

It's the Islamism, stupid

by Peter Nolan

Robert Pape suggests that nationalism explains suicide bombings better than Islamism. He should take fundamentalist ideology more seriously

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A year after 52 Londoners were killed by four suicide bombers, we are no closer to reaching a consensus on why the attacks happened. Were they simply the work of evil men, or were they the inevitable consequence of Britain's involvement in Iraq? The latest attempt to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing comes in "Dying to Win" by Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago.

Pape's contribution is twofold: to translate latter-day suicide terrorism into conventional territorial military struggle; and to claim that campaigns by different organisations may be subsumed for explanation under one colossal theory. Based on data taken from 315 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2003, he argues that, "What nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland."

He contends that nationalism rather than Islamism should be understood as the driving motive behind suicide bombings. Religious differences may exacerbate mistrust between occupiers and occupied and provide mobilising symbols, but are not in themselves the main motivation. In addition to its well-known fundamentalist manifestation, suicide terrorism is used by secular Lebanese and Palestinian groups, as well as the Marxist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers.

The flaw in Pape's analysis, particularly in regard to al Qaeda, is that he never takes fundamentalist ideology and the effect it has on groups like al Qaeda's operational choice towards suicide bombings as seriously as the bombers do themselves.

"It is a battle of ideologies, a struggle for survival and a war with no truce," al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al Zawahiri, wrote in his book "Knights under the Prophet's Banner." Bin Laden's statements show that his vision goes far beyond limited war, or a game of diplomatic chess of the sort realists find most familiar. Instead, he offers a view of an all-embracing conflict over the forms and legitimacy of the state, with him very much at odds with liberal democracy. The collapse of the twin

towers on 9/11 showed the "myth of the great America and the myth of democracy." "They claim," he said, "[democracy] has improved things by letting people play the game of elections, as in Yemen, Jordan or Egypt... regardless of the fact that it is forbidden to abide by polytheistic laws."

Pape's argues that al Qaeda, like Hamas and Hizbullah, operates with widespread public support. But does this not imply that a substantial portion of British and European Muslims have widely supported its atrocities? In reality, the London bombers and the leaders of the 9/11 plot operated without the knowledge or consent of their families or local communities. Instead of the call of the nation, in each case a sub-culture devoted to jihad was powerful enough to take the attackers away from their parents, wives and children, and this radicalisation inevitably happens in isolation from wider society. Funds, weapons and volunteers from abroad, from al Qaeda and Iran in particular, are often available to suicide terrorists, bypassing the need for local support.

In his video statement, the London bomber Mohammad Sidique Khan made clear that his imagined community was not a nation as Pape constructs it, but a global supranational Islamic identity: "Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world... I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters." The four British suicide bombers, like the 9/11 hijackers, avoided the deaths of family and friends, invasion, repression and torture that figure in the biographies of Palestinian and Tamil suicide bombers. As Pape himself concedes, the casualties from America's "occupation" of Saudi Arabia are zero.

The weakness with Pape's "strategic logic" of suicide bombing is that the tactic has become an end in itself. Based on the example of the Madrid attacks, the London bombings could have been just as lethal without the bombers themselves having to die. Nevertheless, in the words of Khan, "our words are dead until we give them life with our blood"--the bombers' blood, that is, not that of their victims. In his published will, Bin Laden himself writes that "Allah bears witness that the love of jihad and death in the cause of Allah has dominated my life."

"Dying to Win", an apparently impressive but deeply flawed analysis, shows the extent to which Pape, the gifted analyst of strategy, has fallen victim to "mirror imaging," the fallacy by which scholars and diplomats subconsciously assume that foreigners will think in the same way that they do.

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