

## Suicide Bombers

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Of course, suicide bombers and attackers can be found outside contemporary Middle Eastern extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups. The Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II and the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka are two such examples. In view of my focus on September 11<sup>th</sup> related issues, however, here I concentrate only on the former.

Certainly the psychology of present-day Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers is extremely puzzling. In our clinical work, we see individuals who wish or attempt to kill themselves, but primarily because they have low self-esteem and suffer from intense feelings of guilt. The present-day Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers kill themselves in order to reach a high level of self-esteem.

### Observations from a Palestinian orphanage:

I began to think of the psychology of these suicide bombers in 1991, when I met five infant survivors of the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon (Volkan, 1997). On September 15, 1982, Israeli Defense forces circled two adjacent Palestinian refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, in West Beirut. In the late afternoon of the following day, the Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia, allies of the Israelis, attacked the camps, indiscriminately killing civilians trapped in the cramped streets. In 1991, I met the five survivors in Tunisia, at a Palestinian orphanage called Biet Atfal al-Sommoud (“the Home of Children of Steadfastness”). The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the headquarters of which were then located in Tunis, administered the orphanage. All five children were infants when the attack on the Sabra and Shatila camps occurred. Apparently, their mothers or other caretakers had hid four of the

infants in trashcans and one under a bed; this had saved their lives. Since their real identities were unknown, they were all given the last name “Arafat,” after the PLO Chairman and frequent visitor to the orphanage.

I examined the five Sabra and Shatila children (and other orphans at this orphanage) for a week. When I first saw them playing together, they appeared as “normal” children do in play. However, I also observed that they would remain together as a “team.” I noted that if one of them were separated from others, he or she would become agitated. On the fifth day of our visit to the orphanage, I attempted to interview these children one by one, with the aid of an interpreter. All of them then became “abnormal”—one hallucinated, and another one literally destroyed the interview room. As soon as they were placed together again, as a “team,” they appeared to be “normal” once more. I concluded that they must have difficulties in their sense of personal identity; on the other hand, they appeared “normal” when they were a team of “Arafats.” This observation taught me a lot about replacing, to one extent or another, a person’s individual identity with a “team” or large-group identity associated with ethnicity, nationality, religion, or ideology. Although the phenomenon was most pronounced in these five children, I noticed a milder version in the rest of the 52 children housed at Biet Atfal al-Sommoud in 1991.

The intent at Biet Atfal al-Sommoud was to nurture and help the orphans. Nevertheless, the Palestinian adult caretakers at Biet Atfal al-Sommoud—most of whom were directly traumatized themselves due to the Middle East conflict—were, if I may use a metaphor, “partners” in filling the “cracks” in these children’s personal identities with a “cement” of Palestinianism, an element that was shared among adults and children alike. This situation

reminded me of another historical period when intentional interference with the personal identities of children occurred—when the “cracks” of German children’s personal identities were filled with Nazi ideology. Official guidance, as presented in Nazi physician Joanna Haarer’s books (Haarer, 1937, 1943; see also Volkan, Ast, and Greer, 2002), counseled parents to feed their children only with a rigorous schedule and not to rush to their children when they cried or encountered trouble with their surroundings. Mothers of the Nazi period were directed to ignore their children’s natural dependency needs and thus ruined their sense of basic trust. Children were forced to experience the sense that there was no benevolent power in their surroundings and were robbed the opportunity to identify with a nurturing parent. Further, frustrated by their parents’ behavior, children projected their own angry feelings onto their parents, imagining their elders to be more aggressive than they might have actually been in reality. In turn, they felt that the only way to protect themselves was to become aggressors, “tough” kids. This interference with personal identity formation was connected to Nazi propaganda. Children’s “cracks” in personal identity formation were directly or indirectly filled with Nazi propaganda so that as adults these children would be “tough” and experience no feelings of remorse for destroying “undesirables” like Jews.

Of course, sometimes we observe in our clinical practice a similar phenomenon—the replacement of one’s individual identity with a group identity, occurring without deliberate outside interference. Imagine a young adult developing schizophrenia: this person loses his or her existing identity and replaces it with a new, albeit, psychotic one. Joe is no longer Joe; he experiences himself as and calls himself Jesus Christ. Sometimes such individuals’ identities are openly replaced by religious, nationalistic, or ideological group identities. Caroline is no longer

Caroline, but the existence of her identity depends on her being a delusional missionary protecting her large-group identity.

A few years after visiting Tunis, I began collecting information on how the Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers in the Middle East are trained. My observations at Biet Atfal al-Sommoud, what is known about Nazi child and youth rearing practices, and my work with schizophrenics (Volkan, 1995) help me to understand bombers' psychology. Suicide bombers are not psychotic. In their case, the created identity fits soundly with the external reality and, significantly, is approved by outsiders. Thus, the future suicide bombers, like the Sabra and Shatila children at play in a team, by all indications are "normal" and often have an enhanced sense of self-esteem.

#### The "education" of suicide bombers

The typical technique of creating Middle Eastern Muslim suicide bombers includes two basic steps (Volkan, 1997): first, the "teachers" find young people whose personal identity is already disturbed and who are seeking an outer "element" to internalize so they can stabilize their internal world. Second, they develop a "teaching method" that "forces" the large-group identity, ethnic and/or religious, into the "cracks" of the person's damaged or subjugated individual identity. Once people become candidates to be suicide bombers, the routine rules and regulations, so to speak, or individual psychology does not fully apply to their patterns of thought and action. The future suicide bomber is now an agent of the large-group identity and will attempt to repair it for himself or herself and for other members of the large group. Killing one's self (and one's personal identity) and "others" (enemies) does not matter. What matters is that the act of bombing (terrorism) brings self-esteem and attention to the large-group identity.

Direct and indirect support of this activity comes from the fact that other members of the traumatized society see this individual as the carrier of the group's identity. Though Islam forbids suicide, there is no lack of conscious and unconscious approval of Muslim suicide bombers from other members of their communities. David Van Biema reports that "in early 1996, only 20% of Palestinians supported the practice. Today about 70% do" (2001).

I found that there was little difficulty in finding young men interested in becoming suicide bombers in Gaza and the West Bank. Repeated actual and expected events humiliate youngsters and interfere with their adaptive identifications with their parents because their parents are humiliated as well. The mental representations of external events, the sense of helplessness, and the feeling that they are being treated as less than human create "cracks" in individuals' identities. Reports show that those who select "bomber candidates" have developed an expertise in sensing whose personal identity "gaps" are most suitable for filling with elements of the large-group identity. For example, those youngsters who suffer from concrete trauma are more suitable candidates than those suffering from more generalized trauma (concrete trauma consists of the trauma caused by an *actual* humiliating event visited upon that person by the enemy, be it a beating, torture, or loss of a parent).

Most suicide bombers in the Middle East are chosen as teenagers, "educated," and then sent off to perform their duty when they are in their late teens or early to mid-twenties. The "education" is most effective when religious elements of the large-group identity are provided as solutions for the personal sense of helplessness, shame, and humiliation. Replacing borrowed elements sanctioned by God for one's internal world makes that person omnipotent and supports the individual's narcissism.

In general, the “education” of the Palestinian youngsters who are candidates to become suicide bombers is most often carried out in small groups. (This has not been as necessary of late, due to terrorist acts becoming more “endemic” to Palestinian culture. Therefore, some suicide bombers now have a very short, less organized training. Furthermore, the more stress is placed on a society the more the people hold on to their large-group identity. Thus, even “normal” persons can be pushed to become candidates for terrorism.) These groups collectively read the Quran and chant religious scriptures. Unlike most of the Pakistani and Afghan “students” in Pakistani madrassas, trained to be mujahideen in Afghanistan and later prepared as supporters for and leaders of the Taliban, the Palestinian “students” are able to understand what they are reading in the Arabic Quran, but for this reason their readings are carefully selected. The “teachers” also supply sacred sounding, but meaningless, phrases to be repeated over and over in chant, such as “I will be patient until patience is worn out from patience.” These kinds of mystical sayings combined with selected verses from the Quran help to create a “different internal world” for the “students.”

Meanwhile, the “teachers” also interfere with the “real world” affairs of the students, mainly by cutting off meaningful communication and other ties to students’ families and by forbidding things such as music and television, on the grounds that they may be sexually stimulating. Sex and women can be obtained only after a passage to adulthood. In the case of the suicide bombers, however, the “passage” is killing oneself, not a symbolic castration. The oedipal triumph is allowed only after death. Allah, who is presented as a strict and primitive superego against the derivatives of libidinal drive and a force to be obeyed while the youngster is alive, allows the satisfaction of the libidinal wishes by *houris* (angels) in paradise. The

“teachers” refer to the Prophet Muhammad’s instructions to his followers, which some consider one of the earliest examples of “war propaganda,” during the Battle of Badr (624 C.E.) in order to play the immortality card on their students and inductees. Muhammad told his followers they would continue to “live” in Paradise if they died during the battle. The youngsters are told that life continues in paradise, and the death of a suicide bomber is celebrated as a “wedding ceremony,” a celebration at which friends and family gather to celebrate their belief that the dead terrorist is in the loving hands of angels in heaven.

In general, suicide bomber candidates are instructed not to inform their parents of their missions. No doubt, parents in this part of the world can surmise what their children’s missions are, but regardless, keeping secrets from family members helps create a sense of power within youngsters. Secrets induce a false sense of further “separation-individuation” (Mahler, 1968) and symbolize the cutting of dependency ties. The dependency ties are replaced as the youngster becomes a carrier or “flag” for the large group.

Islamic schools for children and youth are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East or in other Muslim countries such as Pakistan. They have existed since the beginning of Islam. What is different in modern Pakistani madrassas is that they include training in the service of future violence. Such madrassas existed in Pakistan before Osama bin Laden arrived in neighboring Afghanistan and before the Taliban, for practical purposes, took control of the entire country. The teaching in these madrassas was influenced by Deobandi and Wahabi versions of extreme religious “ideology”(Rashid, 2000). At this time, the training of mostly poor children who attended these madrassas was similar to the training of the Middle Eastern Islamic suicide bombers. The children read the Quran in Arabic for years, but since they did not know

Arabic, they had to accept the “interpretation” given to them by their teachers. When they read in Urdu, they were told that the Urdu letter “jeem” stood for jihad; “kaaf” for Kalashnikov, and “khy” for khoon (blood) (Ali, 2001). These were the madrassas funded by the United States and Britain to raise mujahideen to fight the Soviets. The Saudis provided more funds for the expansion of Wahabism. The “graduates” of these madrassas would later create a foundation on which the Taliban and al-Qaeda could stand.

#### A new breed:

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> caused the press to begin reporting the existence of a new breed of Islamic fundamentalist suicide terrorists. First of all, these terrorists were not “directly” humiliated Palestinians; they were mostly from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These reports also said that the “profiles” of those in this new group of terrorists do not fit those of the standard suicide bomber. They are generally older, well-educated, and come from wealthy, educated families, while the standard Palestinian suicide attacker is a young, uneducated malcontent who comes from a poor, traumatized family. In many ways, the hijackers of September 11<sup>th</sup> (such as Mohammed Atta), all from the Middle East, do appear to belong to a new breed. However, I still believe that the mechanisms for creating standard Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers apply to the new group of terrorists as well.

Of course, we will not know for sure unless more data becomes available about the lives of Atta and other hijackers, some of whom we know did not even realize that they were on a fatal mission until the last minute. My hunch, though, is that they were subject to psychological trauma that had “cracked” their personal identities. Their submission to an absolute leader (Osama bin Laden) is one aspect of the “cement” that filled these “cracks,” as bin Laden is the

spokesperson for their large-group identity and the “true “ Muslim faith. Excerpts from a rough translation of a four-page document left behind by some of the hijackers illuminate at least one small corner of al-Qaeda’s training and command practices. Besides matter-of-fact advice about concealing their true identities, the document also contains selected references from the Quran that seem to give permission for suicide and to sanction killing enemies in the name of God. Between the lines we can see how these instructions create a ritual that mixes “God’s words” with practical instruction in mass murder. “Tightening one’s shoes,” “washing,” and “checking one’s weapons”—above and beyond their functional aspects for mission preparations—are easy tasks to perform without much internal conflict. The instructions for “cleaning” and removing grime, filth, mud, and stains, besides making the trainees “good” Muslims (who can only “meet” the divine power when they are “clean”), balance against the instructions for the actual “dirty work” of killing oneself, the passengers and crew aboard the plane, and the people in the target building. Thus, the steps from leaving one’s apartment to hijacking and crashing an airplane have been ritualized and made psychologically easy. Of course, we do not know how consciously the hijackers’ trainers strategized the instruction of their underlings, but to my mind these instructions alone demonstrate a certain mastery of psychologically effective ritual.

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