2,937 bombers) from 1981 to 2008 (Figure

2.1) and a country-by-country accounting of these attacks (Table 2.1). No source is cited for these data, or for later year-by-year counts of suicide attacks in Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Presumably the source is the author's own data base, begun in 1983, that is cited at the beginning of Chapter 3. It is worth noting that terrorism research is slower than it might be when important publications depend on data that are not publicly available.

Chapter 3 examines demographic characteristics of suicide terrorists around the world, to the extent that these are known. A rough profile emerges: 95% have been male, 89% under 30 years of age, 82% not married, and 91% Muslim.

Chapter 4 presents the results of interviews with the families of 36 Palestinian suicide bombers. Most parents were sad to have lost a child but at the same time proud of their child's suicide operation. Parents report that bombers had earlier shown high levels of political militancy: 15 had lost friends in the struggle, 18 had been in Israeli jails, 27 had been active in Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad before their operations.

Chapter 5 is in many ways the centerpiece of the book. Fifteen would-be suicide bombers are compared with a control group of twelve terrorists imprisoned for offences unrelated to suicide bombing. The control group was matched to would-be suicides on the basis of age, time spent in jail, education, marital status, and organizational affiliation. The two groups were compared using the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the House-Tree-Person Drawing test, a shortened version of the California Personality Inventory (CPI), and an interview with a clinical psychologist fluent in Arabic.

Merari finds systematic differences between the two groups. In particular, more would-be suicide bombers (60%) than controls (17%) achieved a diagnosis of Avoidant-Dependent Personality Disorder. More would-be suicide bombers displayed suicidal tendencies (40% vs. 0%), and more would-be suicide bombers had depressive symptoms (53% vs. 8%). Interestingly, fewer suicide bombers displayed psychopathic tendencies (0% vs. 25%) and fewer would-be suicide bombers displayed impulsive-unstable tendencies (27% vs. 67%).

Chapter 6 reports study of a category so rare as to defy considerations of representativeness. Fourteen regional commanders of Palestinian militant groups, responsible for suicide attacks in Israel and the Occupied Territories, cooperated in interviews and psychological testing. Most said they were not themselves ready to volunteer for martyrdom and that "they would not take mentally unstable candidates, suicidal people who want to die for personal reasons, and criminals" (p. 159). All agreed that the predominant motive for suicide bombers was more nationalist than religious: striking back against Israeli treatment of Palestinians was the driver; religion was for some an important reinforcer. About half their operations used a self-initiated volunteer; half used volunteers solicited by the organization. The drop-out rate was higher for those solicited (56% vs 16%).

Chapter 7 tracks Palestinian public opinion about suicide attacks on Jewish civilians in relation to the numbers of such attacks. Very useful in this regard, Appendix 1 provides results of 82 polls conducted among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza between 1993 and 2009. Palestinian support for suicide attacks went up before attacks increased in the second intifada, but attacks declined before support declined in 2005. Merari makes a strong argument that public support is necessary but not sufficient for militants to increase use of suicide terrorism.

Chapter 8 asks whether understanding of suicide terrorism can be informed by studies of ordinary suicides. After a review that begins with Durkheim's conception of "altruistic suicide," the brief answer is: not much. Ordinary suicides are individual choices, whereas suicide terrorists are recruited and deployed by organizers who try to avoid suicidal individuals. Here we encounter the downside of the label *suicide terrorism*: suicide terrorists are usually not suicidal. Most suicides are individuals escaping from something, often the crushing pain of depression, whereas most suicide terrorists are not suicidal in this sense. Thus Europeans are more likely to talk about *Kamikaze terrorism* and of course Muslims talk about *martyrdom operations*.

Chapter 9 critiques current explanations of suicide terrorism, naming names and quoting claims that Merari disputes. Those who have written about suicide terrorism will hasten to read this chapter.

Finally, Chapter 10 offers the author's own conclusions about suicide terrorism. Conceptually the author follows Mohammed Hafez in dividing explanations into three categories: individual psychology, group dynamics, and mass opinion. At the individual level, Merari reprises the evidence of Chapter 5 that suicide terrorists have personality traits described as dependent-avoidant (60% of interviewees) and impulsive-unstable (27%). At the group level, readers might wish more distinction between face-to-face group dynamics (p. 266: "Cohabitation increases commitment to the group and the effectiveness of group pressure") and organizational dynamics (p. 267: "Presumably, the difference between transient groups of a few members and large organizations is mainly in the recruiting process, and much less so in the social pressure that they exert to keep candidates for suicide attacks on track").

In a brief consideration of countermeasures, Merari argues that targeted killing of militant leaders, military incursions into Palestinian areas, and separation walls have short-term value in decreasing Jewish Israeli casualties but may have longer-term costs in the hearts and minds of Palestinians.

Although every chapter offers rich information and insight, most readers will focus on the argument in Chapter 5 that, contrary to current wisdom, there is a psychological profile that distinguishes suicide bombers from others.

Readers might wish to know the criteria by which these diagnoses and tendencies were established. In particular, we suspect that many readers will not be familiar with the diagnosis of Avoidant-Dependent Personality Disorder, a relatively recent addition to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. By current definition (*DSM IV-TR*, p. 689), "Personality traits are diagnosed as a Personality Disorder only when they are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress." In other words, personality traits become personality disorder only when the traits interfere with daily functioning or cause unhappiness. But the 15 would-be suicide bombers studied by Merari did not seek out psychological help and therefore technically cannot qualify for diagnosis of personality disorder. There may be many with the same personality traits who, like the would-be bombers, would not qualify for diagnosis of Avoidant-Dependent Personality Disorder. The prevalence of Avoidant-Dependent personality (currently unknown) could become an issue if security officers were to start looking for a particular constellation of personality traits.

Another issue arises from the diagnosis itself. Avoidant Personality Disorder indicates an unusual reluctance to take personal risks or to engage in any new

activity because it may be embarrassing (Criterion 7 of *DSM IV-TR*). APD is characterized by excessive attachment to friends; the primary concern is not to be humiliated or embarrassed. In Dependent Personality Disorder, individuals tend to be passive and allow others to take initiative and assume responsibility for their lives (Criterion 2 of *DSM IV-TR*). When APD and DPD are found together in the same individual, the clinical picture is of a person completely engulfed by the will of another person or group, unwilling and unable to express and assert his or her opinion for fear of criticism or embarrassment. This picture does not easily fit the report of Palestinian organizers of suicide attacks (Chapter 6) that about half of their suicide bombers were self-initiated volunteers.

Even if would-be suicide bombers are indeed suffering from Avoidant-Dependent Personality Disorder, this discovery might not offer much practical assistance to security officers. The manifestation of personality disorders such as Avoidant or Dependent can be subtle, the etiology is uncertain, and the treatment is, at best, lengthy and unpredictable. There are no salient symptoms or signs, and no cure. If Avoidant-Dependent Personality Disorder is indeed common among suicide bombers, this result might be an important advance in understanding suicide terrorism but still some distance short of a profile useful for security officers.

As already noted, there is much more in this book than can be represented in the highlights touched on in this review. Every chapter puts the reader in touch with the perspective of an author with unmatched experience in studying suicide terrorism. Among rich insights and information, the psychological testing results are at once the most interesting and the weakest material. Given the small number of interviewees, all Palestinian, questions can be raised about the generalizability of both the data and the interpretations relating to the psychology of suicide bombers. But in this domain Merari has replaced nothing with something, and there can be no doubt that future research on suicide terrorism will build on this book.

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A very different book, *The Banality of Suicide Terrorism*, also argues that suicide terrorism can be understood as pathology. Dr. Nancy Kobrin is a psychoanalyst and counterterrorism consultant. Her thesis is that Muslim suicide terrorists are the result of defective child rearing by mothers who are themselves the victims of abuse by husbands and brothers. "Islamic suicide terrorism can be understood as a new variant of an old problem – domestic violence – that has existed since time immemorial across many cultures" (p. 1). "This book explains Islamic suicide terrorism as displaced rage against the 'Early Mother' of childhood because the young mother in these cultures has been so utterly devalued, abused and traumatized as a child that when she becomes a mother, often at a young age, she is compromised" (p. 3).

The author argues that this kind of rage produces every kind of terrorist, not just suicide terrorists. "They [Islamic suicide terrorists] are enraged, and it is estimated 1 percent of the nearly 1.5 billion Muslims become violent jihadis. That is a significant number of jihadis" (p. 22).

This book boldly contests the low estate of psychoanalytic theory in current social science, and offers a view of terrorism and suicide terrorism that aims to integrate both sociological and psychological insights. Readers will likely agree that 15 million jihadis would be a significant problem.