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# How many suicide terrorists are suicidal?

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Target article: Adam Lankford's *The Myth of Martyrdom*

How many suicide terrorists are suicidal?

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## ABSTRACT:

Suicide terrorists in recent decades total about 3700. Lankford finds risk factors for suicide for about 40 of these cases. Given that many with risk factors for suicide are not in fact seeking death, a reasonable estimate might be that one percent of suicide terrorists are suicidal.

## MAIN TEXT

This book offers a startlingly simple message: suicide bombers are suicidal. They want to die to escape personal problems the way a patient with end-stage cancer wants to escape pain. Dying in an attack on the enemy provides a socially acceptable form of suicide, and earlier analyses of suicide bombing have erred in seeing the bomber's cause as the cause of the bomber's act.

The author understands that his thesis is far from the mainstream of terrorism research. Referring to himself, Lankford muses that "A young professor should not be able to uncover the secret motives of suicide terrorists in just a few years, while the rest of the world essentially failed to do so in the decade that followed 9/11" (p.11).

Lankford takes several tacks in advancing his thesis.

First he argues that suicide bombers are suicidal by definition, because they orchestrate their own deaths. "As a starting point for a more sophisticated theory, this book takes the view that, by definition, all suicide terrorists are suicidal" (p.10).

This thought is quickly left behind, however, in order to engage issues relating to the motivations of suicide bombers. Lankford argues that suicide bombers are not heroes because heroes—the soldier who falls on a grenade, the Secret Service officer who takes a bullet for the president—act to save others rather than to harm others, and act on trained reflexes with no intention of dying.

This is an odd argument in two ways. There are heroes, like Audie Murphy, awarded the U.S. Medal of Honor for extraordinary risk-taking in attacking and killing the enemy. And it is not obvious why the individual who acts without thinking is more heroic than one who chooses death.

Lankford further argues (p.122) that U.S. suicide terrorists (n=12) are similar to U.S. rampage shooters (n=18) and to U.S. school shooters (n=16). In his coding, the great majority of all three groups have mental health problems, most die in the course of their attacks, and many are socially marginalized or

suffering from family, school, or work problems. Thus, not only are suicide terrorists not heroes, they are troubled loners with mental health problems.

Of course the small numbers make statistical conclusions difficult. And, although the suicide terrorist cases are identified as individuals, the rampage shooters and school shooters are not identified. Readers must trust that the author has included all relevant cases and that definitions of 'social marginalization,' 'family problems,' 'work/school problems,' and 'mental health problems' were consistently and reliably coded across the three groups.

Another issue here is that rampage shooters and school shooters are predominantly lone actors, without group or organizational support, whereas suicide terrorists are volunteers or recruits for an organization that arms them and selects their target. One might learn more about lone-actor terrorists by comparing them with predominantly lone-actor school attackers and assassins (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2013), but it is unlikely that suicide bombers, embedded in an organization, have the same motives as lone-actor rampage and school shooters.

Finally, Lankford's thesis must stand or fall with evidence about the motivations of suicide bombers. Willing to die for a cause is martyrdom. Wanting to die to escape human travail—suicide—is condemned by major religions and, to varying extents, by the social norms of most cultures. Although motivation can be difficult to ascertain, it is straightforward to count suicide bombers.

In Israel and the Occupied Territories, between 1981 and 2008, Palestinian suicide bombers numbered 216 (Merari, 2010). Tamil Tiger suicide bombers numbered 378 between 2006 and 2008 (Ministry Of Defence, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2011). Suicide bombers in Iraq numbered 1779 between 2003 and 2010 (Seifert & McCauley, in press). In Afghanistan, between 2001 and 2011, suicide bombers numbered 736 (Bhattacharya, 2011; in Pakistan, between 1995 and 2012, suicide bombers numbered 369 (Pakistan Body Count, 2012).

Some of these numbers may seem surprising. The 200 Palestinian suicide bombers are few in relation to suicide bombers in other countries, notably fewer than the nearly 1100 suicide bombers in Afghanistan and Pakistan ("AfPak Theater"). The total across countries for the past 35 years is 3478, and countries and years not included in this rough count make 3500 a minimal estimate of the number of suicide bombers in recent decades. This is the size and breadth of the phenomenon of interest.

Lankford raises the question, how many of the 3500 were suicidal? His Appendix A ("Partial list of suicide terrorists with risk factors for suicide") contains 142 cases, but only 40 of these have enough detail to be cited in the text. It is not clear that the 40 are a representative sample of the 3500, and many of the 40 cases can be questioned because many with risk factors for suicide are not ready to die.

But let us suppose for a moment that all 40 cases were persuasively shown to be suicidal. What should we conclude about the 3500 suicide bombers? One possibility is to estimate that about one percent of suicide bombers are suicidal. Lankford believes that something close to one hundred percent are suicidal. Readers will have to decide which is the more reasonable estimate.

Given the uncertain evidence that suicide bombers are suicidal, it is worth asking why this book is being reviewed in *BBS*. I believe that the attraction of Lankford's thesis is psychological and political.

Psychologically it is reassuring to think that our enemies are not so committed to their cause as they seem. They do not generate martyrs for their cause, they only channel suicides to masquerade as martyrs. Their commitment to their cause is no stronger than our commitment to our cause; they are not going to outlast us.

Politically it is reassuring to think that "As a form of psychological warfare, [this book] could be used to smear the reputations of suicide terrorists by portraying them as weak, cowardly, and suicidal" (p.172). The enemy won't be listening to this, but it can play well in the U.S.

## 12. ALPHABETICAL REFERENCE LIST (APA STANDARD)

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