

Suicide Terrorism: The Divine Grey Zone Weapon

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Abstract

Terrorism is the preferred means of waging proxy war. Over a period of time, states have evolved effective ways and means to deal with traditional means of terrorist attacks. However, suicide attacks by terrorist organisations help enhance the terror quotient of an attack manifold due to its lethality and helplessness of the target state to deter it. Professionals and military experts have been struggling with the motivation and deterrence paradigm of a suicide attack. A multi-causal reasoning of motivation pitched at individual, organisational and environmental levels appears to be the best explanation put forth by social and psychological scientists. Conclusions drawn from discussions on the causality of suicide attacks make it amply clear that it is nearly impossible to deter individuals from undertaking suicide attacks. But at the organisational levels we do have the space to deter such attacks. Terrorist organisations can be deterred by building a perception of invincibility through the twin strategies of deterrence by denial and punishment. The aim of deterrence by denial essentially involves making a potential target extremely difficult to access. Deterrence by punishment involves focused targeting of terror leadership and the resources used to mount such attacks by an organisation. Using these two strategies, India too can deter terrorist organisations from launching suicide attacks. An important aspect, without which we cannot conduct deterrence operations, is the

need for sound intelligence. Finally, environmental factors such as addressing the socio-economic conditions, searching for political solutions and countering the terror ideology also help in deterring suicide attacks.

Historical Perspective

Suicide bombing is an age-old phenomenon. Japanese Kamikazes, Chinese 'Dare to Die Corps' and German suicide aerial missions are a few examples. In recent times, suicide bombings started with the bombing of US Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon by the Shiite groups in 1983.¹ Later, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) exploited it. In the eighties, various factions in the Lebanon civil war carried out suicide bombings. Since then, the phenomenon has spread like wild fire to other parts of the world. Many countries are victims of suicide attacks. Middle East (ME), West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan are most affected by suicide terrorism.² The 9/11 suicide attacks changed the entire complexion of a suicide attack in the world. Suicide attacks have not spared India too. 26/11 still remains etched in our memories. Recently, a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist, Adi Ahmad Dar, carried out the Pulwama attack. In the video released by JeM, Dar showed no remorse. Dar remarked that by the time the video was released he would be in Jannat (heaven).³ What moves such people to self-destruction? The article attempts to answer this question and recommend solutions to deter such attacks.

Theoretical Construct

Definition. There are many definitions in the academic world. This article will highlight the most acceptable definition in the author's perception. Terrorism experts suggest two approaches to define suicide attacks, narrow and the broad. In the narrow definition, death of the perpetrator is essential for the act to cause the damage. Some examples are suicide belt bombers or ramming of explosive laden vehicle/plane. In the broad definition, death of the perpetrator is almost certain. But the damage to the target is not entirely dependent on his death. Fedayeen attacks would fall into such a category. Scholars such as Assaf Moghadam and Robert Pape are the main proponents of such an approach.⁴ As per Pape, "In the narrow definition attacker kills himself. In the broad definition an attacker fully expects to be killed by others during an attack".⁵

Motivators of Suicide Attacks. Almost all experts reject the theory of mentally deranged people as suicide attackers. Various scholars attribute different reasons as a cause of motivation. Some of the causes are discussed as follows. Professor of Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Muhammad Hafez says in respect of Palestinian bombers that religious and nationalist appeals that equate self-sacrifice with martyrdom and national salvations are instrumental in producing volunteers for suicide attacks.⁶ Political scientist Sheehy-Skeffington suggests shared sense of injustice by the entire community as a possible cause.⁷ The Canadian academic Mia Bloom gives spiritual rewards in afterlife, responsibility with God for the attackers' families, celebrity status and even cash bonuses as some reasons.⁸ She goes on to quote another American terrorism scholar, Jessica Stern, that people indulge in suicide attacks driven by a sense of humiliations or injustice. Pape has also proposed a cocktail of reasons like politics, humiliation, revenge, retaliation and altruism.⁹ Moghadam has taken this idea further and suggested a multi-causal framework of motivation. He has divided the framework into three levels, individual, organisational and environmental.¹⁰

At individual level, for Arab suicide bombers he suggests combination of seeking of revenge, posthumous benefits in heaven, material or immaterial benefits. He has also described personality types that are prone to commit suicide attacks like the exploited suicide bomber and tribal mentality. Exploited suicide bombers emerge due to traumatising life experience and humiliating treatment meted to their community or family by the security forces. Tribal mentality of avenging defeat to the bitter end also motivates some to commit suicide attacks. These factors have created a culture of martyrdom against the current regimes in ME and West Asia. US support to them further aggravates the hatred against them.

Organisational level motivators are socio-cultural environment that honours those who sacrifice themselves in the name of larger collective.¹¹ Outbidding competitors, for example, are Hamas versus Fateh in Palestine, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) versus Al-Qaeda (AQ) in ME and Taliban versus other groups in Afghanistan. Bloom suggests political power

and strategic signalling to the target audience and the state as a possible reason.¹² Tactical advantages such as accuracy, lethality, cost efficiency and irrelevance of planning an escape route also act as strong motivators at the organisational level.¹³ Finally, there are environmental factors that motivate individuals and organisation to undertake such a deadly option of causing damage through self-destruction. Territory perceived to be under foreign occupation, poverty, and government repression contributes to environment prone to emergence of suicide terrorism. Likewise, religious, ethnic and nationalist public figures may also encourage the culture of martyrdom. Australian academic, Riaz Hassan has quoted Pape, stating that suicide attacks follow a strategic logic specifically designed to coerce modern liberal democracies to make significant political and territorial concessions.¹⁴ Foregoing discussion suggests that most effective way to deter suicide terrorism is at the organisational level.

Current Dimensions of Suicide Terrorism

Force Multiplier of Proxy War. Terrorism has been the strategy of non-state actors. But state actors are also using terror groups to undertake proxy wars. The table below highlights the popularity of this form of warfare. Some very responsible state actors like US, Iran and Russia are indulging in it. Deniability and victory without using conventional forces are major advantages of proxy war. Even the cost of waging a proxy war is very low, with high strategic gains. The state also clubs information operations and propaganda with terrorism and exploits socio-cultural differences and economic fault lines to wage information operations. These steps help the proxy non-state actor to build its terror base.

The primary tool of proxy war is terrorism. Its success depends upon the effectiveness of terrorism in the target country. Three per cent of all terrorist incidents from 1980 to 2003 were suicide attacks. But suicide attacks account for 48 per cent of all the fatalities. Even after discounting 9/11, average suicide attacks are twelve times deadlier than other forms of terrorism.¹⁶ Ninety per cent of suicide attacks have occurred in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.¹⁷ Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, Israel

suggests decline in suicide attacks over the past few years. Major findings of its report are¹⁸:

- (a) In 2019, around 149 suicide bombings took place worldwide whereas in 2018, there were 293 suicide attacks – a decline of around 49 per cent.
- (b) For the second consecutive year, the most active area was Asia. Total 68 suicide bombings took place here. The focal point was Afghanistan – accounting for 45.5 per cent.
- (c) ME saw around 47 suicide bombings in 2019. Accounting for around 31.5 per cent of all suicide bombings.
- (d) In Africa, around 33 attacks have taken place in 2019. Accounting for around 22 per cent of attacks during the year.

Table 1 : Countries Involved in Proxy War¹⁵

Principal	Proxy	Conflict	Theatre	Date
USA	Mjd	Soviet – Afghan	Afghanistan	1979 -89
Iran	Hezbollah	Multiple	ME	1980s to date
USA	Iraq Security Forces	Op Inherent Resolve	Iraq	Oct 2014 – May 2018
Russia	Syrian Regime Forces	Syrian Civil War	Syria	2014 to date
Iran	Shia militia groups	OP Inherent Resolve	Iraq	2014 to date
Iran	Houthi rebels	Yemeni Civil War	Yemen	2015 to date
USA	Philippines def forces	Defeat ISIS campaign	The Philippines	2016
Russia	Separatists	Russo – Ukrainian war	Donbas region of Ukraine	2014 to daate
Pakistan*	Various terror gps	J & K conflict	UT of J & K	1990 to date
China*	Pakistan	NWNP	J & K	1990 to date

**Data on Pakistan and China is based on common knowledge and assessment of the author.*

- (e) According to data collected in 2019, out of the 236 suicide bombers, 22 were women. These suicide bombings killed 1,850 people and wounded 3,660. The study however predicts continued use of this tactics, particularly by the global jihadi groups ISIS and Al Qaeda due to their allure to divine path.

Concentration in Islamic Radicalism. One of the reasons for the decline is that earlier people belonging to all faiths have undertaken suicide attacks in the past. But radical Islamic *Jihadists* are now more active in conducting suicide attacks. Among the radical Islamic groups, Salafi *Jihadists* are predominant group that indulge in suicide attacks. Most of them are from fundamentalist groups that see the current rulers of Islamic world straying away from the path of Islam. They justify waging war on the ground that current rulers push people into *jahaliyat*. Divinity and martyrdom in the name of Allah are strong motivators. It propels people to take extreme actions.

How to Deter a Human Being Driven by Divine Faith

The sheer complexity of suicide terrorism increases the difficulty of deterring such a threat. These attacks are like a force multiplier in terrorism. Terrorists operate in a force asymmetric environment and find it a convenient tactic. It is a weapon with a one way ticket to heaven, easy to launch, self-guided, fire and forget system. It also helps in hastening the achievement of their political goals. It is a seventh-generation human weapon platform. The Answer to deterring suicide attacks lies in its definition and causality. Definition negates the possibility of deterrence at the individual level. How do we convince a person who has decided to become a martyr and proceed to heaven? Thus, the strategy to deter must focus at the organisational and environmental levels. If we deter the organisation the bedrock of suicide terrorism will get eliminated. Actions at the environmental level should target the socio-economic conditions, terrorist ideology and search for political solutions. Radical Islamic *jihadists* are the major perpetrators of suicide terror. We must, therefore, counter their radical religious (*salafi*), political and cultural extremism.¹⁹

Strategies to Achieve Deterrence

An organisation or a group of people in a society can be deterred if they are seen to be losing the battle with the state. If we build a victory bank of foiling terror attacks on a regular basis, a perception of invincibility gets created. This has the potential to deter terror groups from undertaking suicide attacks.²⁰ But, we must ensure effective protective measures on possible suicide attack targets. Many experts suggest prompt retaliation on an attacking group to achieve deterrence. Recent case of Balakot bombings by India is an example of

such an approach. But the state must keep demonstrating such intent for any meaningful impact. The twin retaliatory attacks post Uri and Pulwama may have achieved temporary deterrence. Almog has cited similar examples by Israel as the probable cause for reduction in suicide attacks on Israel by Palestinian suicide bombers. What we can arrive at is a two-pronged strategy of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Both have to go hand in hand to deter suicide terrorism.

Deterrence by Denial. Denial would include measures such as hardening of possible targets, especially high value. The endeavour in this strategy is to make it extremely difficult for a suicide attacker to access the potential target. The means could be establishment of effective protection measures, gainful utilisation of Special Forces, effective intelligence and surveillance measures for both offensive and defensive actions and collaborative approach to cut off financial and other resources to the terror group. International alliances and working in close cooperation with international agencies will help. If the intelligence machinery becomes weak and passive then strategies become difficult to put in place. Hence, we must consistently work towards seeking intelligence for better preventive measures.

Deterrence by Punishment. Kinetic action against the terrorist leadership, bomb makers, weapon sources, financiers, trainers, over ground workers and political supporters forms the corner stone of such a strategy. State should take steps to deny resources such as explosives, arms and munitions. Targeting training camps, operating bases and launching pads are few other actions. Another way to deter by punishment is to induce a terror group to harbour an ambition of transforming into a state. Bar says, "The more a terrorist organisation takes on the attributes of a state, the more susceptible it becomes to deterrence. A threat of punishment of unknown proportions looms darker than a punishment meted out on a regular basis."²¹ A classic example is inducing terror groups to seek control of territory and start indulging in state functions such as tax collection and business. This is exactly what happened to ISIS and it met its doom in Syria. Taliban is also forced to negotiate because it has ambitions of forming a nation state. The only caution here is that it is a dangerous step. Sometimes in attempting such a strategy, the state may end up losing to the terror group. It is probably due

to this reason that Afghan government is dragging its feet on implementation of the recently signed peace agreement between USA and Taliban.

Recommendations

India has been consistent victim of proxy war waged by our western adversary. It has been periodically subjected to suicide attacks. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) are hyper active against India. From Mumbai to Pulwama it has suffered loss of human lives and had earned an image of soft state. However, by a combination of denial and punishment we can create an image of hard power and invincibility. We need to make it difficult for a suicide bomber to reach his target through sound intelligence, interceptions and neutralisation. The State must raise specialised counter terror Special Forces/security forces for this purpose. The National Security Guard (NSG) in its current format is not optimally effective. Unless it adopts the structure and methodology followed by international Special Forces, such as GSG 9 of Germany, GIGN of France and Sayeret Matkal of Israel, it is unlikely to achieve desired results. The country must also inflict an unacceptable punishment to the sponsors of proxies. But it must also be prepared to deal with any misadventure. The space provided by revoking of Article 370, 35-A and the delineation of the state into two Union Territories must be used to eliminate terrorist leaders in the Valley. India must also cut off the resource base, to include weapons, ammunition, explosives, funding and over ground workers support, to various radical groups in J&K.

Environmental factors must focus on counter ideological framing that debunks the divinity out of such attacks through concerted information operations. Suggested themes are, firstly, undermining the Pakistani idea of Kashmir; secondly, promoting the less extremist interpretation of Islam against radicalism; thirdly, encouraging alternate and moderate Islamic voices; fourthly promoting the just-cause strategy; fifthly, educating against us-versus-them discourse; lastly, delegitimising and dis-empowering the terrorist leadership by exposing their misdeeds. These steps have the potential to demotivate the support base of terror group which may also then discourage people from taking the divine path to self-destruction.

Conclusion

Proxy war through state sponsored terrorism, involving non-state actors, under the overall rubric of grey zone warfare is becoming a preferred strategy of many states for reasons such as deniability, excessive cost of war and avoiding their own nations' cost in terms of resources and human lives. One of our adversaries on the western border is a past master in such warfare. Terrorist leaders, to gain recognition, often resort to suicide attacks when traditional methods of inflicting terror fail. We have seen that such a tactic often has strategic impact on the target nation. As highlighted, such attacks can only be deterred if the organisations or their proxies are made to realise the futility of suicide attacks. Relentless targeting of the support base of suicide terrorists is a must. Measures to deter would generally fall under the broad typology of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Finally, in any deterrence strategy importance of intelligence will remain paramount.

Endnotes

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¹⁰ Moghadam, 2006.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bloom, 2006.

¹³ Moghadam op cit.

¹⁴ Riaz Hassan, "What Motivates the Suicide Bombers." *Yale Global Online*. 2009. Accessed November 21, 2012. <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/what-motivates-suicide-bombers-0>.

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