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DYING TO WIN: THE
STRATEGIC LOGIC OF
SUICIDE TERRORISM
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Altruism and Terrorism

WHAT MOTIVATES INDIVIDUAL suicide terrorists? Are suicide attackers driven by economic helplessness, social anomie, religious indoctrination, or something else?

The individual logic of suicide terrorism has been hard to grasp, because many are looking at it through the wrong lens—the lens of ordinary suicide. For the past two decades, journalists, scholars, and other researchers have written a multitude of accounts that seek to explain the individual logic of suicide terrorism by assembling the life narratives of specific suicide bombers. These life narratives follow a familiar pattern. Typically, the writer begins by interviewing the suicide bomber's immediate family, friends, and other close associates, asking detailed questions about the personal history and psychological condition of the individual. From these interviews, the suicide attacker's life story is stitched together, often with painstaking effort to identify the key moments of transition that "caused" the person to wish to die and so to willingly accept a suicide terrorist mission. Finally, there is a summary statement—often to the effect that, much to the writer's surprise, no clear "moment of transition" could be found.¹

One can quibble about the method or complain about its thoroughness of execution in hard-to-study areas of the world. However, this method, which experts call psychological autopsy—is exactly the one used to ex-

plain the many cases of ordinary suicide that we read about every day.² Moreover, the life narratives of many suicide terrorists are quite complete, some more complete than accounts of everyday suicides. Although we do want more information, and surely want the best experts to analyze it, this chapter argues that there is a conceptual gap that confounds efforts to explain what motivates individual suicide terrorists.

An important obstacle to resolving the puzzle of the individual logic of suicide terrorism is the tendency to think that all suicides arise from similar causes. In our everyday lives, we have come to expect that “suicide” carries a particular set of meanings. People who “commit suicide” are people “seeking to die,” often because they wish to “escape emotional pain.” Our personal experience tends to reinforce this common understanding. Every day, ordinary suicides are reported in the newspapers. These reports commonly include some account of why the person committed suicide, and the answer is often linked to an identifiable personal trauma or mental illness, usually reported by a family member or close associate. When the occasional suicide occurs that does not fit this pattern, it is easy to think that we just have not learned enough about the case, and also easy not to think about it at all.

Our experience with ordinary suicide leads to a common misunderstanding about suicide terrorists: that many are seeking to end their lives in any case and are merely taking an opportunity to die in an especially theatrical way. This presumption is a mistake. Many suicide terrorists are acting on the basis of motives fundamentally different from those that underlie ordinary suicide and would probably not commit suicide absent the special circumstances that create these motives.

Using Emile Durkheim’s famous study of suicide in nineteenth-century Europe, this chapter broadens our understanding of suicide to include circumstances that we do not encounter every day but that are closely relevant to suicide terrorism (and other forms of suicide). It also applies this broader conceptual framework to elucidate the motives of actual suicide terrorists.

Suicide can take multiple forms. The most common, “egoistic suicide,” occurs when an individual is excessively isolated from society, cannot cope with intense psychological trauma, and chooses voluntary death as a means to escape this painful existence. The less common and fundamentally different “altruistic suicide” occurs when high levels of social integration and respect for community values cause otherwise normal individuals to commit suicide out of a sense of duty. The extremely rare “fatalistic sui-

cide” happens when individuals are confined under conditions of such excessive regulation, oppressive discipline, and seclusion from society that they can be made to carry out extreme acts through what lay people call brainwashing.

This new conceptual lens helps us to see the distinctive qualities of suicide terrorism. Many suicide terrorists are acting out of altruistic motives, not the egoistic motives that are typical of almost all other suicides. Numerous suicide terrorists are acting at least partly to serve their community’s interest in fighting the national enemy. These individuals are rarely brainwashed into accepting such missions through the heavy indoctrination associated with the recent mass suicides by religious cults, but accept the task much like a soldier who accepts a “suicide mission” in an ordinary war.

THE INDIVIDUAL LOGIC OF SUICIDE

Suicide occurs when an individual deliberately acts to kill himself. Although it is common to assume that the supreme motive of the individual in committing suicide is to seek death as an end in itself, there are other motives for voluntary death. A mother sacrificing her life to save her child, a soldier jumping on a hand grenade to protect his buddies, or a shipwrecked sailor giving his last pint of water to others—these individuals may not wish to die, but they are the cause of their own death as surely as Ernest Hemingway when he put a shotgun to his head. The common quality in these cases is not motive, but a conscious choice to take an action that the individual knows, at the moment of acting, will result in certain death. These instances of voluntary death are clearly distinct from other individual behaviors and other categories of death (involuntary, unexpected, and so on) and so are properly considered under the same discrete category of individual behavior commonly called suicide.

In general, suicide can take one of three forms. These are distinguished by the type of motive as well as by the degree of an individual’s integration into society.

Egoistic suicide occurs when individuals simultaneously experience a high degree of personal trauma and a low degree of attachment to society.³ Life is full of personal traumas and major disappointments—painful personal illness, ugly public disclosures of private matters, distressful divorces, anguishing career failures—and the number of these commonly mounts

with age. As Durkheim explains, individuals normally weather personal strains with the help of family members, close personal friends, or involvement in community activities, all of which create important reasons to endure personal pain for the benefit of others and also reduce the sense that one must suffer alone. However, the more detached individuals are from society, the less intense is their sense of duty to others and the more likely they are to see no reason to endure life's sufferings. The root cause of egoistic suicide is not found in the specific suffering the individual faces, but in the fact that the individual confronts this suffering alone. Accordingly, egoistic suicide is usually a private act.⁴

Social detachment can sometimes occur abruptly, causing even individuals with a long history of dense social bonds to commit suicide. The sudden loss of a job, death of a close friend, loss of a fortune, or gush of wealth can leave a person estranged from his accustomed social ties and devoid of a sense of purpose. In the aftermath of sudden social isolation, the present can seem valueless and the future to offer no hope of greater satisfaction. The shock of life without purpose leaves one vulnerable to impulsive decisions for voluntary death, which is why suicide so often rises with personal bankruptcy, divorce, widowhood, and instant wealth.

Durkheim thought abrupt change of circumstances was so important that he created a special category for such suicides, "anomic suicide." However, the mechanisms leading to voluntary death for anomic and egoistic suicide are the same, personal trauma combined with social isolation. They differ only in the duration of detachment—chronic in egoistic suicide, acute in anomic. Hence, I will often use the single term "egoistic" to refer to both phenomena and "anomic suicide" only when assessing whether an abrupt change of circumstance can account for suicide terrorism.

If egoistic suicide originates from extreme personal detachment, the second basic type—altruistic suicide—emanates from nearly the opposite condition: excessive integration of the individual into society. Sometimes, individuals are intensely attached to their community. Parents want their families to survive. Soldiers value the success of their units. Citizens are devoted to their countries. In such situations, society can exert pressure on the individual to make personal sacrifices, including the sacrifice of one's life, for purely collective goals. The mother who insists on living when her death would have saved her child, the soldier who runs out on buddies under fire, the citizen who will not make the supreme sacrifice for his country—these individuals lose public respect and are therefore discour-

aged from doing so. By contrast, individuals who kill themselves rather than allow harm to members of their community gain social prestige and receive encouragement by this fact. Unlike egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide is likely to be a public act. Accordingly, the more a person values his community, the more likely he is to kill himself for the sake of the community, as Durkheim wrote, "because it is his duty."⁵

Although Durkheim found numerous examples of altruistic suicide among the customs of various societies, the paradigmatic case was suicide among military servicemen.⁶ In general, during the nineteenth century, suicide rates in European militaries were much higher than for the civilian population of the same age. This fact was difficult to explain by social isolation, since military institutions are highly cohesive and often respected by the surrounding society. Hardship also accounted poorly for military suicides, since the rate tended to accelerate with prolonged service, when individuals should be most accustomed to the rigors of a soldier's life. Rather, the main cause was simply a close attachment of the individual to the group. As Durkheim wrote:

Influenced by this predisposition, the soldier kills himself at the least disappointment, for the most futile reasons, for a refusal of leave, a reprimand, an unjust punishment, a delay in promotion, a question of honor, a flush of momentary jealousy or even simply because other suicides have occurred before his eyes or to his knowledge.⁷

The third form of suicide is fatalistic suicide.⁸ This occurs when the individual is subjected to such oppressive regulation of personal beliefs that suicide (or any behavior) is the result of "ineluctable and inflexible" pressure to carry out the act. Today, we might reasonably call this brainwashing—the use of excessive regulation and oppressive discipline to strip individuals of the capacity for independent thought and so leave them vulnerable to following directions against their self-interest. To sap an individual's capacity for free will, intensive thought reform or "reeducation" programs generally require that the members of a small group be kept in extreme isolation from the surrounding society for prolonged periods of time. In this situation, an individual can lose all concern for the wider society and value conformity with the small group above all else.⁹ "Suicide pacts" are a common instance of fatalistic suicide, because they generally occur among individuals who are almost exclusively bonded to each other.

Fatalistic suicide differs fundamentally from altruistic suicide, which does not require either heavy indoctrination to change pre-existing beliefs or exclusive bonds to a small group. Although altruistic suicide involves social pressure, the individual retains a significant capacity for choice in the personal decision to accept or reject a social obligation and is not secluded from the surrounding society. Indeed, the condition of sustained isolation from wider society would contradict the logic of altruistic suicide, which depends on mass approval, not oppressive discipline, as the main factor guiding an individual's actions. In the end, the core difference between altruistic suicide and fatalistic suicide is the attitude of the surrounding society to the act. In altruistic suicide, society venerates the person who commits the act as a martyr or hero that others should emulate. In fatalistic suicide, society treats the individuals as lost souls and condemns the act as something repulsive and bizarre that should never happen again.

"Egoistic," "altruistic," and "fatalistic" suicide are logically separate classes of behavior. They also correspond to distinct manifestations of suicide in the world today. The ordinary suicides that we encounter in our daily lives are mainly egoistic. The recent famous mass suicides among various religious cults are examples of fatalistic suicide. Many suicide terrorists are committing altruistic suicide.

TABLE 1B. Forms of Suicide

	<i>Egoistic Suicide</i>	<i>Altruistic Suicide</i>	<i>Fatalistic Suicide</i>
Individual's relationship to society	Isolation	Integration	Separation
Individual's relationship to small groups	Isolation	Participation	Immersion
Society's view of the act	Unacceptable	Approved	Unacceptable
Suicide plan	Private, alone	Public, team or alone	Secluded, en masse
Motive	Escape personal pain	Promote common good	Conformity to group
Real-world example	Ordinary suicide	Suicide terrorism	Cult suicide

Ordinary Suicide. Our understanding of ordinary suicide helps to explain why so many investigators search the life narratives of suicide terrorists for evidence of major depression, personal trauma, and social isolation. Most

of the suicides familiar to us are indeed egoistic. The misunderstanding is not to do with the facts of ordinary suicide, but with the presumption that suicide terrorists are basically the same as ordinary suicides.

The overwhelming feature of ordinary suicides is that the victims were chronically or abruptly detached from society. Ordinary suicide is most often a private, lonely act. Publicity is rarely sought and commonly shunned. Overall, suicide typically accounts for just over 1 percent of all deaths in the United States and other countries. The great majority occur in the victim's home, in prisons, and in hospitals, places in which the victim can predict periods of privacy that reduce the risk of public disclosure before the act is complete. Only a minority (15–20 percent) of completed suicides leave notes, and these are usually intended for family rather than for the wider public.¹⁰

The primary risk factors for ordinary suicide are conditions that would lead individuals to become shut off or to shut themselves off from society. Some 95 percent of ordinary suicides are accompanied by one or more risk factors that are related to depression, physical disease, low levels of social contact, alcohol dependency, past suicide attempts, and gender:

- 80 percent of all suicides are males
- 45–66 percent suffer major depression; often recently hospitalized for mental disorders
- 49 percent have no close friends and belong to no social organizations
- 30 percent have a severe physical illness
- 30 percent have a history of attempted suicide
- 25 percent are alcoholics, often with prolonged dependence¹¹

This is not to say that there are no still deeper antecedent conditions that lead individuals to become shut off or to shut themselves off from society.¹² It is to say, however, that unconnected individuals—especially elderly men who have recently lost their wives—kill themselves vastly more often than do people who are anchored to church, family, or community networks.¹³

Cult Suicide. The dynamics of fatalistic suicide provide an excellent account for the well-known recent instances of mass suicides among religious cults and other small messianic movements. On November 18,

1978, more than 900 followers of Jim Jones committed suicide by drinking cyanide-laced Kool-Aid in the jungle of Guyana, an event that may be the largest mass suicide in history. On April 19, 1993, David Koresh and seventy-six followers took their own lives at their compound ten miles outside Waco, Texas, rather than submit to arrest by the FBI. In October 1994, December 1995, and March 1997, a total of seventy-four members of the Order of the Solar Temple killed themselves in separate incidents in Switzerland and Quebec. On March 26, 1997, thirty-nine members of the religious cult Heaven's Gate killed themselves in a mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, outside San Diego. On March 18, 2000, some 230 members of a Ugandan doomsday cult called the Movement for the Restoration for the Ten Commandments of God sang hymns while dousing themselves with gasoline and setting themselves on fire.

These groups all had charismatic leaders. However, charismatic leadership alone is far too common among the numerous political, economic, religious, social, and other groups that exist in every community to provide a sufficient explanation for such extreme willingness of individuals to follow a leader's direction to destroy themselves. Moreover, most people in any society are subject to the influence of multiple charismatic and persuasive leaders; often they are exposed to the influence of a number of such leaders—in schools, churches, and workplaces, and in their families—within the span of a few weeks. Hence, the simple fact of charismatic leadership does not explain why particular people followed a specific leader at a given moment to such an extreme.

The groups mentioned above also were all religious. However, religious belief and intense religious faith are pervasive elements in most societies and so cannot alone account for the willingness of certain individuals to completely surrender their independent judgment to the decisions of a given leader. Moreover, these groups had a great variety of complex, idiosyncratic belief systems, a fact that casts significant doubt on the idea that particular religious beliefs lead to mass suicidal behavior. Further, to the extent that these groups shared any specific religious beliefs in common, it is a distant association to Christianity that can be found in the backgrounds of many of their leaders and members.¹⁴ Given Christianity's strict prohibition against suicide, this should have militated against the mass suicides rather than encouraged them.¹⁵

Instead, the key factor that these mass suicides have in common is that the members of the groups lived in physical isolation from the surrounding society. Sociologists tell us that the key feature of a cult is not the con-

tent of its belief system or the presence of persuasive leaders, but the existence of a hard boundary separating a self-contained group from the society at large. A hard boundary is important because it enables highly intrusive control. In this situation, leaders can observe and regulate the behavior of their followers across the full range of cognitive, emotional, sexual, and other personal experiences in the rigid manner necessary to maintain a system of shared beliefs that is markedly at variance with the surrounding culture. The boundary separating the group from the wider society typically becomes the key defining feature of the group and so is highly valued by its members. This is why there is often an aggressive or self-destructive response when outsiders seek to breach it.¹⁶

All of the groups whose members committed mass suicide in the past thirty years lived under highly restrictive conditions that established a hard boundary between the group and the surrounding society. The members of Jim Jones's People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, the Solar Temple, and the Uganda doomsday cult all were required to transfer all their personal wealth to the group, to live for years in dormitories or other communal settings that were physically separate—often remote—from wider society, and to engage in bizarre and eccentric practices that marked them as members of the group, reinforced its social isolation, and the group's progressively undermined individual autonomy. These practices included castration, vows of silence, polygamy, public confession, and communal punishment of transgressions. The timing of the mass suicide commonly corresponded to an imminent threat of intrusion by outsiders.¹⁷

Although produced more than a hundred years ago, Durkheim's models of suicide remain most useful in studying ordinary suicide and cult suicide today. They are also highly illuminating with respect to suicide terrorism.

SUICIDE TERRORISM IN THE WORLD

Many acts of suicide terrorism are a murderous form of what Durkheim called altruistic suicide. Although one might object to using the term "altruistic" to describe a behavior clearly intended to kill others, it is important to remember that our purpose is to explain what causes a suicide attacker to willingly kill himself in order to complete the mission. The murder of innocents is surely evil. Explaining it hardly justifies it. How-

ever, the homicidal dimension of the act should not cause us to overlook an important cause leading to it—that many suicide terrorists are killing themselves to advance what they see as the common good.

The circumstances of numerous suicide attackers support this finding. In contrast to persons who commit egoistic suicide, numerous suicide attackers are integrated into society, espouse collective goals for their missions in highly public ceremonies, and raise their social status and their families' by executing the act. Further, suicide terrorist groups exhibit few of the defining features of the religious cults whose members have committed recent mass suicides. Far from creating hard boundaries between the groups and surrounding society, the groups generally make strenuous efforts to integrate into the community, and the surrounding society often approves of the group's behavior. This is not to say that there are no instances of egoistic suicide among suicide terrorists. Some do exist and more may not yet have been detected. However, the data we have show that suicide terrorism is (1) surely not predominantly egoistic; (2) not likely fatalistic; and (3) probably mostly committed by people who are anchored to community or friendship networks.

Standards of Assessment

It is not easy to evaluate the role of egoism and altruism in suicide terrorist attacks. Given the impossibility of interviewing suicide terrorists who actually completed their missions, psychological autopsies based on reconstruction of life narratives are a logical substitute. But these are likely to remain open to charges of intentional or inadvertent bias even if professionals trained in survey methods had far greater access than they do to the families and associates of suicide terrorists. However, we can approach the problem another way. Since we know the circumstances of ordinary suicide, it is possible to compare them to conditions related to suicide terrorism. If the rate of ordinary suicide is not markedly higher in the countries most associated with suicide terrorism, and if the circumstances of suicide terrorist attacks differ significantly from ordinary suicide, this provides strong evidence that suicide terrorism is not overwhelmingly egoistic, because it could not be explained simply by the base rate of ordinary suicide in that particular society. Further, if the circumstances of suicide terrorism closely approximate key measures of altruistic behavior, then this provides positive evidence for the existence of altruistic suicide terrorism.

The analysis below follows this comparative method. It identifies four patterns that, together, demonstrate that altruistic motives likely account

for a substantial portion of suicide terrorism. First, the rate of ordinary suicide is not normally high in countries most associated with suicide terrorism; this undermines the notion that a cultural predisposition for egoistic suicide accounts for this phenomenon. Second, although ordinary suicide sometimes increases abruptly during violent nationalist rebellions associated with suicide terrorism, an important counterexample—Palestinian suicide terrorism since 2000, which has not been accompanied by a rise in ordinary suicide—indicates that even the anomic variant of egoistic suicide does not account overwhelmingly for suicide terrorism. Third, there is a particular method of suicide terrorism—the team attack—that is more likely associated with altruistic than with egoistic motives. Fourth, the social construction of the “altruistic motive” in suicide terrorism is not mainly a product of the separation of the group from society, as is common in recent mass suicides by religious cults, but is typically the result of a close integration of suicide terrorist groups with the surrounding society. The following sections present the evidence for each of these assessments.

Suicide Terrorism Is Not Overwhelmingly Egoistic

Ordinary, egoistic suicide could account for suicide terrorism if the societies most associated with this form of violence were culturally predisposed to tolerate voluntary death. This, however, is not the case. Whether understood as social practices or as the tenet of a specific religion, cultural tolerance for ordinary suicide does little to account for suicide terrorism. Over the past two decades, suicide terrorism has occurred among Muslims in a variety of countries, among Tamils in Sri Lanka, and among Sikhs in India. With the exception of Sri Lanka, the incidence of suicide terrorism is highest where ordinary suicide rates are low. In Sri Lanka, the higher rate of ordinary suicide is more likely due to the protracted civil war than to cultural factors.

Muslim suicide terrorism is the most important case. Whether secular or religious, Muslims are associated with a majority of suicide terrorist attacks. However, Muslims are not especially likely to commit suicide. If anything, there are strong data that suggest Islam reduces the likelihood of suicide.

Suicide rates in Muslim societies are among the lowest in the world, significantly below those in Christian and even Jewish societies. Since the 1950s, the World Health Organization has tracked suicide rates for its member states, of which there are now more than 100. While suicide terrorism has grown over the past twenty years, rates of ordinary suicide

among Muslims have remained relatively flat. During this period, the global average rate for suicide ranged from 11 to 15 per 100,000, with the highest rates in Eastern Europe, from an average of 24 per 100,000 in Poland to more than 70 per 100,000 in Russia and Lithuania. Muslim countries had consistently far lower annual suicide rates, with Jordan, Egypt, Iran, and Syria typically experiencing less than 1 suicide per 100,000 population and Kuwait, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Albania, and Bahrain fewer than 5.¹⁸

There is good reason to think these data are reliable.¹⁹ Muslim suicide rates are based on official death certificates from states with a wide range of political systems and are commonly confirmed by independent scholarship.²⁰ Moreover, Western countries and Israel, whose coroners would have little reason to under-report suicide rates among Muslims, also consistently report lower suicide rates for this community. In 2000, Israel counted deaths due to "intentional self-harm" for Muslims at a rate of 3 per 100,000, compared with 8 for Jews.²¹

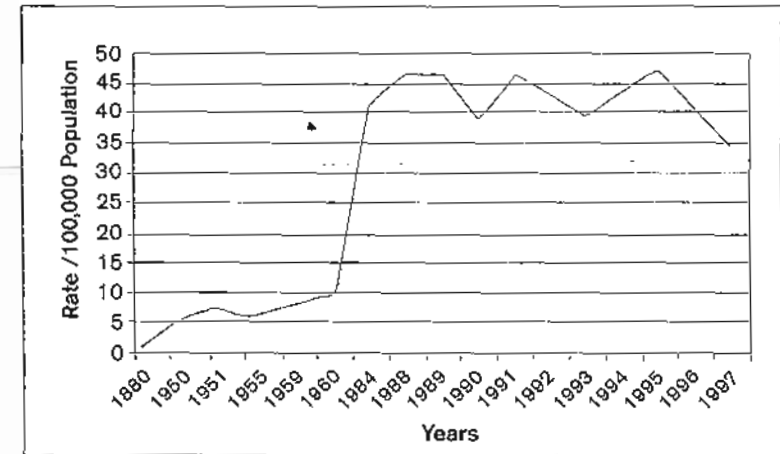
Among Sikhs in Punjab, ordinary suicide is also rare. During the 1980s and 1990s, the highest suicide rate in Punjab was 2.77 per 100,000 in 1997, following a spate of suicides by destitute farmers, a figure that is lower than the world average of 11 and also lower than India's average of 8.48.²²

Tamils in Sri Lanka are the one case in which high rates of ordinary suicide dovetail with suicide terrorism. During the 1980s and 1990s, suicide rates in Sri Lanka were typically among the ten highest in the world, ranging from 35 to 48 per 100,000. Tamils committed ordinary suicide at least as frequently as the national average, according to independent studies of specific villages in the Tamil regions of the island.²³

Culture, however, is probably not the main explanation for the high rates of Tamil suicide over the past two decades. Sometimes the harsh conditions associated with heavy-handed military occupation and violence can lead to a rise in anomic suicide, and indeed, conflict-induced anomic suicide probably accounts for high Tamil suicide rates. As the chart below shows, Sri Lankan suicide rates were relatively low for decades following World War II and only shot up after 1983, the year of the famous riots against Tamils in Colombo that led to a vast expansion of civil violence across the island. During this violence, hundreds of thousands of Tamils and Sinhalese were displaced, often into wretched camps, and many regions were plunged into extreme poverty. Surveys by the World Health Or-

ganization have found high rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders in these destitute areas, and academic studies have found both Sinhalese and Tamil rural villages to have especially high rates of ordinary suicide.²⁴

CHART 4. SUICIDE RATES IN SRI LANKA, 1880-1997



Source: Sri Lanka, Department of Police, Division of Statistics, as reported in Neil Thalagala, "Attempted Suicides" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2000), p. 42.

Limits of Anomic Suicide

Foreign occupation and violent nationalist rebellions can create the conditions for anomic suicide. Forced displacement, extreme brutalization, and death of family members or friends can cause individuals to suddenly lose purpose and opt for voluntary death. Thus, it is possible that suicide terrorism could be mainly a side effect of an underlying rise in the rate of anomic suicide in the occupied society.

Conditions of personal anomic may well have influenced some individuals to carry out suicide terrorist attacks. In the next chapter, we will survey the demographic characteristics and backgrounds of the more than 460 suicide terrorist attackers who actually completed their missions. Of these, we can document that at least sixteen were individuals who had a family member or close friend killed by the foreign enemy. There are probably more. The Chechens make such great use of female suicide at-

tackers who have lost husbands or children that there is a colloquial name for them—the Black Widows.

Anomic suicide, however, is probably not the principal basis for individual suicide terrorism, for three reasons. First, some suicide terrorist campaigns target an enemy who is not inflicting heavy violence on the terrorists' homeland territory. For instance, U.S. forces stationed on the Arabian Peninsula during the 1990s did not kill any citizens of Saudi Arabia or other states in the Persian Gulf, but more than half of all al-Qaeda suicide attackers, from the first such mission in 1995 through 2003, came from these countries.

Second, some suicide terrorist campaigns begin and escalate after the damage inflicted by the foreign forces has peaked and then waned to much lower levels. When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, most of the damage that its forces inflicted on the local Shia community (forced displacement, civilian casualties, and so on) took place in the following several months. However, the first Hezbollah suicide terrorist attack against the Israelis did not occur until November 1982, and the vast majority of attacks did not occur for years after that. Revenge could have motivated some Lebanese attackers, but our usual understanding of anomie would seem to predict the opposite trajectory—a high incidence of suicide attack during 1982, followed by a decline as Israeli violence against the Shia waned.

Third and most important, there is at least one case in which the rate of suicide attacks rose so far and so quickly that it cannot be accounted for by an increase in anomic suicide. From late 2000 through 2003, Palestinian terrorist groups carried out more than thirty suicide attacks per year, compared to an average of fewer than four per year during the 1990s. At the same time, the number of ordinary suicides among the Palestinians hardly changed; it actually declined slightly, from thirty-six in 2000 to twenty-nine in 2003.²⁵ For a rise in anomic suicide to account for Palestinian suicide terrorism in these years, one would have to assume that terrorist groups were able to identify and recruit every new case of an individual willing to commit suicide anyway. Given how difficult it is for family members to anticipate suicides, and given that ordinary suicides generally occur in private, this is highly implausible.

Overall, egoistic and anomic motives are insufficient to account for the individual logic of suicide terrorism. Altruistic motives, either alone or in conjunction with others, likely play an important role.

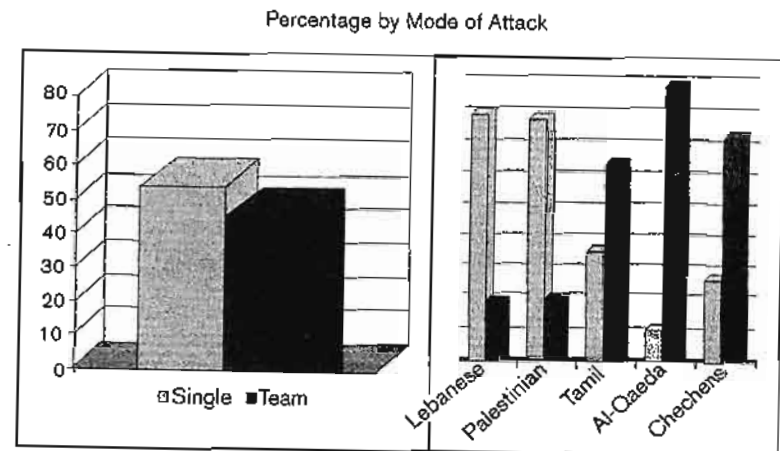
Significantly Altruistic Suicide

A striking fact about suicide terrorism is that it often occurs in teams. In fact, many suicide attacks involve multiple individuals working together for weeks, sometimes even months, to gather intelligence, plan, and rehearse a joint mission. Team suicide attacks, by their nature, are based on extensive social interaction and require unity of purpose, features that are more likely associated with altruistic than egoistic motives.

Team suicides or "suicide pacts" are extremely rare among ordinary suicides. Virtually all of the suicides we encounter every day involve individuals acting alone, often withdrawing from social contact altogether to die a private death. The act of suicide is rarely witnessed. Suicide pacts account for less than 1 percent of all suicides in the United States, Western Europe, and elsewhere. The great majority are pairs of individuals with a long-standing romantic relationship, typically either married couples one of whom is in failing health, or young lovers unable to marry.²⁶

By contrast, suicide terrorists commonly operate in squads. Over the past twenty-five years, there have been at least 462 suicide terrorist attackers who actually completed the mission, killing themselves. Of these, 212, or 46 percent, carried out suicide attacks in which they were part of a joint mission against the same target or targets in close proximity. Some groups use team attacks more than others. Al-Qaeda has deployed 89 percent of its suicide attackers in teams, the Chechens 73 percent, the Tamil Tigers 64 percent, the Palestinians 21 percent, and the

CHART 5. TEAM VERSUS SINGLE SUICIDE ATTACKERS



PKK none.²⁷ Although more work is needed to examine the variation, the groups that must deploy attackers over the greatest distances or against the hardest targets also rely the most on team attacks (al-Qaeda, Chechens, and Tamil Tigers). This suggests that operational considerations may influence how these organizations deploy their attackers.

The prevalence of team suicide attacks strongly indicates the presence of altruistic motives among a significant number of suicide attackers. Even if all suicide attackers had some personal motive to die, suicide attackers who work together as a team must also be motivated, at least partly, to achieve a collective purpose, the completion of a group mission that serves a cause beyond their own personal death.

Egoistic and anomic motives are insufficient to account for team suicide attacks, for two reasons. First, few resemble ordinary suicide pacts. Some team suicides involve individuals with pre-existing social bonds, such as school mates, friends living together, and members of the same civic organization.²⁸ However, many appear to have had little, if any, social interaction before they began to prepare for the mission. Romantic bonds appear to play little role. Only about 25 percent of all team attacks involved exactly two suicide attackers, and less than 5 percent were male-female pairs. There are no reports of a romantic connection between any team attackers.

Second, team attackers are unlikely to be collections of individuals who were spurred by purely egoistic or anomic motives, people who would have committed suicide anyway without also sharing an altruistic motive for the act. Our understanding of ordinary suicide largely rules out the notion that a large fraction of suicidal individuals would expend considerable energy forming teams, or coordinating their actions, or directing their actions at a particular object. Ordinary suicides are so often lethargic and consumed with their own personal problems that a great number would abandon the team attack at an early stage, if they could come together as a group at all.

The existence of team suicide attacks does not mean that all members of a squad were motivated purely by altruism. Mixed motives surely exist among the hundreds of suicide attackers. However, a significant degree of altruism is probably a necessary condition. If many suicide terrorists attack under conditions rarely possible for ordinary, egoistic suicide, and if individual commitment to a collective goal characterizes those conditions, then altruistic motives are probably necessary for at least one important category of suicide terrorism.

Of course, suicide terrorists who attack in single-person missions may also have altruistic motives. In fact, suicide terrorists often claim, in martyr videos and other last testaments, to be motivated by altruism. Absent extensive psychological autopsies, it is impossible to verify these individual claims of altruistic motives. However, the widespread existence of team suicide attacks suggests that many, possibly most, suicide terrorists are motivated, crucially if not wholly, by a collective purpose.

If not for the presence of an altruistic motive, numerous suicide attacks would probably not occur. This raises the question: what gives rise to the altruistic motive?

The Social Construction of Altruistic Martyrdom

Altruistic motives are heavily influenced by social approval. Although one could believe that an action would benefit others even if those others did not agree with the judgment, an individual is more likely to conclude that an act is beneficial if society actually supports and honors it. In fact, social approval is central to the logic of altruistic suicide as Durkheim conceived it. Whereas an egoistic suicide seeks to escape pain that society would normally expect a person to endure, the altruistic suicide willingly accepts a voluntary death precisely because society supports and honors the act.²⁹

The altruistic motive in suicide terrorism also depends on social approval. Suicide terrorist organizations are commonly thought of as "religious cults," as if they consisted of individuals separated from their surrounding communities and with aspirations fundamentally different from those of society at large. This is a mistake. A suicide terrorist organization is generally an integral part of society rather than a separate entity. Indeed, members of the group typically go to great lengths to deepen their social ties, to participate actively in social institutions, and to adopt customs that display communal devotion. For its part, the local society commonly honors individuals who carry out suicide terrorist attacks. As a result, it is impossible to understand the conduct, motivation, and self-perception of individual suicide attackers without considering the importance of the intimate ties that generally exist between suicide terrorist organizations and their communities.³⁰

Suicide terrorist organizations are bound to their societies by virtue of pursuing political goals viewed as legitimate by the society at large, by their participation in local charities and other institutions that benefit society, and by the use of elaborate ceremonies and other rituals that identify the death of a suicide attacker with the good of the community. These close so-

cial bonds do not create altruistic individuals. However, they do create the conditions under which individuals who wish to sacrifice for their community can be confident that their self-sacrifice will be viewed as altruistic.

Hezbollah in Lebanon Although we do not have precise figures, there is broad agreement among those who have studied Hezbollah closely that "within a matter of months, this small group had become a mass movement" with broad community support.³¹ From 1982 to 1986, Hezbollah grew from a handful to more than 7,000 members. During the 1980s and even up through the present day, large segments of the Shia community in Lebanon engage in highly visible rituals and ceremonies that commemorate "martyrs" who have committed acts of suicide terrorism against American, Israeli, and other international targets. Major city streets are named in honor of these fallen heroes, their pictures are widely used as positive symbols in political discourse, and large public rallies are commonly associated with yearly public holidays and other special events that are held in their honor.

Far from being an isolated cult, Hezbollah devotes considerable effort to social services for the community as a whole. Practically from the beginning of its first resistance operations against Israeli and Western troops occupying Lebanon, the leaders of Hezbollah started cultural centers, orphanages, clinics, and welfare centers in Beirut and numerous villages in southern Lebanon. In 1982, Hezbollah started a Financial Assistance Committee, an organization that granted 130,000 scholarships and aided 135,000 needy families with interest-free loans over the next several years. In 1985, secretarial and sewing courses were set up to provide the handicapped with a means of subsistence. In 1986, the Islamic Health Organization, a Hezbollah offshoot, built two major hospitals to care for the local community. As Judith Harik puts it, "by the mid-1980s social services and welfare foundations were *de rigueur*."³²

Provision of social services substantially enhances the legitimacy of Hezbollah as a movement devoted to the collective welfare of the Lebanese population; this work is probably second in importance only to resistance against the occupation itself. Indeed, Hezbollah's legitimacy seems to have rested more on the establishment of social services than on religious affinity. According to a poll conducted in the late 1980s, only 36 percent of southern Lebanese believed in the inevitability of Islamic unity, but 53 percent took advantage of social services provided by Hezbollah and 67 percent viewed this group as more legitimate than the national government.³³

To create the momentum for a protracted campaign, Hezbollah and other Shia leaders encouraged altruistic support for suicide operations. These leaders gave literally hundreds of public speeches and interviews explaining the need for what they call self-martyr operations. The main purpose of this public discourse by leaders of Hezbollah and other Shia groups is to persuade the local community at large to accept that acts normally qualifying as suicide and murder should be re-defined as martyrdom and legitimate self-defense, and to encourage some community members to volunteer for these operations.

Although religion plays a role, the main theme of these speeches is that martyrdom operations are a justifiable response to the specific circumstance of a foreign occupation. In speech after speech, by leader after leader, it is the real-world circumstances of foreign occupation that define how religious norms should be interpreted, not an individual's desire for personal salvation independent of this context. The argument is often made at considerable length, and for good reason. Islamic societies have strong norms that strictly prohibit suicide, so Lebanese leaders must work hard to create broad support for suicide terrorism. This is reflected in the volume and length of their discourse on the subject.

The main argument is that martyrdom is justified by its instrumental value in protecting the local community from a foreign occupation and not as an end itself. An individual, the argument goes, has a purpose on earth and so should end that purpose only for another legitimate purpose. Ending a foreign occupation that would oppress the local community is viewed as a possible legitimate purpose, but only if the self-sacrifice would in fact contribute toward that end.

Hezbollah's discourse on martyrdom relies on three themes that jointly work to make this argument: (1) the purpose of martyrdom operations is to end the foreign occupation of the Shia homeland; (2) martyrdom operations are needed for this purpose because of the imbalance of conventional military power between the occupiers and the occupied community; and (3) martyrdom operations are in fact likely to achieve this goal because the target society is susceptible to coercive pressure.

1. Response to Occupation The first theme is that the central purpose of martyrdom operations—and the principal reason for the armed resistance generally—is to end the occupation of the Shia homeland by American, Israeli, and other Western military forces.

In 1985, Hezbollah's famous "Open Letter" declared:

America and its allies and the Zionist entity . . . have attacked our country, destroyed our villages, massacred our children, violated our sanctities, and installed over our heads criminal henchmen. . . . We have risen to liberate our country, to drive the imperialists and the invaders out of it, and to determine our fate by our own hands.³⁴

2. Conventional Inferiority Mandates Self-Sacrifice The second major theme in the discourse on martyrdom emphasizes that suicide operations are justified as a last resort made necessary by the Shia community's inferiority in conventional weapons compared to Israel and Western military power. As the secretary general of Hezbollah explained:

Speaking about the experience . . . in Lebanon, in order to carry out an operation with an outcome of 8 or 9 dead soldiers, it would need training, equipping, observations, frontier groups, rockets, explosives. . . . After all these preparations, the outcome would only be 3 or 4 deaths due to the strong fortifications of the enemy. On the other hand, one single [martyr] without any training or experience, driving a bus without any military back-ups or supporting groups, was able to kill 8 or 9, wound 21, and scare the entire "Israeli" entity.³⁵

3. The Enemy Is Vulnerable to Coercive Pressure The third theme in Hezbollah's discourse on martyrdom underscores the expectation that Israel and other Western enemies occupying Lebanon would be susceptible to coercive pressure through suicide attack. Hezbollah's "Open Letter" states:

With the blood of its martyrs and the struggle of its heroes, the Islamic resistance has been able to force the enemy for the first time in the history of the conflict against it to make a decision to retreat and withdraw from Lebanon without any American or other influence.

Fadlallah, Hezbollah's spiritual leader, said:

The self-martyring operation is not permitted unless it can convulse the enemy. The believer cannot blow himself up unless the results will equal or exceed the loss of the believer's soul. Self-martyring operations are not fatal accidents but legal obligations governed by rules.³⁶

Finally, Hezbollah has gone to great lengths to ensure that the local community identifies specific suicide terrorist attackers with altruistic motives. In Lebanon, dozens of suicide attackers left testimonials in the form of martyr videos and other last statements. These are widely distributed and strongly reflect altruistic motives. Bilal Fahs wrote before his suicide attack on June 16, 1984, that he sought Lebanon's "liberation from occupation." Wajdi Sayegh wrote before his March 10, 1985, attack that it was "a national and patriotic obligation to fight the occupation." Sana Youssef Mhaydali, probably the first female suicide attacker, explained the motive for her April 9, 1985, attack as "to liberate the south from the occupation of the Zionist terrorists." Before his team suicide attack on July 9, 1985, Khaled al-Azrak said that his "main motive is to liberate this land from the Jewish enemies."³⁷

Given Hezbollah's deep commitment to the welfare of Lebanese society and strong association of suicide terrorism with ending a foreign occupation, it is hardly surprising that some individuals willing to sacrifice for their community would voluntarily carry out suicide attacks for this purpose. These circumstances do not create altruistic individuals, but they do create the opportunity for an altruistic individual to contribute to society and to be honored for it.

Hamas Social construction of altruistic martyrdom is also evidenced in popular support for the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. Since the mid-1990s, numerous surveys of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have shown remarkably high levels of popular support for suicide terrorist attacks against Israel—virtually always above a third of respondents and often as high as 70 percent.³⁸ Moreover, widespread posters, graffiti, and public ceremonies routinely commemorate individual suicide attackers and show that respect for suicide bombing in Palestine goes far beyond a tiny fringe.³⁹

Like Hezbollah, Hamas is deeply embedded in the surrounding society, supporting an extensive network of more than forty social welfare organizations. Most were established by Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the founder of Hamas, with a combination of local tithing (*zakat*) and financial support from Muslims abroad. Charitable institutions provide financial subsidies, food, clothing, and shelter. Service organizations provide education, vocational training, libraries, neighborhood sport clubs, and medical relief. In 1997, an estimated 22,615 families received assistance from Hamas-

affiliated social welfare organizations, while in 1999 such organizations made up as many as 40 percent of all the social welfare institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. Beneficiaries include orphans, widows, families headed by women whose husbands are imprisoned or permanently disabled, and schoolchildren. Although many are small, some of these organizations are quite large. The Zakat Committee in Gaza has more than fifty employees and provides more than 5,000 people with cash assistance, food, free health care, and interest-free loans for housing and university education.⁴⁰

In an important study, the economist Eli Berman finds that Hamas's network of social service organizations makes an essential contribution to the legitimacy of suicide terrorism among Palestinians. By providing collective goods that are otherwise unavailable, Hamas sends a credible signal that the sacrifices it demands of its members actually benefit the community as a whole. This increases the willingness of individuals who do want to sacrifice for the community to act on this motivation, because they are now confident that their self-sacrifice will in fact be viewed as they intend it.⁴¹

Hamas's discourse on martyrdom strongly reinforces the altruistic purpose of the group. Like Hezbollah, the main argument is that martyrdom is justified by its instrumental value in protecting the local community from a foreign occupation and not as an end in itself. Statements by the Hamas Political Bureau routinely follow the three-part logic that suicide operations are a response to occupation, mandated by weakness in conventional force, and justified by Israel's vulnerability to coercive pressure.

1. Response to Occupation

The quickened pace of jihad and heroic operations by our mujahidin in al-Qassam Battalions [suicide squads] fits with the Movement's game plan of resistance until occupation is routed and our sacred land liberated.⁴²

2. Conventional Inferiority Mandates Self-Sacrifice

INTERVIEWER: "Why not plant a bomb and run?"

HAMAS SPOKESMAN: "There are more fatalities in a suicide attack."⁴³

3. The Enemy Is Vulnerable to Coercive Pressure

The Zionist enemy does not understand the language of begging and submission, which only increase its aggressiveness and arrogance. It only understands the language of Jihad, resistance and martyrdom, that was the language that led to its blatant defeat in South Lebanon and it will be the language that will defeat it on the land of Palestine.⁴⁴

Individual suicide bombers routinely leave martyr videos testifying to the altruistic motive for the suicide attack as a means to end Israeli occupation. Although one might doubt the sincerity of these claims, it is important to recognize that there is a strong material basis for why the Palestinian community would find them credible: since 1998, Israel has systematically demolished the homes of suicide bombers' families. Although many reportedly receive cash compensation from Hamas and other groups worth approximately \$10,000, the loss of a home worth many times this value is a strong signal that the motive for the attack was indeed to promote the communal good.⁴⁵ To this day, Palestinian suicide bombers continue to reveal their identities although it is common knowledge that their families will suffer harsh consequences.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Social construction of altruistic martyrdom is closely associated with the popular support for the Tamil Tigers among the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. Since the mid-1990s, numerous journalists and scholars who have visited Jaffna, the LTTE's stronghold in the northern region of the country, report that the local population supports suicide operations and commemorates the LTTE martyrs, called "Black Tigers." Each year on July 5, thousands attend the "Heroes' Day" celebration, commemorating the first Black Tiger, whose mission occurred on July 5, 1987, and others since. There are also hundreds of shrines to individual suicide attackers, kept with flowers and with special trees planted to represent the martyrs who "planted" their lives for the land.⁴⁶

The Tamil Tigers also contribute to the social and economic life of the local society by devoting some of the group's limited resources to social services. In 1987, the LTTE founded the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization near Jaffna, which has provided thousands of families and individuals with food, water, resettlement housing, health services, and interest-free loans.

In 1991, the Center for Women's Development was opened, delivering humanitarian relief, vocational training, psychological counseling, and child care to women and children in a series of centers that has expanded over time. In 1992, the Tigers established a police and judicial system in the areas under its control, recruiting female police officers and administrators in a move that expanded the roles of women in Tamil society. In 1993, the Tamil Eelam Bank was established, providing low-interest loans to stimulate small business from salt production to prawn farming.⁴⁷

The LTTE's discourse on martyrdom emphasizes the altruistic motives and instrumental value of self-sacrifice to liberate the local community from Sinhalese occupation.

1. Response to Occupation Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader:

Our martyrs die in the arena of struggle with the intense passion for the freedom of their people, for the liberation of their homeland and therefore the death of every martyr constitutes a brave act of enunciation of freedom.⁴⁸

2. Conventional Inferiority Mandates Self-Sacrifice Nandini, a female LTTE fighter:

As Black Tigers, they are a physical embodiment of self-determination and liberation. They employ their lives as missiles armed with the kind of determination and purpose that is unmatched by any conventional weapon that the Sinhala forces may deploy. There lies the strength and honor of our Black Tigers.⁴⁹

3. The Enemy Is Vulnerable to Coercive Pressure Prabhakaran:

Tamil Eelam can be achieved in 100 years. But if we conduct Black Tiger operations, we can shorten the suffering of the people and achieve Tamil Eelam in a shorter period of time.⁵⁰

To identify the motives of individual Black Tigers with the Tamil community, the LTTE publishes periodicals with profiles of and tributes to the numerous Black Tigers who have carried out suicide attacks over the past twenty years. The broadsheets *Kalathil* and *Erimalai*, printed in the native Tamil language, are widely distributed within the Tamil regions of Sri

Lanka. They are difficult to obtain in the West, but here are several translations.

- Tribute to Captain Miller, the first Black Tiger: "His intention was always to rescue the motherland." His mother is quoted: "I am sad that my son has died. But he has died for his country. When I think of that, it is pride I feel."
- Black Tigress Major Santhana (June 26, 2000): "Major Santhana . . . joined the Movement to fight and liberate the Tamils from Sinhalese dominance."
- Black Tiger Vasantharaja (December 2000): "This is the most supreme sacrifice I can make. The only way we can get our eelam [homeland] is through arms . . . even if we die."⁵¹

In these ways, the LTTE breaks down the boundaries between the group and the local Tamil community, creating the opportunity for individuals willing to sacrifice for the community to do so through suicide attack. As a study of the LTTE's popular support explains:

Why does the LTTE have so much support among the population? [It] is the only group that is accepted by the population as "one of our own," "our boys," even "our sons." . . . The LTTE are the one militant group that has managed to build up grassroots support and loyalty among the population for reasons of both ideology and organization and got a grip on the political and social structure of Jaffna.⁵²

Al-Qaeda Social construction of altruistic martyrdom plays an important role in al-Qaeda's popular support. To be sure, there is a major debate among Islamists over the morality of suicide attacks, but within Saudi Arabia there is little debate over al-Qaeda's objection to American forces in the region: over 95 percent of Saudi society reportedly agrees with Osama bin Laden on this matter. Recent international opinion polls show that bin Laden enjoys high levels of popular support in other Muslim countries.⁵³

Osama bin Laden has been deeply involved with several Islamic social service organizations and al-Qaeda funds have been used to support their growth. Among the organizations that bin Laden founded or that his associates have worked for are Human Concern International, the Third

World Relief Agency, Mercy International, and the Islamic International Relief Organization. These organizations are not merely shells or fronts to finance terrorist operations (although they do this). They also carry out significant humanitarian work, providing resources to Muslim refugees, widows, orphans, and the elderly around the world.⁵⁴

Two Islamic charities based in the United States illustrate al-Qaeda's support for Islamic humanitarian efforts. After September 11, 2001, the U.S. government shut down the Global Relief Foundation and the Benevolence International Foundation because of accusations that these organizations provided substantial financing to al-Qaeda. Subsequently, the 9/11 Commission thoroughly investigated these cases. There is no doubt that the charities provided millions of dollars for humanitarian relief services to aid Muslims in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Chechnya, including a tuberculosis hospital for children in Tajikistan and a women's hospital in Dagestan. There is also no doubt that al-Qaeda supported the charities. GRF's founders were intimately associated with Osama bin Laden's "Human Services Office," the precursor to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The leader of BIF allegedly also had personal ties to bin Laden in the 1980s and 1990s, and the organization received substantial funds from wealthy Saudi donors who are under scrutiny for funding al-Qaeda military operations. However, as the 9/11 Commission concluded: "Despite these troubling links, the investigation of BIF and GRF revealed little compelling evidence that either of these charities actually provided financial support to Al Qaeda."⁵⁵

Al-Qaeda's discourse on martyrdom emphasizes the altruistic motives and instrumental value of self-sacrifice to liberate the local community from U.S. occupation.

1. Response to Occupation In May 1998, Osama bin Laden said:

The call to wage war against America was made because America has spearheaded the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques [Saudi Arabia] over and above its meddling in its affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control. These are the reasons behind the singling out of America as a target.⁵⁶

2. Conventional Inferiority Mandates Self-Sacrifice In December 2001, al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command, underscored:

the need to concentrate on the method of martyrdom operations as the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the Mujahedin in terms of casualties.⁵⁷

3. The Enemy Is Vulnerable to Coercive Pressure In March 2003, bin Laden said:

The Islamic nation today possesses tremendous forces sufficient to save Palestine and the rest of the Muslim lands. . . . I should like to remind you of the defeats suffered by a number of the great powers at the hands of the Mujahideen. . . . [For example,] the defeat of the American forces in the year 1402 of the Muslim calendar [1982] when the Israelis invaded Lebanon. The Lebanese resistance sent a truck full of explosives to the American Marines' center in Beirut and killed over 240 of them.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Altruistic motives are significant in the individual logic of suicide terrorism. Many suicide attackers may also wish to escape personal problems, but the egoistic motives that account for ordinary suicides are insufficient, on their own, to explain why many individuals voluntarily carry out suicide terrorist attacks. This is especially true for one category of suicide terrorism—the team suicide attack—that by its nature involves multiple individuals working together for a collective purpose. Moreover, suicide terrorist organizations are not socially isolated groups with socially unacceptable goals, but go to great lengths to embed themselves in their surrounding communities and to pursue socially acceptable political objectives. Although this social construction of altruistic martyrdom does not create altruistic individuals, it does produce the circumstances under which an individual who wishes to sacrifice for the community can be confident that the act is understood in this way. As a result, the altruistic motive is often a necessary if not sufficient condition for suicide terrorism. Absent the altruistic motive, many suicide attacks would probably not occur and many suicide attackers might well seek other opportunities to contribute to their community.

This finding has important implications. First, it suggests that the number of people who would engage in suicide terrorism is potentially much greater than the number of those who are suicidal in the ordinary sense.

Far from the common stereotype of a poor, socially isolated, uneducated religious fanatic, we should expect that suicide attackers are likely to come from a broad cross section of society. As the next chapter shows, a remarkable portion of suicide attackers are indeed secular, employed, reasonably well-educated, and otherwise contributing members of their societies. Although many of us would like to believe that suicide terrorism is limited to a tiny fringe, the fact is that there may be no upper bound on the potential number of suicide terrorists.

Second, the role of altruism in suicide terrorism suggests that there may be a geometric multiplier built into the process of suicide terrorism. Unlike suicides following a stock market crash or mass suicides of a religious cult, the trajectory of suicide terrorism is often an upward slope. From Lebanon in the 1980s to the Palestinians in the second intafada in 2000–2003 to al-Qaeda's attacks in 2002–2003, suicide terrorist campaigns tend to gather pace—and attract more walk-in volunteers—over time. Given the dynamics of altruism, this trajectory is something we should expect in future suicide campaigns.

Finally, the role of altruism means that any attempt to profile suicide terrorists that is based on the known profiles of ordinary suicides is likely to miss a substantial portion. Indeed, since the pool of individuals potentially available in suicide terrorist campaigns is probably not limited to those who would commit suicide anyway, nations under fire may have little choice but to deal with the root causes of suicide terrorism.

The Demographic Profile of Suicide Terrorists

THE MOST COMMON stereotype of a suicide bomber is that of a young man or teenage boy who has no job, no education, no prospects, and no hope. Exactly why such a person becomes a suicide terrorist has been the subject of wide speculation. Some suggest religious fanaticism: a young, impulsive, and inexperienced teenage boy would seem to be easily gulled into believing that if he straps a few sticks of dynamite around his waist and presses a button, he will stroll through the Gates of Paradise, where he will be bedded by virgins. Others suggest social alienation presumed common among criminals: a young man living with the dregs of society might enjoy a variety of deviant pleasures, including the self-satisfaction of a sensational, almost theatrical death during a suicide terrorist attack. Still others suggest mental illness: a demented loner is caught in the throes of a depressive nightmare, possibly besieged by demonic illusions, which makes escape through self-killing a desirable end in itself, especially if it is possible to take out some imaginary tormentors at the same time.¹

Until now, the main problem in evaluating these competing explanations is that our information about the actual demographic characteristics of suicide attackers has been woefully incomplete. Our information is improving. There is a growing number of new books and articles that detail the life histories of individual suicide terrorists,² collect broad data on the backgrounds of terrorists in general and certain groups of suicide terrorists