

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SUICIDE BOMBING

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BACKGROUND

Suicide bombing has rightly been centre of attention in recent years. A common perception amongst public and even scientific community is that Suicide bombers are abnormal in some way and must be mentally ill. So for there have been no evidence that people who perpetrate the suicide bombing are with mental illness¹. The black and white and simplistic thinking like 'I am good and right', 'You are bad and wrong'; are the beliefs which may be underlying these acts. These beliefs distance people from their opponents and make it easier for them to kill people with apparently little or no sense of remorse or guilt². However these may be oversimplifications for a very complex phenomenon. In this article we provide a brief overview of the psychological perspective on the suicide bombing. This is not a comprehensive review; it is only an attempt to raise the debate on a subject, which has been subject of little scientific investigations.

History of suicide bombing:

The Jews revolutionary group, the 'zealot' and the 'Secari' that existed approximately 4BC to AD 70 were the first suicide terrorists. However the Suicide attack in the context of warfare has been mentioned in the story of Samson who died together with his victims as he collapsed a Philistine temple. On August 10, 1940 New York Times article mentioned the term suicide bombing for the first time in relation to German's war tactics^{3,4}.

The modern time of suicide bombing started from the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II to the first modern and organized suicide bombing of Iraqi embassy in Beirut, in 1981.

Since then those hardest-hit have been Lebanon during its civil war, Sri Lanka during its prolonged ethnic conflict, Israel, the Palestinian Territories since 1994, Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003 and Pakistan since it has assumed role of front line state against war on terror⁵.

Suicide bombing in Pakistan:

Various News Papers reports and information from news channels suggests that the phenomenon of suicide bombing is new in Pakistan. November 6, 2002

marked the occasion when a lady blew herself in front of news paper office in Karachi, injuring 6 people. Since then there have been 40 incidents up till now claiming more than 832 lives and injuring about than 1762 (Table 1).

There have been steady rise in the incidents since 2006 with its peak in August 2007.

NWFP is the most affected province followed by Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Regarding targets of the security personals have been the main target of suicide bombing, followed by other religious sects.

Psychological perspective of suicide bombing:

Psychology of terrorism and especially suicide bombing has drawn so much attention compared to other threats to life in recent years. This 'perception' and attitude aspect to suicide bombing of perpetrators is of great interest to social scientists as well as psychiatrists and psychologists.

Therefore psychological explanation of such a behavior could be of interest to many segments of society.

Psychological perspectives could explain this extreme behavior of suicide bombing to some extent, though may not be fully applicable to all cases. Following psychological models are applicable to suicide bombing to some extent.

Developmental model: This model points toward black and white thinking process reflecting an immature form of thinking, in those individuals who contemplate terrorist behavior. Keeping this in view some researchers suggested that this behaviour could be pathological, could be an act out or overreaction to childhood experiences of humiliation by an aggressor, which results in a sense of failure and lack of self-esteem⁶.

Some researchers suggest that suicide bombers often come from broken families and they suffer from low self-esteem⁷. this concept is not entirely consistent with known psychological principles. For example, people with high self-esteem are more prone to perpetrating violence than those with low⁸.

Group dynamics: Group dynamics are much more significant in molding psychology of human being. For those people who chose unique life style, then group becomes the sole source of support and friendship for them. Their sense of belonging, meaning in life, even their sense of identity, is derived from the relationships within the group.

Sageman in a study found that about 70% of the suicide bombers joined together while originally they were coming from different countries and cultures. Prior to this get-together they were looking for jobs and edu-

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Table 1
Yearly province wise breakup of suicide bombing in Pakistan.

Year	SINDH		BALOCHISTAN		NWFP		PUNJAB	
	Deaths	Injured	Deaths	Injured	Deaths	Injured	Deaths	Injured
2000	03	06	00	00	00	00	00	00
2002	29	67	00	00	00	00	00	00
2003	00	00	54	57	00	00	15	50
2004	47	100	44	70	00	00	32	120
2005	03	25	00	00	00	00	28	67
2006	57	126	00	00	96	65	00	00
2007	139	500	12	25	212	367	61	117
TOTAL	278	824	110	152	308	432	136	354

cation and were not strongly religious⁹. Sageman infers that social networking of friends, uprooting these young men from their home environment, could be an important factor in joining the suicide groups.

Behaviorist model: This psychological paradigm states that we learn every behavior and positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of repetition of that behavior in accordance with the principles of operant conditioning¹⁰.

Keeping this perspective in view the wide spread support, appreciation, the religiously defined rewards in eternal life and military outcome of the suicide bombings could be some factors positively reinforcing the behavior. Most of those who support this model do not assume psychopathology as a cause of suicide bombing.

The Frustration - Aggression Hypothesis: This is a long-standing model within psychology that has been used to explain aggression and violent behavior. Frustration as a single concept is less useful than the two concepts which cross-cut it, and that is (1) deprivation, and (2) threat to the personal integrity. Deprivation implies much less than is ordinarily implied by the concept of frustration; threat implies much more than physical threat, but also encompasses threat to self esteem¹¹.

According to Margolin who tried to apply frustration-aggression hypothesis to terrorist behaviour much terrorist behavior is a response to Frustration of various needs including personal liberty¹². Knutson, share the same point of view and states that violent and self destructive acts of suicide bombers stem from feelings of rage and hopelessness compounded by the belief that there is 'no other option' and no other way out¹³.

While this model cannot provide a complete explanation – there are is no doubt that it is quite relevant in some cases.

Motivation: Those who carry out suicide bombing have different motives for their acts. Their motivation could be political, religious or military in nature. Many religiously motivated suicide bombers want to attack those whom they see as threat to their religion¹⁴. Another motivation could be 'revenge' coupled with sense of altruism .as many suicide bombers have almost always had at least one relative or close friend who has been killed, or abused by an enemy¹⁵.

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