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Roxanne L. Euben

The attacks on September 11, 2001 released a barrage of public rhetoric characterizing the 19 Muslim hijackers as evil fanatics "in love with death" and animated by a "hatred of freedom." A spate of scholarship, op-ed articles, and policy papers devoted to anatomizing the "problems with Islam"—a propensity for violence and authoritarianism, an archaic conflation of religious and political domains, the pent-up rage of Muslims "left behind" by modernity—soon flooded airwaves, newspapers, and bookstores, in many cases recycling arguments several decades and even centuries old.[1] Counterclaims about the inherently peaceful and tolerant essence of Islam quickly followed, and a very peculiar American public debate about Islamic authenticity was born.

As if in reply, several studies have recently appeared that gather empirical evidence drawn from a variety of suicide campaigns past and present to demonstrate how and why such debates about Islam are a red herring we pursue at our own peril. By both argument and example, they seek to prove that suicide attackers and the organizations that recruit, train, and send them to their deaths are strategic actors whose behavior is not only intelligible but amenable to rational analysis—the kind of analysis conducive to developing those counterstrategies required to outmaneuver actual enemies, rather than spar fruitlessly with ghostly projections of our own fears and anxieties. Far from being the source or even primary cause of such behavior, religion is either bracketed under the rubric of "incentives" (Bloom 2005, 85) or treated as the ideological miasma that must be penetrated to excavate the strategic logic constitutive of rational behavior.

As Robert Pape argues, for example, religion may well be an effective tool frequently used by terrorist organizations to recruit and indoctrinate (2005, 4), but it is ultimately instrumental to the essentially "secular and strategic goal" of nationalist liberation (p. 22). Mia Bloom concurs: Suicide missions may reveal a common pattern in which religion is "manipulated to induce followers to kill in the name of God," but it is crucial to look beyond the patina of piety to recognize suicide bombing as a "tactic of coercive bargaining which includes the risks of outbidding because of the competition among rival organizations utilizing the tactic" (p. 94). Stephen Holmes goes so far as to characterize Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri as professional entrepreneurs who want to "keep up the value of their investment in terrorism" (in Gambetta 2005, 171). In his view, the paranoid, apocalyptic "orgy of blame" they peddle bespeaks less an

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707240125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

irrational fanaticism than an effective tool designed to intensify the "otherwise lukewarm craving for blood revenge felt by jihadists" (p. 169).

Longtime scholars of terrorism, religion, and radical Islamism will no doubt welcome the rich empirical data collected in these studies and will appreciate how handily they dispense with the remarkably resilient claim that suicide attackers and those who recruit them are insane, irrational, brainwashed, or otherwise unable to fathom the nature of what they do. What is bound to be more contentious is the way this rejection of irrationalism slides seamlessly into a recasting of such behavior as rational, which turns out to entail an effort to render suicide attackers and those who send them to kill and be killed intelligible to market logic. Underlying these elisions is, of course, a rational explanatory model (qualified, modified, and reworked in various ways since its earliest articulations) that is built on the assumption that political behavior is intelligible by reference to certain universal aspects of human psychology. Within the terms of this model, religion, language, culture, history, race, and so on, surface as differences that reflect or obscure the extent to which individuals everywhere act, as much as is possible given certain constraints, to maximize the chances of obtaining the ends they seek.

There is quite a bit of scholarship in political science demonstrating that the rational model explains a specific subset of political behavior quite well. The question these studies raise thus bears less on debates about the status of rational actor theory per se than about its explanatory reach: Is a model that analyzes suicide operations as one strategic tactic among many, chosen for its efficiency ("it does the job and other tactics did not"), the most appropriate and illuminating?

In his contribution to the Gambetta volume, Jon Elster argues that "[a]ttempts to identify motivations by some combination of game-theoretic analysis and econometrics are . . . doomed to fail" in part because suicide bombers are vulnerable to "significant mechanisms of irrational belief formation," and talking about "rational actors with irrational beliefs would be an oxymoron" (pp. 257–58). Yet there are other reasons these approaches may be particularly ill-equipped to contend with such behavior, reasons that only come into focus from a vantage outside the logic of instrumental rationality. For instance, motivations derived from those deeply held moral commitments (religious or otherwise) for which human beings in many cultures and epochs have deemed worth killing and dying tend to be stubbornly resistant to the logic and language of quantification and exchange, as is particularly evident in one early attempt to attribute increased religious participation to an "afterlife consumption" motive.[2] As Paul Diesing aptly points out, "[s]alvation is a definite end, so it can have means and a technique of achievement; but it is not alternative to any other end. It is priceless. The technical question, 'What must I do to be saved?' makes sense and can be answered; but the economic question 'How much is salvation worth to you?' does not."[3]

Yet it is surely the case that suicide attackers have goals, that they are capable of and often do behave strategically to realize such purposes, and that understanding such aims and practices is crucial to explaining their behavior. While these studies largely derive meaning from function, the particular significance of such tactics, the standards by which success is measured, and the contexts relevant to determining the particular function they perform actually depends upon the kind of interpretive frame operative at particular moments in particular places. If meaning and function are in this way mutually and dialectically determinative, norms, ideas, and beliefs do not simply reflect or obscure a set of given conditions, constraints, and choices, but rather determine how and in what terms they are understood. Explaining the function of any particular practice or tactic thus requires close examination of the complex interactions among material conditions, strategic choices, multiple and at times overlapping contexts, and the very beliefs and commitments these studies set aside, along with other "incentives" whose content is largely incidental.

In the case of suicide missions, Islam is not one among many incentives that can be bracketed in this way. Despite efforts to disentangle such operations from religion, the vast majority of the recent suicide campaigns in these studies are organized, carried out by, and pursued in the name of Muslims for whom (despite significant disagreements) Islam is not an "incentive" but rather an interlocking system of meanings. And like many other complex systems of belief, it articulates and defines a range of identities, categories, and norms; organizes human experience into narratives that assemble past, present, and future into a compelling interpretive frame; and specifies the range and meaning of acceptable and desirable practices. What this suggests is that any explanation of such behavior must attend to how and why Islam is deployed in particular ways, and that doing so effectively requires a shift in terminology as well as in theoretical perspective. Given that Islam is generally understood to prohibit suicide, for example, the very terminology of "suicide missions" (let alone "suicide terrorism") already takes a particular position on the questions an inquiry into "*jihadi* martyrdom" must investigate.[4]

Such a shift brings into view an interpretive frame derived from a selective appropriation of Islamic texts, precedents, and practices that bears directly on questions about how to understand the logic and proliferation of martyrdom tactics, albeit in ways that are difficult to measure and quantify. This frame positions Islam as the antithesis of a metastasizing Western[5] moral and spiritual bankruptcy, whereby moral transgressions are transfigured into natural urges, crass self-interest becomes the bedrock of collective life, and the divine plan for the universe and all things in it

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707240125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is reduced to a system of physical causality just waiting to be mastered by way of human ingenuity. As an expression of colossal human hubris, such premises and the worldview they express transgress against a divine sovereignty said to encompass all domains of human existence. Yet it is also cast as part of a long history of unrelieved Western aggression against Muslim lives, lands, and sensibilities in which the Christian Crusades, European colonialism, current American foreign policy, Israeli treatment of Palestinians, puppet "Muslim" governments, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Dutch cartoons, and anti-Turkish violence in Germany are but a few examples. Particularly significant here is the way this narrative resists distinctions between guilty and innocent: Along with "infected" Muslims, all Westerners by definition are collectively responsible for bequeathing such violence and corruption to the world. No one so implicated can claim moral innocence or even see clearly the real stakes of the crisis at hand. As Abdesslam Yassine, a Maghrebi Islamist, has argued:

> I tell you that what ties me to these people who are here before you. . . . It is not so much the ideological mobilization in the name of Islam to fight against those who deny our personality, our authenticity, to fight our historical adversary. . . . It is not so much that as it is our attachment to God. . . . But for you, this spiritual region remains voluntarily opaque. You do not want to see it. You do not want to look at it. . . . People do not come to Islam as an alternative for their social misfortunes. People come to Islam in response to a call, a call which goes very far and deep in the human soul. I do not know by which accident of history or by what misfortune "Homo Occidentalus," as you say, has lost this organ which permits the perception of things that are spiritual. . . . All that he has left are elements of economic, political and social analysis . . . things that are earthbound in some way.[6]

To be clear: the point here is not that this way of seeing the world is accurate, that it reflects the mind-set of all *jihadis,* or that it somehow explains why martyrdom has been embraced by Islamists originating from and operating within countries as diverse as Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Indonesia, and Pakistan. What it does sketch, and necessarily incompletely, are the contours of one particularly prevalent, if poorly understood, interpretive frame that provides a particular epistemology, narrative of history, and diagnosis of contemporary politics from which the purposes and function of Muslim struggle against all forms of the "disease"—including violent tactics that vitiate distinctions between guilt and innocence—are simultaneously defined and sanctified. It is, moreover, a system of representation that subsumes disparate yet immediately recognizable experiences of injustice, suffering, frustration, loss, and humiliation into an explanation capable of appealing to Muslims who live in radically different contexts who would never dream of strapping explosives to their bodies.

To acknowledge the ways in which this frame selectively draws upon and reworks Muslim history, practices, and texts does not commit one to arguing that 1) Islam is inherently intolerant and bloody-minded, and therefore 2) it is somehow the "cause" of the proliferation of jihadi martyrdom among Islamist groups from Hezbollah to Hamas to Al Qaeda. While there is no doubt that a singular Islam captures and organizes the subjectivities of millions who self-identify as Muslim (among other things), what travels under the rubric of "Islam" is inescapably diverse, multiethnic, and defined as much by disagreement as consensus. Just as the Torah and Bible lend themselves to at times radically divergent interpretations of what it means to be Jewish or Christian, the Koran and *hadith* (reports of the Prophet Muhammad's practices and sayings) are complex and susceptible to many different, and at times contradictory, enactments.

Understood as a discursive tradition,[7] rather than a fixed essence, Islam captures what is imagined as continuous and unitary in dialectical relationship to those concrete articulations and enactments by which it is transformed and adapted in different contexts for plural purposes. This suggests that questions about the true Islam and what it "really" justifies and condemns, as well as questions about whether and to what extent jihadi martyrdom can be traced to Islam, are the wrong questions, in part because answering them would require that a political scientist be able to delineate the "essential" Islam independent of power, history, and human interests. As centuries of Muslim jurisprudential debates and commentary demonstrate, this task is neither straightforward nor easy. It is not, in any case, required for one to answer the question that is much more likely to illuminate the current proliferation of jihadi martyrdom in the current context: Given explicit Islamic prohibitions against suicide, destruction of property, and the killing of innocents, why in this particular historical period, with these specific political, social, and economic circumstances, has a version of Islam conducive to the proliferation of violent martyrdom operations attained such political purchase among particular Muslim communities?

The answer to this question is far from clear. What is fairly clear is that the tautologies often produced by efforts to define rational behavior in terms of actions designed to achieve a desired end offer up as answers precisely that which needs to be explained. Why have suicide missions been on the rise recently? Because "suicide terrorists have learned that this strategy pays" (Pape, p. 22, echoed in Bloom, p. 78). Why do these tactics flourish in particular communities? "[I]f the domestic environment is extremely hospitable to violence, suicide terror may be championed because the hatred for the other side is very high" (Bloom, p. 81). Such tautologies may be self-evidently true, but they do not do justice to the texture of and contradictions in the empirical evidence, nor do they say much about why jihadi martyrdom is multiplying exponentially at this particular moment in history.

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(They do, however, explain a surprising inattention to some basic facts about Islam, from Pape's inaccurate description of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, as a kind of Sunni fundamentalism, to Bloom's confusion of the most important twentieth-century Sunni Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood/*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun,* founded by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, with *al-Mujamma al-Islami,* a Hamas charity founded in the 1970s by Shaikh Ahmed Yassin.)

An adequate answer to this question must begin by attending not only to the strategic logic of suicide bombers and the organizations that deploy them but also to the specificity of the contexts in which suicide operations are now proliferating, the words and meanings given to such missions by those who engage in and organize them, and the Muslim communities—local, regional, transnational, and increasingly virtual—from whom jihadis draw support and guidance and who are simultaneously embroiled in an ongoing and contentious debate about the legitimacy, meaning, and consequences of such tactics and their relation to other modes of resistance. Only by attending to the complex interplay among these material, discursive, symbolic, historical, and political forces can it be shown if, how, and why Hamas's mobilization of Islamic precedents, exhortations, and texts to widely propagate a particular interpretation of martyrdom among Palestinians illuminates, and is in turn illuminated by, the exponential increase of such tactics in Iraq or the transnational pursuit of violent jihad by Islamists affiliated with Al Qaeda.

This does not mean that each campaign is so unique that it is impossible to identify family resemblances and patterns of cross-pollination in the strategies, justifications, and conditions under which jihadi martyrdom operations proliferate. Nor does an insistence that words and systems of meanings are crucial to an explanation reduce political inquiry to an explication of ideas independent of context, require that scholars relinquish the capacity for judgment, or give the last word to the participants themselves. Political scientists are no better served by imagining ideas running around without history, language, partisans, or audiences than they are by reducing them to a mere mirror or distortion of strategic calculations. What attempts to explain the proliferation of jihadi martyrdom do need, and urgently, is a careful account of the specific and complex interrelation of meaning and function, which includes an account—to borrow from a now-ancient essay by Clifford Geertz—of how ideas "transform sentiment into significance and so make it socially available."[8]

Notes

1 Anxieties about the particular susceptibility of Muslims to irrationality, insularity, and fanaticism have a long and distinguished pedigree in Euro-American history. See, for example, Ernest Renan, *L'Islamisme et la Science: Conférence faite a la Sorbonne le 20 mars 1883,* ed. Calmann Lévy, Ancienne Maison Michel Lévy Frères (Paris, 1883), p. 3.

2 Corry Azzi and Ronald Ehrenberg, "Household Allocation of Time and Church Attendance," *Journal of Political Economy* 83 (February 1975): 28.

3 Paul Diesing, *Reason in Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 63.

4 As the Arabic for martyr, *shahid* (masc.)/*shahida* (fem.), is connected to the verb that means "to bear witness, experience first-hand, certify, testify and confirm," it has a much wider and more complicated range of connotations than what is suggested by "suicide attacker." By the same token *jihad,* often taken to mean "holy war," actually means "to struggle or strive" (there is an entirely different word in Arabic for war, *harb,* as well as killing, *qital*), and it is often used with various modifiers to distinguish among different forms of struggle (e.g., the jihad of the pen, of the sword, and so on). This is somewhat at odds with the current usage of *jihadi* to describe the most violent of Islamists.

5 Categories such as the West and non-West, the West and Islam, carve up the world in ways that obscure the fissures within each category, erase their mutual historical indebtedness, and deny the cross-pollination of the present. Given the frequency with which these terms are invoked by peoples all over the world and the very real allegiances and enmities they evoke, however, scholars engaged directly with the dilemmas of contemporary politics cannot simply dispense with such categories by reference to all that they miss, distort, or exclude. As the current political climate attests, there is much more at stake here than whether or not categories such as Islam and the West are *accurate,* in the sense of corresponding, more or less precisely, to actual geographic, political, historical, and/or normative borders in the world. As a result, I have opted to retain these terms, although all subsequent references should be read as problematic.

6 Interview with François Burgat, Rabat Salé, October, 1987. Burgat and William Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1993), p. 75.

7 In Talal Asad's words, Islam is a tradition consisting of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. . . . An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future with reference to particular Islamic practice in the present." T. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707240125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), p. 14.

8 Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System" in *Ideology and Discontent,* ed. David Apter (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), pp. 56–57.

Ian Shapiro

The books under review reveal considerable agreement about suicide bombers.[1] Yet there is a significant gap between the scholarly consensus they embody and widespread perceptions about the subject. We learn, for example, that suicide missions are as old as the hills. We learn that there is no particular link between the propensity to engage in suicide attacks or other forms of extreme terrorism and religious belief—let alone belief in Islamic fundamentalism. We learn that Sri Lanka's secular Marxist Tamil Tigers have been responsible for more suicide attacks than any other group in recent decades. We learn that even within Islamist groups like Hezbollah, the majority of suicide attackers have not been religious at all, and that some of the religious ones have been Christian rather than Islamist. And we learn that suicide attackers are of both sexes and of various ages, incomes, and education levels.

These findings merit widespread dissemination. They also prompt the observation that the least interesting things about suicide attackers, for political scientists, might be their religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or what they believe. Some subset of any population can likely be mobilized to die—and to kill—as aggressive crusaders for a politicized cause. The more interesting political questions are about who mobilizes and directs them, and what the conditions are that make people accept, and perhaps even support, suicide attacks as legitimate. Knowing a great deal about what was in the heads of Kamikaze pilots during World War II would not tell us much about why they were sent or what produced a culture in which their activities were validated.

In many circumstances, suicide missions are a weapon of the weak, a way for groups lacking in significant military resources to inflict maximum damage at low cost. This is why they are often deployed by political groups that lack conventional armies, such as insurgent militias and transnational ideological movements. Terrorism, of which suicide bombing is an extreme and dramatic form, is often the most effective tool they can deploy. And, as Robert Pape's book makes clear, it is often successful.

This logic of violence is not unique to terrorist groups. Social historians Douglas Hay and Michel Foucault long ago noted the existence of an inverse relationship between the coercive capacity at the state's disposal and the level of draconian punishments. Weak states engage in the kind of grotesque punishments described in the opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* just because they lack routine mechanisms of enforcement.[2] Richard Posner formalized this intuition by noting that the optimal punishment for a crime is the value of the benefit to a criminal

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707240125 Published online by Cambridge University Press