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# Suicide Bombing – The Argument over Motives

Robert Pape's "Dying to Win" and "Cutting the Fuse" have cast long shadows across terrorism studies. The texts' territory-centered explanations for suicide bombing remain seminal yet also provoke questions. The ISN's Peter Faber, for example, wonders if the explanations are comprehensive enough.

By Peter Faber for ISN

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As terrorism studies both proliferated and matured after 9/11, inevitable controversies arose. Of the 109 definitions of terrorism identified by Alex Schmid (with their up to 22 subparts), which ones were we to embrace and/or reject? Then, who were we to believe – Bruce Hoffman, who argued later in the decade that "al Quada Prime" remained a potent, centralized and hierarchical force, or Marc Sageman, who claimed that terrorism was increasingly being pursued by a self-organizing (and therefore undeterrable) "bunch of guys." As prominent as these disputes were, they had their equal in the controversy surrounding suicide bombing.

The lightning rod for this dispute was the University of Chicago's Dr Robert Pape, a protégé of the well-known political scientist, John Mearsheimer. Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005) and his follow-on *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (2011), which he co-authored with James "Ken" Feldman, are must-read texts on the phenomenon of suicide bombing. In the case of *Dying to Win*, however, the study was not merely influential – it was a "game changer." It basically defined the debate in this subcategory of terrorism studies.

## ***Dying to Win's* Thesis and its Virtues**

What Robert Pape did in his pioneering work was to introduce analytical rigor into the study of suicide terrorism. He compiled a database of all the suicide terrorist attacks committed worldwide from 1980 to 2000, which totaled 187. After sifting through the data, Pape then concluded that the largely anecdotal explanations used to bound suicide bombing were mere opinions wrapped in speculations. (These putative explanations included poverty or low per capita income, a lack of civil liberties, social estrangement, etc.) Indeed, Pape's statistical analysis pointed him in another direction.

He concluded that suicide bombing was first and foremost a political strategy. It was, and remains, a reasoned and premeditated response to foreign occupation, particularly if the occupiers are religiously and culturally different from the host society. Second, it was (and remains) a reasoned and premeditated response to the long-term support provided by the United States to undemocratic regimes. And finally, it was (and remains) a reasoned and premeditated response because in this

instance suicide attacks actually work – i.e., they can influence democracies to change their policies and to withdraw from occupied territories.

Pape's bold thesis – that suicide bombing represents "an existential rejection of oppression" – soon had its detractors, as we will discuss shortly, but its virtues remain intact. For one thing, he does not "pathologize" suicide bombing. He does not, in other words, immediately demonize or stigmatize the bomber's behavior; nor does he negate his or her humanity or idealism. Instead, he insists the bomber is rational, and that he or she lives in the quotidian world of politics rather than the spectral world of utopian dreams. Second, he kept the thorny issue of religion out of the picture – new-era terrorism does not have unprecedented theological or apocalyptic underpinnings that we necessarily have to consider. Finally, Pape denied that contemporary terrorism is a radical departure from past norms and practices, which means that the way we govern and adjudicate ourselves does not have to be significantly revised, as certain members of the Bush Administration argued.

Now, what is a virtue to some is of course a vice to others, particularly if that virtue has policy implications. In the case of Pape's "virtues" there were two implications which raised the dander of certain policy advocates. First, if contemporary terrorism is not a radical departure from the norm, then our discomfort with the "stretching" of laws in the name of security is both justified and appropriate. Second, and even more important, is Pape's ultimate claim that "over 95% of . . . suicide attacks are in response to foreign occupation." Implicit in this conclusion, at least in the case of the United States, is a dual criticism of Washington's seeming insistence on its "planetary rights to interference," as Scott Atran has put it, and its willingness to support Israel's settlement policies in the West Bank. Rightly or wrongly, these implications then led either to upright, on-the-merits criticisms of *Dying to Win* or to outright polemical assaults.

### **The Critics React - Bombing to Win's Alleged Flaws**

Despite *Dying to Win*'s virtues, there were those who were quick to highlight its limitations. We can cluster a high percentage of them around four rebuttals.

1. *A methodological rebuttal* – As can be imagined, the methodological complaints about *Dying to Win* were inevitable. Four Princeton professors, for example, sniffed in May 2008 that Pape's data "are only minimally informative about the relationship between the strategic environment and organizations' decisions to use suicide terror tactics." In turn, Atran reminded us, not unjustifiably, that "statistical regularity or predictability alone can only indicate correlations but never demonstrates cause." Third, James Kiras registered a dual complaint – 1) Pape "repeatedly selects data from single sources to support particular assertions when other sources of data, used together, could provide more rigorous and useful insights into the phenomenon of suicide bombing," and 2) he "codes his data on suicide attacks according to a loose set of criteria." Obviously, these alleged methodological sins (and more) permitted the critics, both well-intentioned and not, to question some of Pape's broader conclusions about the utility of suicide terrorism and the reasons behind it.

2. *A frameworking rebuttal* – Closely aligned with the above methodological or coding complaints were concerns about how Pape went about framing his study. One critic fretted about his "choice of the term *suicide terrorism*, rather than suicide attacks, suicide missions, or suicide operations." Such parsing may seem trivial, but since many of the attacks Pape lists in his dataset are actually against military targets, the terms he uses may "fail to meet the most widely accepted understanding of terrorism, which is violence waged against civilians."

3. *A political rebuttal* – Pape tries to universalize a phenomenon (terrorism) that actually has local characteristics and histories, or so multiple critics have observed. And by extension, JS Piven claims, he over-concentrates his sample on disputes that flourished in the highly politicized Cold War and

immediate post-Cold War eras. This sampling tilt, which underplays the "irrational" and non-political components of current terrorism, then causes Pape to distort the available statistical data, or so the argument goes. It also blinds him to the possibility of suicide assaults being driven by broader strategic goals. Why can't the goal be to increase an organization's political "market share," asks Atran, rather than expelling foreigners from occupied soil? Why indeed.

4. *A cultural-religious rebuttal* – To minimize or misrepresent the role of "religion" in suicide bombing may be laudable in some quarters, argues David Cook, but it is also intellectually dishonest. Even the secular Tamil Tigers used, as Piven puts it, "modalities that are deeply rooted in the lifestyles and religious practices of Tamils in India and Sri Lanka" to attract followers and sympathizers. In other words, religious language, frameworks and culture have been systematically expropriated by "normal" and suicide terrorists in order to legitimize their actions and to spread their appeal. At a minimum, applying a religious overlay to terrorist actions provides multiple benefits, as Piven notes further – it confers divine justification, a demand for divine obedience, a threat of divine wrath, the sanctification of death and the "purifying" acts that lead up to it, the threat of mass punishment through the arm of God, the transformation of killing into a heroic apotheosis, etc. Basically, the critics charge, you really have to ignore the elephant in the room not to recognize the explicit theological discourse being used to justify suicide bombing and current terrorism in general. The bombers may or may not be religious, but the rhetoric invoked is often (if not outright predominantly) religious in tone.

### **Updating the Thesis - *Cutting the Fuse***

Since suicide bombings increased as the 2000s wore on, and since Pape had the resources available to expand his dataset further, he worked with Ken Feldman to update his earlier findings and conclusions. The result was *Cutting the Fuse*, which is based on a dataset of 2,200 suicide bombing cases rather than the original 180. (Note: The number of suicide attacks that occurred from 2004-2009 were 500% more than from 1980-2003 combined. Yes, this increase was largely attributable to assaults in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but *Cutting the Fuse* does provide case studies on the seeming causes of suicide terrorism elsewhere – i.e., Pakistan, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, Chechnya, and those related to Al-Qaeda.)

If *Cutting the Fuse* is in many respects an elaboration of previous work done, it is most certainly a reminder that enlarging a dataset does not necessarily redirect one's conclusions. Indeed, after the required "number crunching" *Pape and Feldman ultimately decide that 1) foreign military occupations are still the major cause behind suicide terrorism, 2) foreign military occupations additionally account for transnational suicide terrorism, and 3) the ultimate way to deal with this type of terrorism is for the occupying power in place to change its existing military policies.* It's the second (and new) conclusion that's of immediate interest here.

After all, if territorially-based nationalism drove the suicide bombers analyzed in *Dying to Win*, what now drives non-Afghan Taliban fighters, for example, to blow themselves up in response to the occupation of a country that isn't even theirs? The answer, according to Pape and Feldman, is "dueling loyalties." In other words, there are suicide bombers who have ". . . multiple [ethnic] national loyalties to different stable communities of people associated with a territory, distinctive culture, and common language." When loyalty to a "kindred community" trumps the others, transnationally-based suicide attacks can (and do) occur.

This explanation for more recent events is both clever and helpful to Pape and Feldman. Yes, it preserves their core thesis, but it too has its gaps. What about sectarian suicide terrorism, for example, which accounts for a large part of the 5-year spike in bombings we alluded to earlier? As one critics has put it, "If foreign occupations explain suicide terrorism directed against the occupiers, what explains the suicide terrorism directed against the sectarian other (Shi'ia vs. Sunni) within the

same country?" (Are we to absorb this phenomenon within the large one of occupation? If so, does that hide our problem or fix it? And so the questions arise, yet again.)

### **Where We Stand Now - Psychology still Matters**

Because of limited space, this article has provided just a thumbnail sketch of the suicide terrorism controversy. The debates that feed it, needless to say, are much more labyrinthine than presented here. Nevertheless, what we have before us is something relatively uncommon – i.e., the Pape (and Feldman) books have had an outsized influence on a significant subcategory of terrorism studies. Now, no one can doubt that the books provide outstanding foundations for debate, but are they ultimately right to characterize things as they do? Is not the psychology of the actors involved in suicide bombing still open to further inquiry?

To someone such as JS Piven, for example, Robert Pape's sanitized psychological treatment of suicide bombing is an evasion – i.e., it continues to downplay the potential impact of ignorance, poverty, cowardice or even mental illness in suicide bombing. Indeed, in seeking to rehabilitate suicide bombers as rational political actors, does Pape go too far? Can he and his sympathizers assume that there are no misfits, no maladjusted terrorists who have psychopathic or non-rational motives behind what they do? After all, can't you be a precise and calculating planner and yet be pathologically dissociated from a sense of guilt and remorse for your actions? Doesn't perpetrating random death require serious strains of dehumanization and dissociation in your character? Doesn't such behavior, Piven asks, ultimately involve "defective empathic structures," stark black and white views of the world, regressive and rigid thinking, and collective fictions that can be validated, propagandized, reinforced, canonized, mythologized and naturalized as absolute fact in small, self-contained "magical thinking" groups?

Finally, and in reference to the above groups, Pape argues that these aggrieved, suicide bomber-wielding cohorts have been traumatized by occupation, but at the same time their response to trauma is political and reasoned. Well, is that how human beings really work? How can you be traumatized but not have irrational or pathological components as part of that trauma, the Pivens of the world ask? Pape's model thus seems to be denying the emotional impact of violence, both coming and going, and in doing so contravenes how real people react to real trauma. Is that analytically helpful, or does it show, whether intentional or not, Western elites yet again patting pesky "Others" on the head, but in a more "sensitive" way. Seen in this light, suicide bombing may indeed center on territorial sovereignty, but in a metaphysical way. The bomber, through his or her self-annihilation, may be reasserting sovereignty over the one territory no one else can ultimately control – his or her inner self.

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Prior to becoming the Head of ISN Strategy and Operations in May 2011, [Peter Faber](#) was an Associate Professor of Security Studies at the US National War College and a part-time faculty member at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, DC. He also served in the United States Department of Defense for 30 years, both as a strategic planner and as a policy developer.

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