

The Fatal Attraction of Suicide Terrorism

by Mr Daniel Tan Kuan Wei

“The life of this world is just a game and accumulation of possessions and children. What God has is better for me than all this”

- A note left behind by Hisham Hamad, a suicide bomber from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad¹

“While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.”

- Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky²

When the Marriott hotel bombing occurred on 5 August 2003, it signaled a new trend in the modus operandi of terror in Southeast Asia – Suicide Terrorism. Suicide bombers are the most feared weapons in the arsenal of terrorists. Usually, there is no telephone warning; the act itself and its resultant chaos announce the attack.³ Traditionally seen as a problem affecting the Middle East, South Asia, Russia, and until recently in the US on 11 September 2001, the threat posed by suicide terrorism may be spreading to Southeast Asia. Reports of a suicide bomber exploding a van near the Marriott hotel lobby in Indonesia were particularly disturbing, as it was the second known suicide terror attack in Southeast Asia after the Bali bomb blast on 12 October 2002.

Taking a working definition for the purpose of this analysis, suicide terrorism may be broadly defined as “the readiness to sacrifice one’s life in the process of destroying or attempting to destroy a target to advance a political goal. The aim of the psychologically and physically war-trained terrorist is to die while destroying the enemy target.”⁴

Subsequently, in the wake of the recent suicide attacks in Indonesia that claimed hundreds of innocent lives, suicide terrorism never felt so close to home and is indeed a compelling new scourge to Southeast Asian governments. As such, this article aims to comprehend and investigate further the phenomenon of suicide terrorism, and seeks answers to a central question of “Why is suicide terrorism an attractive choice for terror groups?” It primarily argues that despite the complexity of suicide terrorism operations, suicide terrorism remains an attractive choice for terror groups due to five main reasons:

Tactical Advantage and Success.

Cost-Effective Operations.

Personal Rewards for Perpetrator.

The Utility of Women.

Psychological Victory.

This article then sketches a brief overview of selected terrorist organisations’ suicide squads in South-east Asia and concludes by briefly highlighting two counter-strategies.

A BACKDROP OF SUICIDE TERRORISM

According to Emile Durkheim, (1856-1919) the French sociological thinker, there are three basic typologies of suicides. The first type is termed Egoistic Suicide, by which an individual commits suicide if he fails to integrate himself with his family and society. The second form is known as Anomic Suicide, by which an individual commits suicide when he feels helpless due to a breakdown of regular life, resulting in industrial, financial and social insecurity.⁵

A terrorism analyst from the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies has noted that suicide terrorism falls into Durkheim’s third type called Altruistic Suicide, in which the individual commits suicide due to his integration with

Suicide terrorism brings about a great degree of tactical advantage and success. According to Boaz Ganor, Executive Director of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism:

Suicide attacks result in many casualties and cause extensive damage.

Suicide attacks attract wide media coverage. A suicide attack is a newsworthy event for the media as it indicates a display of great determination and inclination for self-sacrifice on the part of the terrorists.

Although a suicide attack is a very primitive and simple attack, the use of suicide tactics guarantees that the attack will be carried out at the most appropriate time and place with regards to the circumstances at the target location. This guarantees the maximum number of casualties (in contrast to the use of technical means such as a time bomb or even a remote controlled explosive charge). In this regard, the suicide bomber is no more than a sophisticated bomb—a carrier that brings the explosive device to the right location and at the right time.

In a suicide attack, as soon as the terrorist sets off on his mission, his success is virtually guaranteed.

It is extremely difficult to counter suicide attacks once the terrorist is on his way to the target; even if the security forces do succeed in stopping him before he reaches the intended target, he can still activate the charge and cause damage.

Planning and executing the escape route after a terror attack has occurred is usually one of the most complicated and problematic stages of any terrorist attack. Suicide attacks require no escape plan. Therefore, a suicide terrorist could enter a highly secure zone and accomplish his mission without worrying about escape or evasion.

Since the perpetrator is killed during the course of the suicide attack, there is no fear of him being caught afterwards, being interrogated by the security forces and passing on information liable to endanger other activists.¹⁴

In addition to these, suicide bombers are almost impossible to detect. For instance, in Israel, suicide bombers can change their appearance dramatically before suicide operations. They shave and dye their hair, dress as tourists, orthodox Jews, soldiers and policemen.¹⁵

Cost-Effective Operations

The cost-effective nature of suicide attacks may also be another possible reason why suicide terrorism is an attractive method. Bruce Hoffman argues that low cost nuts and bolts, screws and ball bearings, any metal shards or odd bits of broken machinery could be packed together with home-made explosives and then strapped to the body of a terrorist dispatched to any place where people gather—bus, train, restaurant, café, supermarket, shopping mall, street corner, promenade. These attacks probably cost no more than US\$150 to mount and are reliably deadly.¹⁶

To drive home the point of suicide terrorism as cost-effective, statistics have shown that ratio of victims to the perpetrators are immensely disparate. It only takes a handful of suicide terrorists to inflict immense damage. For instance, in Beirut, more than 250 soldiers were killed with just one suicide killer in 1983; 40 soldiers were killed in Sri Lanka in 1987 with a single driver riding his truck into a makeshift camp; thousands have died in the September 11 attacks with just 19 suicide terrorists.¹⁷ In the case of the Bali bombings, approximately 202 innocent lives were lost, with hundreds more injured by two suicide bombers named Iqbal and Feri.¹⁸

Personal Rewards For Perpetrator

In suicide attacks that are regarded as a kind of religious “Holy War” or a divine command by a particular terror group, suicide terrorism is attractive as it would bring about great personal benefits to the perpetrator. For instance, an Islamic terrorist group sees absolutely nothing suicidal about its suicide terrorists’ wayward murder of innocent lives. Instead, suicide is merely a momentary inconvenience on his or her fiery propulsion into heaven.¹⁹

Citing the example of Hamas, a Palestinian Islamic militant group that frequently launches suicide attacks against Israelis, the perpetrator of a Hamas suicide attack is not considered either by himself or by other activists to have committed suicide. Rather, he is perceived to be a shahid - a martyr who falls in the process of fulfilling a religious command, the Jihad or Holy War.²⁰ The Arabic term used for martyrdom is istishad, a religious term meaning to give one’s life in the name of Allah, as opposed to intihar, which refers to suicide resulting from personal distress.

The latter form of death is not condoned in Islamic teachings.²¹

Thus, terrorists claim that suicide attacks provide the shahid and his families with substantial rewards:

The majority of the shahids come from a low social background. The shahid improves his social status after his death as well as that of his family.

The family of the shahid is showered with honour and praise, and receives financial rewards for the attack.²²

In addition to the religious mission and the family rewards, the shahid also receives some personal benefits (according to his belief), including:

Eternal life in paradise,

Permission to see the face of Allah,

Loving kindness of 72 young virgins who will serve him in heaven.

Privilege to promise a life in heaven to 70 of his relatives.²³

At this point, a caveat must be noted. Notwithstanding the unique Islamic tenets of jihad and shahid, Muslims are not more likely to end their lives or become suicide bombers than other people.²⁴ A case in point would be the non-Islamic terror group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), credited for numerous suicide bombings in Sri Lanka. The LTTE offers significant proof that "suicide terrorism is not merely a religious phenomenon and that, under certain extreme political and psychological circumstances, secular volunteers are fully capable of martyrdom."²⁵

The Utility of Women

Suicide terrorism may be a favoured choice of attack by terror groups because of the utility of women in suicide missions. According to Rohan Gunaratna, women arouse less suspicion, and in certain conservative societies, there is a hesitation to body search a woman. Also, women can wear a suicide device beneath her clothes and appear pregnant.²⁶ As such, terror groups may prefer suicide terrorism as they can utilise female suicide bombers to exploit the element of surprise, infiltrate highly secured areas and outsmart counter-terror forces.

Already, women suicide bombers have been a frequent feature globally. In Sri Lanka, about 30 - 40% of LTTE's overall suicide missions are conducted by women with great success. For instance, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in May 1991 by a female LTTE suicide-bomber while campaigning for re-election.²⁷ In Russia, which is presently plagued by Chechen separatism, Chechen women strapped with explosives were among the Chechen fighters who seized a Moscow theatre in the 2002 hostage drama. In June 2003, a Chechen female suicide bomber blew herself up on a bus carrying Russian troops to Chechnya, in which at least 18 people died.²⁸ The latest female suicide bombing incident occurred on 5 July 2003 when two Chechen female suicide bombers killed 14 people outside a rock festival near Moscow.²⁹

Psychological

Victory

Successful suicide attacks would also bring about a great psychological victory for the terror group, as it carries potent psychological ramifications for the target society. As David Ucko and Christopher Langton of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) succinctly put it,

"Suicide attacks suggest to the target society that their enemy is not a rational actor with a particular set of political ideals, but a compulsive and volatile force, ready to pay the ultimate price to achieve victory. In this manner, the apparent fanaticism of the attacker brings its own rewards to the terrorist group. Similarly and somewhat counter-intuitively, the apparent desperation of the attacker can raise the moral standing of the group, as the suicidal aspect connotes not the cowardice or cynicism of a conventional terrorist attack, but rather points to the frustration of last resort. These factors are force multipliers."³⁰

Regional Terrorist Organisations' Suicide Squads: An Overview

Subsequently, with the various reasons for suicide terrorism as a preferred option espoused above, this section will

attempt to piece an overview of terror organisation's suicide squads in Southeast Asia. In known terror groups that operate in Southeast Asia such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), there have been reports about the JI possessing an elite special operations unit called the "Laskar Khos" or Special Militia, containing a suicide squad. An Indonesian news magazine, Tempo, reported that a man going by the name of Mustafa, one of five JI members arrested in Jakarta in mid-July 2003, had confessed to being the commander of Laskar Khos. Mustafa reportedly told police that Laskar Khos had between 10 and 15 members skilled in bomb-making, who are prepared to carry out suicide terror attacks in Southeast Asia.³¹

The Tempo report however did not make clear whether 10 - 15 was the total number of potential suicide bombers or whether each cell contained that number. The report also added that Ali Ghufron alias Mukhlas, who is accused of having overall responsibility for the Bali bombing, belonged to one cell while Mustafa himself belonged to another cell and there are still members of other cells yet to be caught.^{sup}

Also, it has been reported that the JI has plans for a suicide bombing campaign, designed to transform Asia and the Pacific region into Islamic provinces, which is reportedly revealed in a 40-page manifesto – the Pupji book or General Guide to the Struggle of JI.³³

In the case of the Abu Sayyaf that predominantly operates in the Philippines, a Philippine Inquirer news report, quoting an anonymous intelligence officer based in Southern Philippines, noted that 50 suicide bombers have been trained and deployed by the Abu Sayyaf in key areas of Mindanao as early as September 2002. The bombers are reportedly fresh recruits whose ages range from 18 to 35 years.³⁴ The Kumpulan Militant Malaysia (KMM) reportedly has suicide squads as well. Malaysian Police Inspector-General Norian Mai on 26 November 2002 confirmed that two arrested KMM members with links to the JI were part of a "suicide bomber" squad to carry out attacks on key installations in Singapore, including the water pipeline from Johore to the republic, a radar installation, the US Embassy and the Causeway.³⁵

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has engaged the issue of suicide terrorism and primarily argued that despite the complexity of suicide terrorism operations, suicide terrorism remains a preferred choice for terror groups due to five main reasons:

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Also, it attempted to piece an overview of various terror groups' suicide squads in Southeast Asia, such as the JI, Abu Sayyaf, and the KMM. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss and analyse suicide terrorism counter-strategies in detail, two recommendations postulated by Ehud Sprinzak in his article, "Outsmarting Suicide Terrorists", are briefly highlighted here.

Firstly, Sprinzak argues that while it may not be possible to apprehend would-be suicide bombers, security services can strike against the commanders and field officers who recruit and train the suicide assailants.³⁶

Secondly, Sprinzak calls for greater physical protection of potential target areas. The idea of erecting concrete barriers reduces the effect of the suicide bombing if and when the terrorist hits the target area, and it serves as a deterrent against potential suicide strikes. Also, Sprinzak notes that such security measures offer another important benefit: They reassure the public. As suicide terrorism is a form of psychological warfare, citizens who are told that they are being subjected to psychological manipulation will develop a stronger immunity against it.³⁷

As noted by Mark Harrison, the author of "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism" (not related to Bruce Hoffman's article with the same title), regardless of the actual motivation for suicide terrorism, the tactic will be around for a long time. Suicide terrorism is an invention. Once it is been invented, it cannot be un-invented.³⁸ Subsequently with suicide

terrorism's ugly head showing signs of emerging in Southeast Asia, examining the motivations for suicide terror tactics may be a good starting point of reference for policy makers to counter the bane of suicide terrorism.

Annex A

Endnotes

1 Hisham Hamad, a suicide bomber from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad who killed three Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip in November 1994. Quoted in N. Mac-Farquhar, "Portrait of a Suicide Bomber: Devout, Apolitical and Angry", New York Times, 18 March 1996.

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3 John Daly, "Suicide Bombing: No Warning, No Total Solution", Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor, 17 September 2001. The article can be found at http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jtism/jtism010917_1_n.shtml

4 Rohan Gunaratna, "Suicide Terrorism: A Global Threat", Jane's Intelligence Review, 20 October 2000 at http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/usscole/jir001020_1_n.shtml

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6 *ibid.*

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17 Suba Chandran, "Suicide Terrorism", The Hindu, 06 October 2001.

18 Shefali Rekhi, "What Makes a Suicide Bomber Tick?", The Straits Times, 24 August 2003.

19 Louise Rene Beres, "Understanding September 11th: Who is the 'Islamic' Suicide Bomber?", at <http://www.gamla.org.il/english/index.htm>

20 Boaz Ganor, "Suicide Terrorism: An Overview", op.cit.

21 Rex Hudson, "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?", a report prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, September 1999.

22 Boaz Ganor, "Suicide Terrorism: An Overview", op.cit.

23 ibid.

24 Daniel Pipes, "The Scourge of Suicide Terrorism", The National Interest, Summer 1986. The article can be found at <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/175>

25 Ehud Sprinzak, "Outsmarting Suicide Terrorists", Christian Science Monitor, 21 October 2000.

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