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Opinion Pieces

Who Wants to Be a Martyr? Scott Atran. Policy Matters 03-12. May 2003

One given in the war against terrorism seems to be that suicide attackers are evil, deluded or homicidal misfits who thrive in poverty, ignorance and anarchy.

President Bush, at last year's United Nations conference on poor nations in Monterrey, Mexico, said that "we fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror." Senator John Warner, the Virginia Republican, argued that a new security doctrine including wars of preemption was necessary because "those who would commit suicide in their assaults on the free world are not rational." A State Department report issued on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks said that development aid should be based "on the belief that poverty provides a breeding ground for terrorism."

As logical as the poverty-breeds-terrorism argument may seem, study after study shows that suicide attackers and their supporters are rarely ignorant or impoverished. Nor are they crazed, cowardly, apathetic or asocial. If terrorist groups relied on such maladjusted people, "they couldn't produce effective and reliable killers," according to Todd Stewart, a retired Air Force general who directs the Ohio State University program in international and domestic security.

In the suicide bombing of a cafe in Tel Aviv last week that killed three bystanders, for instance, the bomber and the man accused of being his accomplice grew up in Britain, in relatively prosperous circumstances, and attended college.

The Princeton economist Alan Krueger and others released a study in 2002 comparing Lebanese Hezbollah militants who died in violent action to other Lebanese of the same age group. He found that the Hezbollah members were less likely to come from poor homes and more likely to have a secondary school education.

Nasra Hassan, a Pakistani relief worker, interviewed nearly 250 aspiring Palestinian suicide bombers and their recruiters. "None were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded or depressed," she reported in 2001. "They all seemed to be entirely normal members of their families."

A 2001 poll by the nonprofit Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research indicated that Palestinian adults with 12 years or more of education are far more likely to support bomb attacks than those who cannot read.

Officials with the Army Defense Intelligence Agency who have interrogated Saudi-born members of Al Qaeda being detained at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, have told me that these fundamentalists, especially those in leadership positions, are often educated above reasonable employment level; a surprising number have graduate degrees and come from high-status families. Their motivation and commitment are evident in their willingness to sacrifice material and emotional comforts (families, jobs, physical security), to travel long distances and to pay their own way.

The body of research shows that over all, suicide terrorists tend not to have the attributes of the socially dysfunctional (fatherless, friendless, jobless). They don't vent fear of enemies or express hopelessness or a sense of "nothing to lose" because of lack of a career or social mobility as would be consistent with economic theories of criminal behavior. Suicide attackers don't opt for paradise out of despair. If they did, say Muslim clerics who countenance martyrdom for Allah but not personal suicide, their actions would be criminal and blasphemous.

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A study of world attitudes toward America by the Pew Research Center in December 2002 and many other polls of Muslims from Algeria to Indonesia show ever-rising support for "martyrs." A United Nations report indicated that as soon as the United States began building up for the Iraq invasion, Qaeda recruitment has picked up in 30 to 40 countries. Recruiters for groups sponsoring terrorist acts tell researchers that volunteers are beating down the doors to join.

This allows terrorist agents to choose recruits who are intelligent, psychologically balanced and socially poised. Candidates who mostly want virgins in paradise or money for their families are weeded out. Those selected show patience and the ability to plan and execute in subtle, quiet ways that don't draw attention. Al Qaeda, especially, is rarely in a hurry. It can wait years and then strike when least expected.

It's the particular genius of the institutions like Al Qaeda, Hamas or Hezbollah that they are able to make otherwise well-adjusted people into human bombs. Intense indoctrination, often lasting 18 months or more, causes recruits to identify emotionally with their terrorist cell, viewing it as a family for whom they are as willing to die as a mother for her child or a soldier for his buddies. Consider the oath taken by members of Harkat al Ansar, a Pakistan-based ally of Al Qaeda: "Each martyr has a special place — among them are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear."

Brian Barber, a psychologist at the University of Tennessee, has interviewed some 900 young adults from Gaza and a comparison group of Bosnian Muslims who had also suffered through violence but had not become a source of suicide bombers. The Bosnians had markedly weaker expressions of self-esteem and less hope for the future. Faith was the largest difference: the Palestinians routinely invoked religion to invest personal trauma with social meaning, whereas the Bosnians did not consider religion significant to their life.

This overall pattern was also captured in a white paper by the Parliament of Singapore concerning captured operatives from Jemaah Islamiyah, a militant group allied with Al Qaeda: "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. As a group, most of the detainees regarded religion as their most important personal value."

Like the best Madison Avenue advertisers, but to ghastlier effect, the charismatic leaders of terrorist groups turn ordinary desires for family and religion into cravings for what they're pitching.

How do we combat these masters of manipulation? President Bush and many American politicians maintain that these groups and the people supporting them hate our democracy and freedoms. But poll after poll of the Muslim world shows opinion strongly favoring America's forms of government, personal liberty and education. A University of Michigan political scientist, Mark Tessler, finds Arab attitudes to American culture most favorable among young adults (regardless of their religious feeling) — the same population that recruiters single out.

It is our actions that they don't like: as long ago as 1997, a Defense Department report (in response to the 1996 suicide bombing of Air Force housing at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia) noted that "historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States."

Shows of military strength don't seem to dissuade terrorists: witness the failure of Israel's coercive efforts to end the string of Palestinian suicide bombings. Rather, we need to show the Muslim world the side of our culture that they most respect. Our engagement needs to involve interfaith initiatives, not ethnic profiling. America must address grievances, such as the conflict in the Palestinian territories, whose daily images of violence engender global Muslim resentment.

Of course, this does not 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. Osama bin Laden seeks no compromise. But most of the people who sympathize with him

just might.

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This article was originally published in the *New York Times* on May 5, 2003.

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