

# The Strategic Threat from Suicide Terror

Scott Atran

► **To cite this version:**

| Scott Atran. The Strategic Threat from Suicide Terror. 03-33, 2003. <ijn\_00000435>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00000435**

**[https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn\\_00000435](https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000435)**

Submitted on 17 Dec 2003

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**J O I N T C E N T E R**  
AEI-BROOKINGS JOINT CENTER FOR REGULATORY STUDIES

## **The Strategic Threat From Suicide Terror**

**Scott Atran**

**Related Publication 03-33**  
**December 2003**

The author is Scott Atran of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. He thanks Robert Axelrod, Douglas Medin, Richard Garwin, Noam Chomsky and Lawrence Pintak for information and suggestions on an earlier draft. Please contact the author at Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 426 Thompson St., Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248; [satran@umich.edu](mailto:satran@umich.edu)

## **Executive Summary**

Suicide attacks have become more prevalent globally, gaining in strategic importance. Most are religiously motivated, with Islamic Jihadi groups networked to permit “swarming” by different groups honing in on multiple targets, then dispersing to form new swarms. The incidence and impact of suicide terrorism have not diminished despite billions of dollars spent. Military and counterinsurgency actions are tactical, not strategic responses. Long-term reliance on belligerent tactics is counterproductive. Poverty and lack of education *per se* are not root causes of terrorism. Rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations – especially regarding civil liberties – are critical. There are recommendations to diminish the strategic threat.

## The Strategic Threat From Suicide Terror

Scott Atran

“We in this country... don’t understand the Muslim fundamentalists today.... In any event, the fact is that at the senior levels of the Government we did not have a deep understanding of the peoples we were involved with [during the Vietnam War]; we didn’t know their history, their culture, their politics, their personalities. And that ignorance was reflected in the national intelligence estimates, which were the bible by which the Secretaries of State, Defense, National Security Advisers and the Presidents behaved.”

- Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, interviewed for *The National Security Archive*, Episode 11: Vietnam, 6 Dec. 1998

### **1. The Strategic Peril**

“It will be a long, hard slog.” That conclusion in a recent leaked memo by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is official recognition of a grim and perverse reality: The war on terror is making the world an even more dangerous place. The past three years have seen more suicide attacks than the last quarter century. And while many top leaders of al-Qaeda are now in custody, the organization is transforming into a highly decentralized “virtual” network even more difficult to fight than before.

According to a U.S. Congressional Report released in August 2003, suicide attacks from 1980 through 2001 represented 3 percent of terrorist attacks worldwide but accounted for nearly half of all deaths. Since 2000, some 300 attacks have killed well over 5000 people in 17 countries. At least 70% of these attacks were religiously motivated, with more than 100 attacks by Al-Qaeda and affiliates. More ominously, Islamic Jihadi groups are now networked in ways that permit “swarming” by actors contracted from many different groups homing in on multiple targets, then dispersing to form new swarms. Multiple coordinated suicide attack across countries and even continents is the adaptive hallmark of Al Qaeda's continued global web-making. The London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies surmises that: “The counter-terrorism effort has perversely impelled an already highly decentralized and evasive transnational terrorist network to become more ‘virtual’ and protean and, therefore, harder to identify and neutralize.”

Repeated suicide actions in Israel/Palestine, Pakistan/Kashmir/India, Russia/Chechnya, and now in U.S.-occupied Iraq show that massive counterforce alone does not stop, or even reliably diminish, frequency of suicide attack (although it may stem increase), and that suicide attacks often achieve attackers' near-term strategic goals (forcing withdrawal from areas subject to attack, radically upsetting life routines in order to destabilize and demonstrate vulnerability). In Lebanon, Hizbollah ("Party of God") initiated the first systematic campaign of contemporary suicide attack in 1983, killing hundreds of American and French soldiers in coordinated truck bombings, and compelling the Americans and French to withdraw their remaining forces. Hizbollah effectively ceased suicide operations after achieving its main objective of forcing Israel to abandon most of the territorial and political gains made during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. In Palestine/Israel, suicide attack has derailed the Interim Agreement under the 1995 Oslo accords, as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad persistently demanded, and thwarted peace negotiations aimed at territorial compromise. In Sri Lanka, Tamil Eelam ("Tamil Homeland") only recently suspended actions by suicide squads of Tamil Tigers after wresting control of Tamil areas from the Sinhalese-dominated government, and forcing it to officially recognize some measure of Tamil autonomy. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda suicide bombings have provoked a drastically reduced U.S. military presence in the country. Economic disruption from the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. range in official estimates from hundreds of billions of dollars to more than a trillion, with nearly \$100 billion in costs for New York City alone.

In every country where suicide attacks have occurred, people have become more suspicious and afraid of other people. Emboldened by such successful precedents, and by increasing support and recruitment among Muslim populations angered by U.S. actions in Iraq and those of its allies elsewhere, Jihadi groups believe and show themselves able to mount a lengthy and costly "war of attrition" against their foes. As Secretary Rumsfeld laments: "The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists' cost of millions."

The longer this war of attrition lasts, the greater the long-term strategic risk of radicalizing Muslim sentiment against us around the world, of undermining our own international alliances, and of causing serious and sustained discontent at home. In a June 2003 survey, the Pew Research Center found that only 7% of Saudis had a positive view of the U.S. , and less than 20% of Pakistanis and Turks. 99% of Lebanese, 98% of Palestinians and 83% of

Indonesians held unfavorable opinions of the U.S., while majorities in these countries also expressed confidence in Osama Bin Laden to “do the right thing regarding world affairs.” A White House panel reported in October 2003 that Muslim hostility towards the USA “has reached shocking levels,” and is growing steadily. Similar shifts in opinion are occurring among our closest allies. In an October 2003 poll commissioned by the European Union, Europeans ranked America with North Korea as the greatest threat to world peace after Israel. A June 2003 poll by the German Marshall Fund found that the majority of Europeans overall do not support force as a means of imposing international justice (compared with 84% of Americans who do support use of force), and no longer want the USA to maintain a strong global presence (compared to 64% in 2002 who favored a strong U.S. global role). Distrust becomes mutual. A survey released by Euro RSCG Worldwide in September 2003 shows that 73% of Americans admired France less than they did before 9/11; 57% had a diminished view of Saudi Arabia. Two years after the 9/11 attacks, most Americans felt no safer from terrorist threats, more distrustful of many longstanding allies, and increasingly anxious about the future.

Just as with international and civil wars tracked over the last two centuries, political scientist Robert Axelrod shows that most casualties and cascading effects of terrorist acts are caused by a few, increasingly clustered and massive operations planned over months and years (and long-term planning is Al-Qaeda’s hallmark). This striking trend (a straight line on a log-log scale) makes imperative that effective countermeasures be found to avoid catastrophic devastation and disruption. “God has ordered us to build nuclear weapons,” proclaimed Fazlur Rahman Khalil of Harkat ul-Mujahideen on the CBS News show *60 Minutes II*. A subsequent attack on India’s Parliament by Jaish-e-Muhammed, a Pakistani offshoot of the Al-Qaeda affiliate that Khalil heads, probably brought nuclear war closer than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Pakistan government’s release of dozens of Harkat and Jaish operatives (who had been rounded up in a post-9/11 staging of solidarity with the U.S.) suggests such a “partnership in the war on terror” is more a matter of convenience than of the conviction necessary to stop those who are just dying to kill Americans, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Asian and African Christians, Animists and Muslim “unbelievers” (*kafir*).

One research priority should be to explore how best “netwar” may be waged against increasingly high-tech, networked terrorist groups that are seeking WMDs from multiple criminal and other non-state sources in order to pursue what physicist Richard Garwin terms

“megaterror.” Disabling and defending against relatively diffuse, horizontal social networks of control and command may require very different risk assessments and tactics than those used to combat the vertical social hierarchies that direct national armies. Carnegie Mellon’s Kathleen Carley has used multi-agent network analysis to monitor and model changes in Al-Qaeda, such as those following break up of the cell responsible for the suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Tanzania. She found that eliminating leaders who are central actors (having the most ties to other cell members and to other cells) can produce more adaptive responses in the overall network “healing” process than elimination of less central actors. This indicates that targeted assassinations – a favorite Israeli tactic – can be counterproductive, regardless of any civilian reaction.

A key weakness in increasingly virtual networks like Al-Qaeda is lessening of direct ties between family, friends and fighters, which makes trust in such networks harder to sustain and easier to sunder. But we have yet to take advantage of this emerging weakness in our foe. The U.S. remains (like Pakistan and other “partners”) too self-interested and hidebound by its own hard power to secure the trust and cooperation needed for the long slog. Traditional top-heavy and one-sided approaches - such as “strategic” bombardment, sanctions, invasion, occupation and other massive forms of coercion – will not eliminate tactically innovative and elusive terrorist swarms. Moreover, intelligence estimates and recommendations, which continue to be based primarily on models generalizing from past occurrences and frequency of events, actually make us less secure by underestimating the importance of large but rare attacks that are far and away the most damaging. Reliance on past events also blinds us to enemy innovation (the “Maginot Effect”). In finance, as George Soros has so profitably sensed, the more we look to the ripples, the less we are prepared for the tidal wave. This is also how we should face the apocalyptic warfare that Al-Qaeda and company intends.

Combating terrorist swarms probably requires our own military’s ability to operate in swarms of small and rapid mobile units, informed by culturally astute street intelligence and connected by wireless networks to powerful radar and satellite images. This sort of “network-centric” warfare is in the planning at the new Pentagon Office of Force Transformation. But hunting down, catching and destroying terrorist networks also requires a new strategic form of “spider webbing” powered by multilateral, interfaith alliances of transnational, national and local groups. Bonded by mutual trust, purpose and dedication, these multi-channel associations (true

“coalitions of the willing” not bought or commandeered) could have the broad collective intelligence and resourcefulness needed to keep ahead of the game.

Equally important, if not more so, concerted effort must be made to understand under what conditions people opt to become committed terrorists in order to preempt and prevent terrorism. Of course, this doesn't mean negotiating with terrorist groups over goals like Al-Qaeda's quest to replace the Western-inspired system of nation-states with a global caliphate. Bin Laden and other leaders of the Qaeda-led *World Islamic Front for the Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders* seek no compromise, and must probably be fought to the death. But most people who sympathize with him are likely open to give and take. We must circumscribe the point at which commitment becomes absolute and non-negotiable and seek to reach people before they come to it.

The number of people outside of government who are trained and qualified to analyze terrorist organizations and the cultural support that sustains them is quite small in the United States, and meager elsewhere. Western academic institutions do not, as a rule, support terrorism studies as a discipline that merits long-term funding or intellectual dedication because of wariness over devoting resources to a politically-charged field whose relevance depends upon changing perceptions of threats and policy priorities. In an age of globalized information, there is potentially much more to be gained through freely accessed open sources than through classified sources (CIA and DIA analysts maintain that much of the information needed to “connect the points” before 9/11 was available from open sources). This situation of generally open-access to information facilitates joint civilian and military education programs and encourages long-term cooperative ventures between academic institutions, NGOs and government, akin to those established in order to manage the tensions and threats to national survival and global security during the Cold War. Reliance on government alone is too risky.

## **2. Limitations of Military Action**

On May 1, 2003 President Bush declared an end to major combat in Iraq and “one victory in the war on terror that began on 9/11.” Cofer Black, the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism, opined that while combat was ongoing Al-Qaeda had to “put up or shut up ... they had failed. It proves the global war on terrorism is effective.” On May 12, Qaeda-directed



bombings of three Western compounds in Saudi Arabia, were soon followed by similar series of suicide attacks in Morocco, Israel and Chechnya. These attacks were collectively more numerous and widespread than in any of the preceding 12 months.

Sizable suicide attacks in Israel, Indonesia and Iraq during August 2003 palpably altered the political landscape in the Middle East (end of the “Road Map”), southeast Asia (Indonesia’s government acknowledge it was “under assault”) and even within the U.S. (Republicans backed into political defense, Democrats charged on offense), and changed attitudes and relations among NATO countries and within the United Nations (Britain joined France and Germany to persuade the U.S. to seriously engage a jittery U.N.). In October 2003, Iraq suffered more suicide bombings than in its entire modern history (and now ranks only to Israel as the prime target of suicide bombings). White House claims that such attacks only confirm the increased “desperation” of terrorists in the face of allegedly increasing U.S. progress in the war on terror provide little real comfort. “Whatever their shape,” reported the *New York Times*, “Arab commentators were completely dismissive of President Bush’s remarks that the attacks were being inspired by growing American successes.” A November 2003 suicide attack on Italian forces in southern Iraq influenced other countries to forego any immediate contribution to the military occupation, and spurred the U.S. to speed up its timetable for ceding authority to Iraqis. In the same month, suicide bombings in Turkey by Al-Qaeda sympathizers directly challenged the strongest example of nonsectarian and democratic rule in the Muslim world, and extended the strategic threat to NATO’s underbelly. In December 2003, renewed suicide attacks by Chechnya’s “black widows” (women allowed to become religious martyrs, usually because of what Russian soldiers have done to the men in their families), brought terror to ordinary civilians in Russia’s own territory.

The frequency and impact of suicide terrorism have not diminished despite 165 billion dollars requested so far for the war effort in Iraq, and despite tens of billions of dollars spent on countermeasures aimed at penetrating suicide-sponsoring organizations, killing and capturing terrorist operatives and leaders, and depriving recruits their training and support bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Indonesia, Philippines and elsewhere. If Iraq, whose previous regime had no tangible relation to 9/11, is now truly the “central front” in the fight against terrorism, as President Bush emphasizes, it is at least partly because a vast military intervention by the U.S. has won there many new supporters for the terrorist’s cause. “War in

Iraq has probably inflamed radical passions among Muslims,” concludes the IISS, “and thus increased al Qaeda’s recruiting power and morale.” Al-Qaeda, which in the early 1990s first turned its hate from the Soviets to Saddam before taking on the U.S., had suffered manpower losses since 9/11, and so it profits doubly from no Saddam and new recruits.

So, what - apart from managing Iraq - is a good counterstrategy to terrorism, particularly of the suicidal 9/11 sort? Surely not belligerency alone. Military and counterinsurgency actions are tactical, not strategic responses to terrorism. Consider:

According to the final U.S. Federal Interagency report on *Combating Terrorism*, State Department funding for counterstrategies to combat terrorism overseas increased 133% from 9/11 through fiscal 2003. Including Defense Department budget increases and emergency supplemental measures, the bill for foreign operations in “The War on Terror” exceeded \$200 billion (with tens of billions more for Homeland Security). Yet incidence of suicide terrorism has not declined. The report, which reviews plans and activities by dozens of civil and military agencies, reveals scant evidence of serious effort or funding to understand or prevent people becoming terrorists in the first place.

Especially in the case of Al-Qaeda, which accounts for the most deaths by suicide attack worldwide (2000-2003), there are severe drawbacks to reliance on military and counterinsurgency action alone:

- The Al Qaeda network is a global association with affiliates in over 60 countries and links to recruits and supporters in nearly 100 countries. Massive military retaliation against an increasingly virtual network can be counterproductive if it is not clearly focused, with little likelihood of thoroughly neutralizing key actors and significant probability of causing appreciable civilian casualties, dislocation of civil life and hence increased hostility on the part of the general population. The war in Afghanistan targeted Taliban rule to destroy evident Taliban support for Al-Qaeda; however, war upon Iraq had no clear target or concrete result for the “War on Terror.” Although the Iraq war was billed as necessary to deprive terrorists – especially Al Qaeda – of WMDs, there were no reliable data to support President Bush’s claim that Iraqi WMDs posed “a mounting threat to our country,” much less that Al-Qaeda had plans to access them. (In late November 2003, veteran CIA analyst Stuart Cohen, who was in charge of putting

together the 2002 intelligence estimate, posted this partial disclaimer on the agency's website: "Any reader would have had to read only as far as the second paragraph of the Key Judgments to know that as we said: 'We lacked specific information of Iraq's WMD program'."")

- The aftermath of large-scale military action requires rapid, large-scale and sustained post-combat restructuring of society. This puts a considerable economic and political burden on the occupying powers, which their homeland populations may be unwilling to support in the measure necessary. Thus, for the second time in little more than a decade, the U.S. has practically forsaken Afghanistan after declaring military victory there. The country receives relatively paltry aid, despite overwhelming evidence of utter devastation and promises to alleviate the population's misery. Rural regions remain on the edge of political, social and economic meltdown. Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's pro-American President, barely rules Kabul. The country is again the world's major exporter of opium poppy.
- An occupying military administration alone is unlikely to have the policing, economic and social welfare capabilities needed for the job of reconstruction. Performance assessments of peacekeeping activity by U.S. forces in Bosnia indicate that soldiers on standard tours of duty tend to be reactive and risk averse in dealing with local problems. They venture from their barracks only in fully-outfitted patrols and convoys. The focus is on efficiency in completing short-term assignments, not on deepening understanding of local society. Soldiers want to stay alive, finish their tour and go home. Unfamiliar with the culture, and unwilling to risk becoming familiar, they often overreact to low-level threats (taking a pile of leftover building stones for an ambush) and ignore problems that do not seem immediately threatening (leaving blocked village sewage untended, which leads to disease, then spurs rioting). In Iraq, the high level of ongoing threats exacerbates such behaviors and their consequences. According to Larry Hollingworth, a former British colonel and relief specialist who has worked in the Balkans and Chechnya served with Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance after the fall of Baghdad: "at the U.S. military's insistence, we traveled out from our fortified

headquarters in Saddam's old Republican Guard Palace in armored vehicles, wearing helmets and flack jackets, trying to convince Iraqis that peace was at hand, and that they were safe. It was ridiculous." Delays caused in seeking competent outsiders and locals adequate to the task prolong conditions of political instability and personal insecurity in which terrorism thrives. This is arguably the case today in Iraq, as it was in Israeli-occupied Lebanon 20 years ago.

- A continued war footing causes psychological and social strain on the homeland and, in the absence of clear prospects for military victory, may undermine political faith and economic performance, no matter how positive the public relations "spin."

Regarding the Palestine/Israel conflict, which accounts for a plurality of suicide attacks worldwide, polls by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre indicate that increased coercive measures by Israeli forces during the Second Intifada (fall 2000 - present) are positively correlated with Palestinian popular support for attacks. Support for suicide attacks, in turn, directly correlates with:

- increased support for the principal radical Islamic groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad,
- decreased popular support for the multiparty, non-sectarian Palestinian Authority and its President, Yasser Arafat,
- decreased optimism for the future, and decreased Palestinian readiness to follow the peace process toward a negotiated political solution.

Accordingly, a significant part of future efforts should focus on identifying root causes and how to effectively deal with them, within a reasonable time frame. This effort may demand more patience than governments can politically tolerate in times of crisis; however, we can ill afford to ignore either the consequences of own society's actions or the causes behind the actions of others.

### **3. Misconceiving Root Causes**

The U.S. *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* highlights “The War of Ideas” and “The War on Poverty” as adjunct programs to reduce terrorism’s pool of support and recruitment. The war of ideas is based on the premise that terrorists and their supporters “hate our freedoms,” a sentiment President Bush has expressed both with regard to Al-Qaeda and to the Iraqi resistance. But survey data reliably show that most Muslims who support suicide terrorism favor elected government, personal liberty, educational opportunity and economic choice. Mark Tessler, who coordinates long-term surveys of Muslim societies from the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, finds that Arab attitudes to American culture are most favorable among young adults, regardless of their religious feeling. This is the same population that terrorist recruiters single out.

The war on poverty is based on the premise that terrorism is spawned by conditions of impoverishment, lack of education and social estrangement. Current models of crime prevention are based on the assumption that the greater the amount of human capital accumulated by a person (including income and education), the less likely that person is to commit a crime. This is because the greater a person’s human capital, the more that person is aware of losing out on substantial future gains if captured or killed (“opportunity costs”). Similar thinking applies to suicide: the less promising one’s future, the more likely one’s choice to end life. Almost all current U.S. foreign aid programs related to terrorism pivot on such assumptions. Money is poured into poverty reduction and literacy enhancement so that rising opportunity costs will act to deter terrorism. According to the U.S. State Department report, *September 11 One Year Later*, development aid is based “on the belief that poverty provides a breeding ground for terrorism. The terrorist attacks of September 11 reaffirmed this conviction.” President Bush declared at last year’s UN conference in Monterrey, Mexico: “We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror.” But study after study demonstrates that suicide terrorists and their supporters are not abjectly poor, illiterate or socially estranged. If they were, they couldn’t produce effective and reliable killers, argues retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Todd Stewart, Ohio State’s Director for International and Homeland Security.

Another misconception that implicitly drives current national security policy is that suicide terrorists are not sane. Senator John Warner testified that a new security doctrine of

preemption was necessary because “those who would commit suicide in their assaults on the free world are not rational.” But suicide terrorists on the whole have no appreciable psychopathology. A report on *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism* used by the Central and Defense Intelligence Agencies (CIA and DIA) finds that “there is no psychological attribute or personality distinctive of terrorists.”

Recruits are generally well-adjusted in their families and liked by peers, and often more educated and economically better off than their surrounding population. Researchers Basel Saleh and Claude Berrebi independently find that the majority of Palestinian suicide bombers have college education (versus 15% of the population of comparable age) and that less than 15% come from poor families (although about a third of the population lives in poverty). DIA sources who have interrogated Al-Qaeda detainees at Guantánamo note that Saudi-born operatives, especially those in leadership positions, are often “educated above reasonable employment level, a surprising number have graduate degrees and come from high-status families.” Motivation and commitment are evident in willingness to sacrifice material and emotional comforts (families, jobs, physical security), and to pay their own way from their homes to travel long distances. The general pattern was captured in a Singapore Parliamentary report on prisoners from Jemaah Islamiyah, an Al-Qaeda ally: “These men were not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised. Like many of their counterparts in militant Islamic organizations in the region, they held normal, respectable jobs. Most detainees regarded religion as their most important personal value.”

This is not to deny the role of economic factors in sustaining popular support for terrorism, such as those that arise from explosive population growth, combined with failure of rigidly authoritarian governments to provide initiatives for youth. It is difficult, and perhaps not possible, to disentangle the relative significance of political versus economic factors in the in the Muslim world’s terror-generating process of rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations. During the 1990s, rising aspirations among Muslim peoples were fanned by momentous political developments in Algeria (multiparty elections, including Islamic groups), Palestine (Oslo Peace Accords), Chechnya (dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Communist control), Indonesia (Suharto’s resignation and the end of dictatorship) and elsewhere. In each case, economic stagnation or decline followed as political aspirations were thwarted (cancellation of elections by the Algerian Army, breakdown of the Israel-Palestine

Camp David negotiations, Russia's crackdown on Chechnya's bid for autonomy, fomenting of interethnic strife and political disaccord by Suharto army loyalists and paramilitary groups).

Support and recruitment for suicide terrorism occur not under conditions of political repression, poverty and unemployment or illiteracy as such, but when converging political, economic and social trends produce diminishing life opportunities relative to expectations, thus generating frustrations that radical organizations exploit. In fact, the greater a person's human capital (including income and education), the greater that person's awareness of future needs, and the greater the person's degree of altruism and commitment to the future generation's welfare. This is the economic rationale for the emergence of dynastic families, and also anchors devotion to social causes that require understanding the future (e.g., conservation movements). Revolutionary terror bursts upon history when greater freedom from want and awareness of the future are amplified into explosive frustration by corrupt and corroded societies that choke rising aspirations.

This helps to account for terrorism's spread but not its spark. Most people in the world who suffer stifling, even murderous oppression don't become terrorists. As with nearly all creators and leaders of history's terrorist movements, those who conceive of using suicide terrorism in the first place belong mostly to an intellectual elite possessing sufficient material means for personal advancement. What motivates them is religious or ideological conviction and zeal, whose founding assumptions (like those of *any* religion) cannot be rationally scrutinized, and which they get others to believe in and die for.

This doesn't mean that sponsors of martyrdom are irrational. Use of religious assumptions for political or economic purposes can be eminently rational, as in martyrdom or missionary actions to gain recognition, recruits and power. Dwindling returns on future life prospects for individuals translate into increasing recruitment and prompt returns for terrorist groups and leaders. This degree of manipulation usually works, however, only if the manipulators themselves are convinced of what they are doing.

Through indoctrination of recruits into relatively small and closeted cells - emotionally tight-knit "brotherhoods" - terror organizations create a "family" of cell mates who are just as willing to sacrifice for one another as a mother for her children. Consider the "Oath to Jihad" taken by recruits to Harkat ul-Mujahideen, which affirms that by their sacrifice they would help secure the future of their family of fictive kin: "Each [martyr] has a special place - among them

are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear.” These culturally-contrived cell loyalties mimic and (at least temporarily) override genetically-based fidelities to family kin while securing belief in sacrifice to a larger group cause. The mechanism of manipulation resembles the one used by our own army to train soldiers in small groups of committed buddies who acquire willingness to sacrifice for one another, and derivatively for glory and country (motherland, fatherland).

Like the best commercial advertisers, but to ghastlier effect, charismatic leaders of terrorist groups turn ordinary desires for family and religion into cravings for what they're pitching, to the benefit of the manipulating organization rather than the individual being manipulated (much as the fast food or soft drink industries manipulate innate desires for naturally scarce commodities like fatty foods and sugar to ends that reduce personal fitness but benefit the manipulating institution). This suggests that a key to understanding and parrying suicide terrorism is to concentrate more on the organizational structure, indoctrination methods and ideological appeal of recruiting organizations than on personality attributes. No doubt predisposing individual differences render some people more susceptible to social factors that leaders use to get people to die for their cause. But months – sometimes years – of intense indoctrination can lead to “blind obedience” no matter who the individual, as indicated in studies of people who become torturers for their governments.

Despite numerous studies of individual behavior in group contexts that show situation to be a much better predictor than personality, Americans overwhelmingly believe that personal decision, success and failure depend upon individual choice, responsibility and personality. Most of the world disagrees. This is plausibly one reason many Americans tend to think of terrorists as “homicidal maniacs.” “If we have to, we just mow the whole place down,” said Senator Trent Lott, exasperated with the situation in Iraq, “You’re dealing with insane suicide bombers who are killing our people, and we need to be very aggressive in taking them out.” Although we can't do much about personality traits, whether biologically influenced or not, we presumably can think of nonmilitary ways to make terrorist groups less attractive and to undermine their effectiveness with recruits.



#### **4. Facing Our Responsibilities**

Whether because of a fundamental attribution error that assigns the individual all responsibility for any action, or willful blindness to avoid dissonance with one's own worldview, Americans often view attempts to understand what motivates terrorism as a waste of time or worse, as pandering to terrorism. But countering terrorism also requires facing problems with our own society's appraisals and actions.

There is no evidence these people hate our internal cultural freedoms, but every indication they dislike its external foreign policies, particularly in the Middle East. They are not so much jealous of America as hostile to a perceived jumble of *realpolitik* and messianic mission that allows preemptive action against those who oppose the vision in the *National Security Strategy of the United States* of a "single sustainable model for national success... right and true for every person, in every society." A Defense Department Science Board reports (in response to a suicide attack against U.S. military housing at Khobar Towers, Saudi Arabia): "Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States."

The U.S. has a military presence in over 100 countries, most of which are not democracies. Backing weak, failed and corrupt states generates animosity and terrorism by peoples who wish to participate in strong, successful and honest governance. Studies by Princeton economist Alan Krueger and others find no correlation between a nation's per capita income and terrorism, but do find a correlation between lack of civil liberties (defined by Freedom House) and terrorism. A recent National Research Council report, *Discouraging Terrorism*, finds that: "terrorism and its supporting audiences appear to be fostered by policies of extreme political repression and discouraged by policies of incorporating both dissident and moderate groups responsibly into civil society and the political process."

What can we do to diminish the strategic threat and attract potential recruits away from terrorism? We should play on the strengths of our "soft power" to inspire individual creativity and the collective benefits of free choice, not rely primarily on the "hard power" of conflict and coercion. Muslim and world opinion generally favors these aspects of our soft power. Accordingly,

- We should promote personal liberty by withdrawing military and political support from those of our “partners” who persistently infringe on human rights and deny political expression to their people. There seems to be a direct correlation between U.S. military aid to politically corroded or ethnically divided states, human rights abuses by those regimes, and rise in terrorism, as initially moderate opposition is pushed into common cause with more radical elements. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch regularly document “horrific” and “massive” human rights abuses occurring in countries that receive the most U.S. aid in absolute terms (Israel, Egypt, Colombia, Pakistan), and the greatest relative increase in aid (Central Asian Republics, Georgia, Turkey) including many “new Partners in the War on Terrorism.” Of course, we can’t just unilaterally pull out of places that would then be threatened with collapse or hostile takeover. But our long-term planning must not allow us to become embroiled in maintaining brutal and repressive regimes whose practices generate popular resentment against us. The geopolitical context no longer supports complacent tolerance for “bastards, but our bastards.” In the Cold War’s zero-sum game, when we backed a nation our opponent lost; now, if we sponsor regimes devoid of popular support, non-state and transnational terrorism only gains.
- We should promote economic choice. But people must be allowed to pick and choose those goods and values of ours that they desire, and must not be made to accept goods and values that we want them to have in the name of “free markets” or “globalization.” The forced privatization of the formerly state-run economy of Iraq, without the informed consent of Iraqi citizens, has little to do with promoting freedom (and is certainly illegal under the terms of the Hague Convention). Similarly, the U.S. decision to exclude allies in NATO and the U.N. Security Council from bidding in fair competition for contracts to rebuild Iraq because they did not support the war suggests that a chief aim of globalization may be simply “Americanization” by politically correct multinationals.
- We should promote democracy. But we must be ready to accept “democracy’s paradox”: if people choose representatives who we don’t like, or who have different values or ways of doing things, then we must accept voters’ decisions as long as this does not yield

physical violence against us. In fact, democratic governments, whose electoral mandates can only be achieved and maintained through compromise and popular consensus, have never warred against each other (although U.S. subversion of the elected governments of Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, Guatemala President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, and Chile President Salvador Allende in 1973 came close). So let us pressure those in power to accept the verdict of the ballot box, whether or not they (or we) like the results. Democratic self-determination in Palestine, Kashmir and Iraq – or for that matter, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia – will more likely reduce terrorism than more military and counterinsurgency aid.

- We should promote educational opportunity by funding non-sectarian education as an alternative to religious seminaries (*madrassahs*) that have become principal sources of free education (including books, housing, board) unto Holy War for many Muslim youth. We can help to train teachers and administrators, build schools and dormitories, furnish books and computers, provide fellowships and stipends, and fund local invitations for all willing parties to discuss and debate. Radical Islamic and other terrorist groups often provide more and better educational, medical, and social welfare services than governments do; so we must help others in these societies to compete with – rather than attempt to crush – such programs for the bodies, minds and hearts of people.
- We must establish an intense dialogue with Muslim religious and community leaders to reconcile Islamic custom and religious law (*shari'a*) with internationally recognized standards for crime and punishment and human rights.
- We should empower moderates from within to confront inadequacies and inconsistencies in their own knowledge (of others as evil), values (respect for life) and behavior (support for killing), and other members of their group. This can produce emotional dissatisfaction leading to lasting change and influence in these individuals. Social psychology research by Stanford's Lee Ross and others indicates that people who identify with antagonistic groups use conflicting information from the other group to reinforce antagonism. Thus, simply trying to persuade others from without by bombarding them with more self-

serving information about how good we are may only increase hostility. Nevertheless, most people have more moderate views than what they consider their group norm to be, and so may be more willing to listen to others, to negotiate and to feed back compromise to their own group if allowed to engage others outside of group contexts.

- We must work in concert with the international community to address the historical and personal grievances – whether perceived or actual - of people who have been denied the opportunity and power to realize their hopes and aspirations for personal security, collective peace, environmental sustainability and cultural fulfillment. For, no evidence (historical or otherwise) indicates that support for suicide terrorism will evaporate without complicity in achieving at least some fundamental goals that suicide attackers and supporting communities share. The festering conflicts and killing fields of Israel/Palestine, Pakistan/Kashmir/India, Russia/Chechnya, the Western Sahara, Mindanao, The Moluccas, Bosnia and elsewhere should be as much of a concern and a prod to action as the current state of the world economy.

What can we do to demonstrate good will, shore up domestic support and gain international cooperation in the struggle against terrorism? We must realize that:

- Candor and debate with open dissent instill confidence, but propaganda and manipulative public relations breed disaffection and distrust within our own society, alienate our allies and incite support for our foes. As any good scientist or businessman knows, by acknowledging errors, we can correct them to perform better, and in performing better we are better able to recognize and correct our errors. Our government does not inspire trust with rosy White House releases about how “the good days outnumber the bad days” (just after 5 suicide bombs in Baghdad’s bloodiest day to that date) or feel-good State Department infomercials about the “Afghan Spring” (when Afghanistan remains second only to the Congo as the planet’s deadliest region of armed conflict). We know now that claims for going to war, such as Iraq’s possession of WMDs and links to Al Qaeda, were based on faulty or false inferences from flimsy and fragmentary evidence. Rather than own up to this as either error in judgment or cover for something else important,

continued spinning and dodging risk destroying the national consensus and conviction necessary for difficult and informed decisions, and undermining the reliability of our case for international cooperation to improve the security climate.

- People from different cultures do not recognize the legitimacy of another's motives or "ideals" as justifying the consequences of actions. From the perspective of different cultures, regard for consequences always trumps regard for motives. It does no good to attempt to persuade others that their people's deaths and suffering at our hands are "accidental," "regrettable and unwanted" or "collateral" to our "real" intentions and goals. Such interpretations only have moral import and political persuasion for those who already share a society's moral axioms and political ideals. No amount of spin will convince most Muslims that the 4,000 or so civilian deaths suffered during Iraq's combat phase were any less atrocious in destruction of innocent life than the 3,000 deaths of 9/11. We ignore this at the risk of appearing to be brutal hypocrites.
- Similarly, we do not gain the world's trust by "exceptional" treatment of prisoners seized in combat (interning them without charge at Guantánamo or handing them over to others who are not bound by our legal constraints), by insisting that only our WMDs and those of allies and clients are for good purposes, and by demanding that others abide by international treaties and UN resolutions of our choosing as we ignore those that displease us.

In sum, shows of military strength don't seem to dissuade popular support for terrorism: witness failure in Israel's and Russia's coercive efforts to end the string of Palestinian and Chechnyan suicide bombings. Rather, we need to show the Muslim world the side of democratic cultures they most respect. Our engagement needs to involve interfaith initiatives, not ethnic profiling. We should promote international trust through negotiation and proliferation of international norms and standards, whether or not a particular application proves to our liking. We must address grievances in places where daily reports and images of violence against civilians engender global Muslim resentment. And we have to stop insisting that our vision alone defines the future of civilization for all humanity. A key "lesson" of the Vietnam War, former

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told Harvard's Kennedy School in 1995, was to err in thinking "we're on a mission. We weren't then and we aren't today. And we shouldn't act unilaterally militarily under any circumstances. We don't have the God-given right to shape every nation to our own image." America may be the world's "indispensable nation," as President Clinton avowed, but not if it goes it alone.

## **5. Epilogue**

Ever since the Enlightenment, the major movements of the modern world – all the big "isms" of recent history - have been on a mission to invent "humanity" by saving it and making it their own. Modernism is the industrial legacy of monotheism (however atheist in appearance), secularized and scientifically applied. No non-monotheistic society ever considered that all people are, or should be, essentially of a kind. To many in our own society, the 20th-century demise of anarchism, facism and communism left history's playing field wide open to what Lincoln besought as "the last great hope of mankind," our society's ideal of democratic liberalism. Even after 9/11, there is scant recognition that the unforeseen events of history perpetually transform or destroy the best laid plans for historical engineering. Yet the catastrophic wars and revolutions of the modern era teach us that the more uncompromising the design and the more self-assured the designer, the harder both will fall.

If we take an evolutionary perspective on history, which frames success and failure in terms of the growth or decline of traits over populations (and, eventually, in terms of the growth or decline of populations themselves), then current U.S. antiterrorism policies do not seem adaptive. Support for the U.S. is declining in the world as support for terrorism increases. Moreover, U.S. procedures to combat terror are often predictable and reactive. Even the "new" security strategy of preemption is preponderantly about maintaining U.S. preponderance (the global status quo) using traditional military means and other Great Power tactics. By contrast, terrorist stratagems are increasingly innovative and proactive. Perhaps more important, increasingly many people in the world perceive the terrorists' anti-American agenda to be turning the tide of history. Such perceptions invariably act upon the future in unpredictable ways that make it folly and hazardous to believe in the constancy of clashing civilizations, the inevitability of the world's Americanization ("globalization" for some), or the end of history.

Whatever the final outcome, the more fixed that religious fundamentalisms become in their own messianic mission to “desecularize” modernity, the more likely they, too, will miserably fail. To survive, we must learn to ride history’s tide, looking for destinations fit to our means and likings. But we must be forever vigilant in adapting our course to changing circumstances, or else they will cause us to drown.