

# *Suicide Terrorism*

by Ami Pedahzur, Polity, 2005, 240 pp.

## Nicola Pratt

In 2003, Nir Regev – a university student, whom Ami Pedahzur had taught – was killed when Hanadi Jaradat, a 29-year-old lawyer from Jenin, blew herself up in a Haifa restaurant. Against this backdrop of personal loss, this book sets out to ‘understand the phenomenon of suicide terrorism’ (p. 4). It is divided into three parts: the first part defines suicide terrorism; the second considers the causes for its emergence and dispersion, and the third examines its effects and makes suggestions to deal with it.

The first chapter provides a definition of ‘suicide terrorism’ (as opposed to just ‘terrorism’) as an act of violence that kills yourself in addition to bystanders, but that also represents a tactic of terrorist organisations. This definition is, as Pedahzur notes, close to that given by Mia Bloom. [1] This definition is an important basis for the framework of analysis proposed in the remainder of the book. Chapter two reviews current explanations of suicide terrorism – which are categorised as personal, organisational and environmental. Rather than finding these explanations particularly deficient, the author argues that it is necessary to combine them to deepen one’s understanding of the phenomenon. This claim allows the author to avoid any serious critique of these existing approaches. More significantly, it rather masks the fact that his own analytical framework is based on a rational choice model of explanation.

This weakness aside, the rest of the book offers several interesting insights into suicide terrorism. First and foremost, suicide terrorism is regarded as a rational act rather than one perpetrated by pathological and/or dysfunctional individuals. Second, the motivation for suicide terrorism is not specific to a certain religious and/or cultural context. A large number of suicide terrorist acts are perpetrated by secular organisations: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey and, more recently, the Fatah-linked Al-Aqsa Brigade in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Of these, the LTTE, which represents a major perpetrator of suicide terrorist operations, functions in the non-Muslim environment of Sri Lanka. Third, suicide terrorism is not the result of decisions made by lone individuals but rather is embedded within the strategies

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of certain organisations and/or networks of friends, family and communities.

With regard to the last point, the author examines how certain organisations ( Hamas, Hezbollah, LTTE, PKK and other organisations in Chechnya and Iraq) have resorted to the tactic of suicide terrorism in order to further the aims of the organisation within particular national and political contexts. Despite the differing contexts and nature of these organisations, these aims demonstrate several commonalities. These include the struggle over territory and/or for self-determination against a more powerful enemy that has inflicted long-term misery on the community that the organisation seeks to represent. In addition, suicide terrorism is used by organisations in order to increase support against their political rivals within the community in which they operate. This can be seen with regard to the Occupied Territories. There, Hamas and Islamic Jihad began a campaign of suicide bombings after the signing of the Oslo Accords, not only to signal their opposition to the accords but also to gain political leverage over the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority. Their campaign of resistance was increasingly seen by many within the community as justified in the face of the Israeli government's reluctance to implement the accords and the ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Authority in leading Palestinians towards self-determination.

Whatever the motive or trigger of the individual – which may be the loss of loved ones, commitment to the cause, or even a way of avoiding the social stigma of extra-marital sex – organisations provide the mechanism for recruitment of would-be 'suicide terrorists,' by providing logistical support, and by 'marketing' suicide terrorism as part of 'a culture of death,' in which self-sacrifice for the community and its cause is seen as desirable. Hezbollah's decision to 'celebrate' suicide terrorism by erecting huge images in public places of its first suicide terrorist – 15 year-old Ahmad Qasir, who drove a vehicle loaded with explosives into an Israeli military compound in the Lebanese city of Tyre in November 1982 – and commemorating his death, helped to facilitate the recruitment of other suicide terrorists. The celebration of 'suicide terrorism' is promoted by organisations through the exhibition of posters of the images of suicide terrorists, through websites dedicated to their martyrdom and by the distribution of videos of the messages recorded before they embark on suicide missions. Moreover, suicide terrorism not only represents to some an organisational tactic but also a means of 'empowerment' – both for the individuals whose act of 'suicide terrorism' is celebrated and also for communities, for whom the act of 'suicide terrorism' transforms them from victim of oppression to active resistor against oppression.

The final chapter discusses the impact of suicide terrorism which, beyond the deaths and injuries of individuals, includes post-traumatic stress disorder, 'mistrust of other people, disillusionment with the government's ability to protect them, sceptical attitudes towards prospects of reconciliation and peace and, above all, militant and hostile attitudes towards the terrorists and communities they claim to represent' (p. 184). Suicide terrorism works against the resolution of conflicts and the righting of wrongs because of its brutalisation of civilian populations. It provides legitimacy for governments to respond to terrorism through severe measures against the communities from which suicide terrorists emerge and also legitimates the reduction of the democratic rights of their own constituencies. Alternatively, some governments (such as, the Spanish) may respond by acquiescing to terrorist demands, thereby providing 'an important triumph among terrorists all over the world' (p. 186).

One would hope that security services in Israel, the UK, the US, Turkey and Sri Lanka would read the final chapter of this book as quickly as possible. As a pacifist, I find it heartening to read that a senior researcher at the National Security Studies Centre at the University of Haifa believes the long-term solution to suicide terrorism (or, one could argue, any type of terrorism) is not military. Pedahzur points to the need for trust to be built amongst those communities in which suicide terrorists emerge. It is vital to establish the belief in those communities that the other side is honest in 'respect[ing] their needs and aspirations (p. 196).' Indeed, 'Inflicting pain on a civilian population will eliminate trust and simply drive more people into the unremitting cycle of violence and revenge' (p. 197). In the short term, the author advises caution in carrying out offensive strikes aimed at preventing suicide attacks since these strikes 'may inflict extensive damage on civilians who have nothing to do with terrorism' (p. 190).

A long-term and non-military solution to suicide terrorism is to 'undercut support for terrorist organizations' (p. 196) by 'undertak[ing] to meet some of their demands' (p. 195). The author does not elucidate which of these demands should be met. Yet it is implied that meeting such demands is negotiable according to the national security of the more powerful state. Furthermore, the use of 'more aggressive modes of response' (p. 189) to suicide terrorism 'may become inevitable under certain circumstances' (p. 190) that are implicitly determined by the notion of national security that is employed. Pedahzur argues for a de-militarised approach

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to suicide terrorism but without rejecting the state's right to resort to (military) violence where necessary. This ambiguity may be deliberate in order for this book to reach certain audiences. In particular, the author appears to use certain phrases to make his arguments more palatable to the Israeli security establishment. For example, he refers to the (illegal) occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel as 'Israeli control' (p. 13) and to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as 'Judea, Samaria and Gaza' (pp. 59, 66, 67, 68) – a term that is not recognised internationally and is often used by those who do not recognise Palestinian rights to statehood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

As an academic and peace activist, I am also interested in what this book may bring to the further exploration and conceptualisation of (political) violence. The book certainly helps us understand the gendered nature of suicide terrorism. The author describes how female suicide terrorists may choose to inflict violence upon themselves and others in order to restore their reputation within a socially conservative society that pities childless women and condemns extra-marital sex. Meanwhile, (male) commitment to the cause of groups that perpetrate suicide terrorism and to comrades within those groups may induce acts of suicide terrorism. Though Pedahzur mentions that such commitment is also observed amongst soldiers, he does not explore this insight – the factors shaping an individual's desire to perpetrate violence within the organisational setting of a national military may be similar to those of a 'terrorist,' in that both organisations rely on notions of 'militarised masculinity' [2] in order to induce members to use violence. I do not seek to establish a dichotomy in which all female suicide bombers are motivated by factors concerning their moral reputation, whilst all male suicide bombers are motivated by commitment to a larger cause (defending the nation, their comrades and/or an ideology). Rather, this discussion points to the fact that suicide terrorism is embedded within gender identities, roles and relations that are constructed in particular social, economic and cultural contexts. Consequently, the more useful question may not be why men and/or women engage in 'suicide terrorism,' but what are the factors leading men and women to engage in different types of political violence (whether linked to militaries or militias). To conceive of some sorts of violence (i.e. suicide terrorism) as a phenomenon to be explained, whilst not simultaneously examining the phenomenon of other types of violence (i.e. military aggression) is hypocritical and partial in addressing the causes of conflict and protecting the lives of individuals and their communities.

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### References

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### Notes

[1] Bloom 2005, Ch. 4.

[2] See Enloe 1989, 2000, 2004.