

A Durkheimian Explanation for Suicide Terrorism

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Introduction

“Suicide attack is the most virulent and horrifying form of terrorism in the world today,” (Atran, 2006, 127). This statement accurately represents the Western view of suicide bombings. Suicide attacks are on the rise — “80 percent of suicide attacks since 1968 occurred after the September 11 attacks” (Atran, 2006, 127) — and popular support for suicide attacks remains high in the Middle East. The attacks are both cheap and easy to perform and result in a disproportionate number of enemy casualties in the terrorist organizations’ favor. Numerous government leaders and journalists misjudge the causes of terrorism: “[A] common notion in the U.S. administration and media spin on the war on terrorism is that suicide attackers are evil, deluded, or homicidal misfits who thrive in poverty, ignorance, and anarchy,” (Atran, 2004, 73). Actually, most suicide attackers differ from the assumed poverty and ignorance paradigm. Although suicide attacks are social expressions, suicide, in general, is an individual act. However, endless searches for specific individuals who may one day participate in a suicide attack should not be the basis of prevention policies.

A new framework is necessary to explain the suicide bombing phenomenon and properly direct prevention policy decisions. An effective framework should apply Durkheimian concepts to studies of suicide terrorism. Durkheim’s study and classification of types of suicide provide insight into suicide terrorism, but there are important differences between “ordinary” suicide and suicide terrorism. Despite these differences, when Durkheim’s principles are applied to the phenomenon of suicide

terrorism, it suggests that suicide terrorism will flourish in highly integrated and highly regulated social environments.

Durkheim's *Suicide*

Scholars often note Emile Durkheim as one of the founders of modern sociology. In his writing, Durkheim investigated the effects of modern society on the individual. His seminal work, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1979), provides insights about the societal conditions that contribute to increased rates of suicide within different countries. One precondition that contributes to increased suicide rates is integration, which is the extent to which an individual is part of a society. Durkheim argues that individuals who are either extremely under-integrated into society or over-integrated into society are the most likely to commit suicide. Durkheim defines suicide resulting from extremely weak integration as egoistic suicide. One type of weak integrated individual is the unmarried male. Marriage—more generally, family life—has the ability to “[neutralize] the suicidal tendency or [prevent] its outburst,” (Durkheim, 1979, 180). Therefore, unmarried men are more likely to commit suicide than married men. Educated people are also weakly integrated into society. Durkheim relates education to class, believing that the higher classes tend to pursue knowledge and have the “most active intellectual life,” (Durkheim, 1979, 165). He concludes that well-to-do classes exhibit higher suicide rates and, more importantly, that “suicide increases with knowledge,” (Durkheim, 1979, 168). However, Durkheim (1979) notes that education does not cause the destruction of societal ties, but rather, education is pursued because societal ties have already fallen apart. Therefore, education can serve as an indicator of weak societal bonds.

On the other end of the integration spectrum, suicide that results from an individual being over-integrated is altruistic suicide, Durkheim states that:

[W]hen a person kills himself...it is not because he assumes the right to do so but, on the contrary, *because it is his duty*. If he fails in this obligation, he is dishonored and also punished, usually, by religious sanctions...Now, we have seen that if such a person insists on living he loses public respect; in one case the usual funeral honors are denied, in another a life of horror is supposed to await him beyond the grave. The weight of society is thus brought to bear on him to lead him to destroy himself. (Durkheim, 1979, 219)

The individual that is highly integrated into society commits suicide when society's needs and opinions dictate that the person should commit suicide. Since the society or group is important to the person, s/he is willing to commit suicide for the society.

The other societal factor that fosters suicide Durkheim investigates is regulation. Regulation is the extent to which society controls the actions and desires of an individual. Similar to integration, extreme levels of regulation—either excessive or insufficient—tend to increase suicide rates. Durkheim refers to suicide resulting from low levels of regulation as anomic suicide. Crises—positive or negative—result in low levels of regulation, which interrupt the social order, thus disturbing individual identities (Durkheim, 1979). The disturbance of social order removes restrictions on individual desires. Individual desires need to exist in equilibrium with the means to fulfill those desires, or an individual may be unhappy and be more inclined to commit suicide.

Individuals that are highly regulated by society are more inclined to commit suicide. This type of suicide is referred to as “fatalistic suicide”. Durkheim mentions fatalistic suicide as a footnote in his overall study, briefly describing it as “the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and

passions violently choked by oppressive discipline,” (Durkheim, 1979, 276). An example of someone that fits this example is a slave, because a slave’s actions — from the most complex actions to the most mundane — are regulated by his or her owner.

The two scales (regulation and integration) work independently in equilibrium. It is not sufficient to keep the levels high or low, since a drastic calibration in either direction is likely contribute to the increased prevalence of suicide. If integration is too low, individuals are more inclined toward egoistic suicide; if integration is too high, individuals are more inclined toward altruistic suicide. Furthermore, if regulation is too low, individuals are more inclined toward anomic suicide; if regulation is too high, individuals are more inclined toward fatalistic suicide.

Joining Suicide Terrorist Organizations

In “The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism” and “Mishandling Suicide Terrorism,” Scott Atran studies the roots of the current suicide terrorism phenomenon and attempts to redefine the current paradigm for suicide terrorism. Atran argues that, even though the government and the general population believe suicide terrorists are poor and uneducated, in reality they are “often more educated and economically better off than their surrounding population... [T]he majority of Palestinian suicide bombers have a college education... [and] less than 15 percent come from poor families,” (Atran, 2004, 75). Furthermore, suicide bombers are usually “young, unattached males,” (Atran, 2004, 76). This analysis refutes the current paradigm, but simultaneously lacks a causal mechanism to establish why the individuals become suicide terrorists.

Durkheim's typology of suicide provides a framework for understanding suicide terrorism, arguing that low integration contributes to suicide. As already mentioned, suicide terrorists exhibit similar conditions (ie-unmarried) as those that are likely to commit individualistic, "ordinary" suicide. This is especially true of jihadi terrorists—terrorists that actively work toward the creation of a pan-Islamic state. Additionally, most jihadi suicide terrorists exhibit the relationship that Durkheim discusses between education and deteriorated social bonds. These factors are evidence of jihadis' disconnect from their communities. However, there are more direct indicators of their estrangement from society. Atran states that "more than 80 percent of known jihadis currently live in diaspora communities, which are often marginalized from the host society and physically disconnected from each other," (Atran, 2006, 135). Since jihadis live as minorities in their communities, they lack connections to their surrounding communities. Thus, marginalized, unmarried, well-educated, well-to-do men are most likely to be recruited to become suicide terrorists. This is the case because societal institutions, such as marriage and religion, have failed to provide the prophylactic effect against the individualistic whims that could lead someone to join a terrorist group.

Society also tends to under-regulate jihadis. Durkheim discusses that low regulation leads to anomic suicide, because society is unable to curb the desires of individuals. Suicide terrorists often live in countries where crises have dissolved the abilities of society to regulate people. Atran states:

During the 1990's, momentous political developments in Algeria (multiparty elections, including Islamic groups in 1992), Palestine (Oslo peace accords in 1993), Chechnya (dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Communist control), Indonesia (Suharto's resignation in 1998 and the end of dictatorship), and elsewhere fanned rising

aspirations among Muslim peoples for political freedom and economic advancement. In each case, economic stagnation or decline followed as political aspirations were thwarted (the Algerian army cancelled elections, the Israel-Palestine Camp David negotiations broke down, Russia cracked down on Chechnya's bid for autonomy, and Suharto army loyalists and paramilitary groups fomented interethnic strife and political disaccord). (Atran, 2004, 78).

These nations underwent rapid changes that altered the social order, which resulted in high aspirations for the future. However, the desired outcomes of these revolutionary events never came to fruition. This explains the prevalence of suicide bombers in these countries.

Committing a Suicide Bombing

Although the characteristics of suicide terrorists correlate with the demographic characteristics of Durkheim's framework for low integration and regulation, it is necessary to redefine Durkheim's framework to account for the social character of suicide terrorism. Durkheim analyzes individual suicides that are committed privately and do not harm others. Based on Durkheim's analysis, the people who are most prone to suicide — those who are unhappy over not being able to fulfill desires or those who give into momentary whims — could easily commit traditional, individualistic suicide. However, the suicide bombers choose to commit suicide to harm others. Moreover, the suicide bomber does not perform the attack independently; the suicide bomber operates through a terrorist organization. Therefore, Durkheim's analysis of individual suicides is not directly applicable to the suicide terrorist phenomenon, inasmuch as there is not a category of suicide terrorist at each end of the integration and regulation scales. In general, low regulation and low integration do not directly result in an individual

committing a suicide attack. Rather, these factors contribute to increased rates of joining terrorist networks and cells, as people search for a sense of belonging and stability.

Overcompensation in the pursuit of stability results in the direct prerequisites for suicide terrorists to follow through with their attacks—the extremely high levels of integration and regulation. These high levels both affect an individual suicide terrorist, but it is convenient to isolate each factor in order to classify two distinct types of suicide terrorists (based upon the primary factor influencing the individual). The two types are the altruistic suicide bomber and the fatalistic suicide bomber. Although it is necessary to define them as separate categories for the purposes of this investigation, they are most likely Weberian ideal types. The fatalistic suicide bomber experiences the same high level of regulation as the individual that commits “ordinary” fatalistic suicide. Bombers join terrorist groups of their own volition, but that does not mean they continue to foster the desire to commit a suicide attack. Atran notes that some groups do not necessarily completely indoctrinate the potential bombers: “For example, Tamil [Tiger] suicide operatives are actively selected by recruiters and cannot withdraw from planned operations without fear of retaliation against their families,” (Atran, 2006, 131). These bombers do not have the option of refusing to commit an attack. Therefore, terrorist organizations exert the same stranglehold on the fatalistic suicide bombers as societies exert on those who commit fatalistic suicide.

The second form of suicide terrorism — altruistic suicide terrorism — resembles Durkheim’s obligatory altruistic suicide, which results from extremely high levels of integration. The altruistic suicide bomber displays an intense assimilation of the organization’s, as well as the general society’s, expectations. Although the altruistic

suicide bomber may be punished, it is in the form of loss of prestige within the group. The bomber forms intense bonds of loyalty with his fellow bombers. Oftentimes, the altruistic suicide bomber is a member of a global jihadi group. The jihadis take an oath that “affirms that by their sacrifice members help secure the future of their family of fictive kin: ‘Each [martyr] has a special place—among them are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear,’” (Atran, 2004, 79). Despite living in diaspora communities, the indoctrination of the suicide terrorists evokes intense feelings of community and obligation to fight for fellow members of the jihadi group, which resembles army training (Atran, 2004). The bond created often results from wide use of the internet, which allows communities to form despite geographical separation from other jihadis (Atran, 2006). Most importantly, the global jihadi movement, although made of individual cells that have a unique bond within the group, is able to use the internet and media to unite the groups. The movement has the ability to take the various “interpretations of religious canon [and] flatten and homogenize” them and create a specific message for the terrorist cells (Atran, 2006, 136). This message “translates personal and local ties within and across small groups into a profound connection with the wider Muslim community (ummah),” (Atran, 2006, 136). The result is the formation of “‘born again’ radical Islamists, including converts from Christianity, [who] embrace apocalyptic visions for humanity’s violent salvation,” (Atran, 2006, 129). This intense shift toward a high level of integration results in a large community with members who are willing to give their lives for the group.

Conclusion

It is necessary to restructure Durkheim's separate integration and regulation scales in order to use them as tools for understanding suicide terrorism, because there is not a category of suicide terrorist at the ends of both of the spectrums. Suicide terrorism endemically results from low regulation and integration. These societal presuppositions create an environment in which individuals, in the pursuit of finding a group that can help rectify grievances, join terrorist groups that require them to commit acts of suicide terrorism. However, once individuals join a terrorist group, they enter into an environment of high integration and high regulation. At this point, it is hard for an individual to leave the terrorist group or refuse to commit a suicide bombing.

The Durkheimian framework points to potential solutions for reducing the prevalence of suicide terrorism. First, western nations, primarily the US, need to focus on supporting regimes that will attempt to achieve the goals that the people in their countries strived to achieve during the early 1990's. For example, The US government needs to encourage a final resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby improving the living conditions of the Palestinians. This shift away from supporting regimes that benefit short-term economic interests in exchange for failing to secure the interests of their own citizens will reduce the level of anomy within the societies in question. Second, rather than funding corrupt regimes, western nations should fund organizations that support the betterment of communities that are likely breeding grounds for terrorists. This shift will increase integration among disaffected members of these communities. Most importantly, this investigation found that trying to identify specific terrorists or potential terrorists is a difficult and often fruitless task. Therefore, eliminating the root,

societal causes that predispose individuals to suicide terrorism is the only means of deterring terrorism.

References

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