



# What motivates people to become suicide attackers?

Part 2



**By R.P. Redenbach**

**P**art one of this article in the previous issue of *Security Solutions Magazine* began the discussion by considering the mindset and motivation of a suicide attacker. The author drew parallels to Olympic athletes to provide a conceptual point of reference to facilitate an appreciation that extreme, even life-threatening, behaviour is not limited to religious or political pursuits. The final part of this article continues the discussion by turning to the cultural and/or ideological influences that encourage different perspectives on suicide terrorism.

The term suicide itself is ideologically charged and facilitates a barrier of conflict between a Christian and an Islamic perspective. Suicide within a Christian context has extreme negative connotations, and even though some translations of the Koran advise “Do not become a suicide” (Reuter, 2004), and “Do not kill yourselves” (Dawood, 2003), this advice is potentially counterbalanced by comments of influential Islamic extremists such as Osama bin Laden, who in an interview with *Time Magazine* in May 1996 stated, “In our religion, there is a special place in the hereafter for those who participate in jihad.” [Jihad or ‘struggle’ venerates individual and collective effort focused on the defence of the Islamic religion and Muslim followers of that religion (Bell, 1970), and frequently accompanies media reports of suicide attacks; for example, “It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of jihad, and the way to die a martyr’s death” (Bloom, 2005).]

Additional, conflicting Islamic guidance includes the second canonical source in Islam, the Hadith, the corpus of sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which contains numerous references to jihad, including, “A morning or an evening expedition in God’s path is better than the world and what it contains, and for one of you to remain in the line of battle is better

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than his prayers for sixty years”. The Hadith also stresses repeatedly that those who fight jihad are given God’s promise that they will enter paradise (Hillenbrand, 2000).

In attempting to understand the influence of sources such as the Hadith in contributing to the motivations and actions of suicide attackers, it is worth acknowledging that the veracity of the source of the motivation does not necessarily have to be flawless. So long as the ideological opinion is accepted by the attacker as absolute truth, then the strength of the belief itself overrides objectivity, which in turn demonstrates a consistency with the New Collins Concise English Dictionary definition of a philosophical ideology – “an

idea that is false or held for the wrong reasons but is believed with such conviction as to be irrefutable”.

Considering this definition of a philosophical ideology assists in further understanding the mindset of a suicide attacker and, in part, aids in appreciating how such extreme actions could be carried out: if something is believed with such conviction as to be irrefutable, then notions such as God rewarding those who participate in jihad have the potential to become a powerful motivating factor (Hillenbrand, 2000).

Combine this potential with the view of Victor Frankl, whose extensive research led him to the conclusion that humanity’s

primary motivational force is their search for meaning (Frankl, 1985), and a light of understanding begins (if somewhat tentatively) to be shone upon a dark and complex subject. This ‘search for meaning’ could, in part, explain why suicide attackers cross demographics and why in-depth studies investigating the backgrounds of suicide attackers have not led to clear conclusions regarding attacker ‘profiles’ (Pedahzur, 2005).

It is not so much the external measurables (such as ethnicity, gender, educational background) which predetermine a suicide attacker’s profile, but rather what exists within the person which, by circumstance or

design, marries with some type of external trigger. An example of this dual requirement can be seen in groups such as the Chechen Black Widows: the “sisters, mothers or wives of Chechen men that have been killed in battles with [Russian] troops... [who] choose to die as a bomber in order to show the strength of the resistance” (Bloom, 2005). Black Widow suicide attackers have taken part in at least eighteen attacks on Russian forces since the outbreak of the second Chechen war (Bloom, 2005). Clearly, not all females who experience the loss of a relative in war (be it in Chechnya, or elsewhere) express that loss by becoming a human bomb... but, some do. The point is that if someone possesses an internal predisposition to find meaning in a cause, belief or action, and if external influences facilitate expression of that predisposition, then the practical outcome can manifest itself in a myriad of ways, including, but not restricted to, Chechen Black Widows.

The premise that what motivates people to become suicide attackers consists of

two predominate factors (that is, an internal predisposition and external influences) is reflected by Ami Pedahzur – associate professor at the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Pedahzur (2005) holds the view that “suicide terrorism has made its appearance primarily in conflicts where the balance of power has been asymmetrical, meaning a relatively weak organization up against a strong state”.

Pedahzur’s view suggests that, from a tactical perspective, suicide terrorism does make combative sense. If a less-powerful organization lacks the scale of resources needed to defeat a stronger military opponent in conventional battle, then resorting to suicide tactics is a powerful tactic indeed. This was seen during WWII when Japanese Kamikaze pilots willingly flew their aircraft into US vessels (Sears, 2008). It is reasonable to suggest that, 1) the Kamikaze pilots possessed an internal predisposition to find meaning in their actions, and 2) external influences (such as examples set by other Kamikaze pilots)

facilitated a means by which to express/ demonstrate their beliefs.

Like modern-day suicide attackers, Kamikaze pilots inflicted greater damage than orthodox attacks and, significantly, the fear associated with the tactic surpassed the physical damage they inflicted (Richardson, 2006). Similarly, beyond the fear and psychological impact associated with modern suicide terrorism, the relatively low cost associated with suicide attacks also makes economic sense.

As Bruce Hoffman (2006) states in *Inside Terrorism*, “Suicide tactics are devastatingly effective, lethally efficient, have a greater likelihood of success, and are relatively inexpensive and generally easier to execute than other attack modes... The suicide terrorist is the ‘ultimate smart bomb’... relentlessly homing in on its target but with flexibility in timing and access. It is this effectiveness, efficiency and relative low cost of suicide terrorism, combined with an almost insatiable media appetite for details associated with extreme violence,



which potentially accounts for an increase in suicide terrorism. Just as crimes of notoriety – and the media coverage that accompanies those crimes – often encourages copycats (Coleman, 2004), so too do suicide attacks potentially inspire (and educate) individuals/organizations with a predisposition for suicide terrorism.

Looking beyond the moral/ideological interpretations of whether or not religiously motivated suicide is sanctioned by texts such as the Koran, the economic advantages associated with suicide terrorism presents a tangible motivation for this method of attack. “According to one estimate, the total cost of a typical Palestinian suicide operation, for example, is about one hundred and fifty dollars”, yet this insubstantial amount can average a return on investment of up to four times that of other terrorist attacks (Hoffman, 2006). Of course, a prime example of economic return on investment of suicide terrorism is the 9/11 attacks, which cost somewhere between \$400,000 and \$500,000 to execute (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004) at a cost to the US economy of at least 27.2 billion dollars (Looney, 2002).

Naturally, the cost to architects of suicide attacks is not comparable to that of the attackers themselves. However, if the architects can identify, prepare and direct even a small quantity of people who are prepared to “sacrifice [their] soul in order to defeat the enemy and for God’s sake [become] a martyr” (Reuter, 2004), then they have harvested and dispatched a cost-effective combative tool. Whether the suicide attackers are misguided, ill-informed pawns or not does not really matter if viewed from the macro perspective of the overall conflict, just as whether or not individual soldiers of WWI were fighting “the war to end all wars” (Gammage, 1974) does not really matter if viewed from the macro perspective of that particular conflict. Similarly, whether or not a person who purposefully kills

themselves in battle is a suicide or a martyr is a debate with no definitive conclusion.

In the case of modern suicide terrorist attacks, what does matter is that architects of suicide attacks can mobilize the internal drivers of potential suicide candidates and in the process marry those drivers with external influences (for example, religious/cultural ideologies) and a perceived need (such as revenge or desperation) – which in turn provide incentive for action and a medium of expression.

An example of that medium of expression can be seen in events of July 2005, when four suicide bombers travelling by train in London killed fifty-six people and, in the process injured 700 more, in the first suicide attack in Europe (Richardson, 2006).

A more recent example of the employment of suicide attacks took place on 21 July 2009 when male suicide attackers dressed in women’s burqas forcibly entered security headquarters and government buildings in Eastern Afghanistan, killing twelve people and injuring more than twenty others (Sengupta, 2009). This method of operation, while comparatively common in Iraq, is relatively new in Afghanistan. Previously, religious sensibilities had acted as a barrier to Taliban disguising themselves as Islamic women. That said, the effectiveness of suicide tactics, along with its growing popularity and geographical reach (Richardson, 2006), demonstrates that an inferior force can indeed have a disproportional impact on a superior force, which in turn justifies the employment of suicide attackers in what could be classified as asymmetrical warfare.

For example, Coalition forces in Afghanistan currently sit at approximately 58,390 (ABC News, 2009). Estimates of Taliban combating that Coalition presence vary, but it is reasonable to suggest that, 1) those numbers are inferior to Coalition numbers, and 2) given the political and economic power of the US

and coalition partners such as Germany, Canada and Great Britain, the military hardware and resources available to Coalition forces is far superior to that of the Taliban. If viewed independently of Western biases, it makes both combative and economic sense for Afghans opposed to the presence of foreign military personnel in Afghanistan to employ suicide tactics. Again, if viewed as a return on investment enterprise, suicide attacks offer superior dividends compared to conventional warfare, where opposing forces meet in pitched battle as if replicating Napoleonic campaigns of previous centuries (Johnson, 2004).

If something is seen to get results, then people – being people – will emulate whatever it is that gets those results. Granted, specific results, along with specific vehicles by which those results can be achieved, will not appeal to all people – just as not all people have the talent, the desire or the means to gain Olympic success. However, as long as there is a percentage of any population who, 1) possess an internal predisposition, and 2) are subject to relevant external influences that provide incentive for action, then architects of suicide attacks will continue to seek, prepare and mobilize suicide attackers as cost-effective weapons of war. n

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*A full list of references is available upon request to editorial@australianmediagroup.com.*