Suicide Terrorism as a Tool of Insurgency Campaigns:
Functions, Risk Factors, and Countermeasures

By Luis de la Corte and Andrea Giménez-Salinas

1. Introduction

Suicide attacks are offensive operations where success depends upon the death of the perpetrator. In most cases, the practice of suicide bombings represents the highest point of escalation towards a maximum level of destructiveness promoted by terrorist or insurgent campaigns. On the other hand, suicide operations are methods of growing application among insurgent groups. We have only to remember the most significant armed conflicts and terrorist episodes of the last three decades: for instance, the conflicts and attacks in Lebanon, Israel, Sri Lanka, Iraq, United States, Spain, United Kingdom, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, etc.[1]

This paper offers a short review of the recent scientific literature about three main issues related to suicide violence. First, the strategic objectives as well as tactical and operational advantages of suicide attacks in the context of asymmetric conflicts. This will help to understand the rationale underlying the use of this tactic as well its instrumental utility following a plan designed by the leaders of an organization.

Nevertheless, suicide operations are not choices that are implemented by an organization, initially. As we explain later, usually these operations are the consequence of strategic shifts that follow strategic, tactical and operative criteria. Second, we interpret several scientific hypotheses about the socio-political causes of suicide terrorism in terms of risk factors. This could be useful to understand the conditions that might increase the probability of organizations opting for suicide methods rather than other tools of violence; whether alone or in combination with other political initiatives. Furthermore, this approach could help to design measures and policies to counter and prevent these kinds of attacks, an issue that will be addressed in the final section of this article.

2. Strategic goals with tactical and operational advantages

Contrary to some stereotypes, suicide attacks involve an instrumental logic. Rather, violent organizations chose suicide attacks from among a variety of tactical options in order to achieve certain strategic, tactical, and operational goals.[2]

The strategic goals most often associated with suicide operations are the following:

Expulsion of foreign occupying forces;
Obtaining national independence;
Destabilization or replacement of a political regime;
Intensification of a violent conflict in progress;
Interruption of some process of peaceful solutions for a political, ethnic or religious conflict.

It can be observed through the study of suicide campaigns conducted in Israel and Iraq that the above objectives are not necessarily contradictory. Suicide operations against Israeli targets share the same goal with other forms of violence from Palestinian radical groups: the foundation of a new state in Palestine. However, all suicide campaigns undertaken by Palestinian groups have entailed a significant increase of violence and, on more than one occasion; have been utilized to interrupt peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).[3] In the case of Iraq, jihadi insurgent groups have directed their suicide operations against quite different targets with different purposes. Some operations are directed against Coalition Forces to expel them from the country and others against the Shiite population of Iraq in order to promote a civil war. It should be noted that each of those strategic goals could be pursued using conventional terrorist and insurgent methodologies.[4] For this reason, qualifications for suicide terrorism as a choice above other tactics should be evaluated by exploring the tactic's potential advantages over other types of violent actions. From a tactical and operational point of view, these advantages are:

High lethality. Suicide operations cause much more casualties and material damage than any other typical insurgent method, especially when they are conducted against civilians. Suicide attacks have caused nearly 50% of victims registered since 1968, despite the fact that they represent a minority of the total number of terrorist incidents during that period. This makes suicide campaigns a very attractive option for the weaker contenders involved in asymmetrical conflicts.[5]

Intense psychological and social impact. Because of the high number of causalities that are produced and the spectacular and illustrate the fanatical determination of its perpetrators, suicide attacks generate more anxiety, sense of helplessness, fear, and social disturbance than any other conventional violent method. Furthermore, these effects usually involve intensive media coverage.

Facilitates access to certain well-protected and high value political, military or symbolic targets. For example, political leaders or public buildings.

Precision guaranteed by means of the attacks. The use of suicide volunteers to activate explosive devices decreases dependence on remote controlled systems. The ability of the suicide bomber to decide the exact time and location of detonation provides the opportunity to adapt to any unforeseen change, such as an unexpected increase in protection arrangements of the target. Even if the suicide bomber would be stopped by a security force, he/she could still activate the explosive and cause some damage.
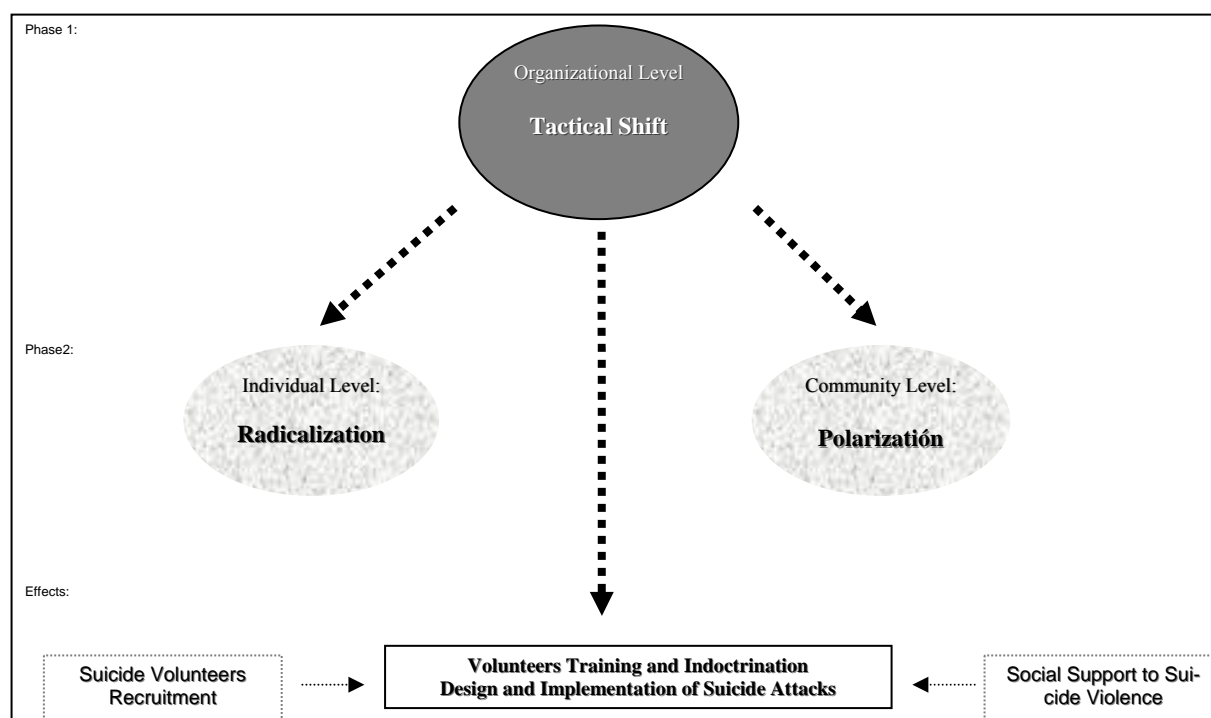
Simplification of the attacks and risk reduction. The death of the suicide bombers eliminates the need to design an escape plan as well as the risk of being captured and subsequently leaking sensitive information to the adversaries.

3. Risk factors of suicide campaigns

The data and studies accumulated over the last years make it possible to identify several conditions that correlate with suicide campaigns. We interpret these conditions as factors that could contribute to on increase in the risk that an insurgent or extremist group will resort to suicide violence.

At least, three main conditions are associated to the emergence of a suicide campaign. According to a theoretical model recently proposed by De la Corte and Giménez-Salinas, the satisfaction of those conditions occurs in two successive periods (see Figure 1).[6] A first phase involves the activation of collective deliberation and instrumental calculations inside an insurgent group (more specifically within its apex and its elite leadership). The ultimate outcome of this deliberation is a tactical shift in favour of promoting the use of suicide attacks. But the implementation of those operations requires two more conditions that should be simultaneously satisfied during a second phase. On one hand, the political or religious attitudes of the insurgent passive supporters must be polarized to the point that the organization favours or, at the very least, excuses the use of suicide violence. Moreover, this condition should be complemented by a radicalisation process that must be extreme enough so that the members of the organization are willing to participate in suicide operations (volunteerism is an almost universal feature of suicide attacks[7]).

Figure 1: **Motivational Processes that Promote Suicide Campaigns**

In the following section some risk factors are addressed to understand the conditions increasing the risk of a tactical shift to suicide methods and the risk of a process of polarization and radicalization.

Risk factors related to tactical shifts

According to available academic studies, the choice to promote a suicide campaign becomes more likely with the intervention of one or more of the three following factors [8]:

1)Feeling of stagnation, crisis or failure in the use of other insurgent methods: suicide operations may be perceived as an effective method to accelerate the resolution of certain conflicts.

2)Coexistence of several insurgent groups pursuing equivalent goals: one of those groups may use suicide attacks to capitalize attention on their community of reference. According to several analyses, that has been a key factor in explaining the increasing periods of suicide terrorism in places like Israel and Sri Lanka.[9]

3)Pre-existence of suicidal activity: the adoption of suicide methods by an insurgent group can result in a contagion effect encouraging other groups to introduce this method into their operational repertoire. This effect can be reproduced by two types of insurgent groups: those who are involved in the same conflict and those who participate in different or distant confrontations.

Risk factors related to the processes of polarization and radicalization

The polarization and radicalization processes that fuel suicide campaigns are closely related phenomena. After all, both processes are based on very similar psychosocial effects which include an attitudinal change coherent with certain political or religious arguments and a belief set that justifies suicide campaigns. Those changes could be facilitated by the subsequent factors:

1. Dissemination of a subculture of martyrdom. As pointed out by Gill[10], the concept of a "subculture of martyrdom" refers to a set of beliefs and symbolic resources that have been extracted from the political culture or the religion that insurgent groups who perpetrate suicide attacks share with a constituent community. These beliefs and symbolic resources are adapted in order to build a moral interpretation of suicide attacks as a legitimate and heroic sacrifice in favour of a certain community or social collective, or as a response to a sacred obligation (in the case of suicide violence promoted by religious groups). Obviously, the spreading of a subculture of martyrdom is frequently connected with religious indoctrination and generally speaking should be understood as the result of several activities developed to attain that goal: proselytizing, preaching, charismatic leadership, propaganda, intensive indoctrination of future suicide bombers, etc. [11] The subculture of martyrdom that promotes jihadi suicide violence adds two frequent and strong motivations for "martyrdom operations": as a way of atoning for the previous sins, or as an action that would be compensated with a rewards after death and/ or some benefits to the suicide bomber's family in life (from cash bonuses to free apartments.[12]

2. Implementation of bloody counterinsurgent strategies. Although a universal pattern cannot be set out, the correlation between overreactions to terrorism and the increase of terrorist activity has been noted on several occasions. That premise can also be applied to suicide terrorism. The polls show that the percentages of support for "martyrdom operations" are higher in countries or regions where potential sympathizers of the insurgent groups have suffered severe repression perpetrated by institutional or foreign security forces.[13] Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is a controversial topic. For instance, the study of Pape shows that this condition does not always manifest itself in the same way. Generally speaking, there exist numerous examples of counterproductive counterinsurgent operations, in terms of how such operations contribute to an increase in suicide terrorism. Further, we can also find cases where suicide campaigns have occurred during periods of relatively lax counterinsurgent operations.

3. Higher contrast of identities between insurgents and their adversaries and targets. Usually, the larger the perceived differences between aggressors and their enemies are, the greater the levels of violence observed. In the same way, it seems more likely for suicide campaigns to receive significant social support when the perpetrators of suicide attacks are perceived as members of a wider social community and there exists a clear contrast of identities between that community and the targets or victims of the attacks. Such contrasts may be based on any perceived difference, ranging from religion to nationality, political ideology to social status and profession (indeed, that is the reason why suicide attacks against military personnel or senior officials gain a stronger social support that those attacks carried out against civilians), etc.

4. Some operational aspects

The success of suicide operations is dependent on several conditions: a maximum level of secrecy, reconnaissance of the scene, the procurement of materials and the acquisition of information about the target. Secrecy ensures the preservation of the surprise factor, which is crucial for most operations. Familiarity with the attack's location, and information about the target, facilitates the anticipation of actions just before the attack and the planning of the suicide operation itself. Ordinarily, suicide bombers are supported by a cell whose members provide the attackers information on the target, safe accommodation, food, materials, explosive devices, and clothing, etc. Generally, just before the attack one of those members perform a final reconnaissance of the scene before engaging the suicide bomber.

There are different procedures for carrying out a suicide operation. The choice depends on the resources available to the group, the level of damage that is intended, and the identity of the target. Focusing on recent trends, the use of an explosive vest or belt rapped around the body and hidden under heavier clothing (SBBIEDs or Suicide Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) has become typical. The preparation of SBBIEDs is easy and cheap. The type of material used for these kinds of suicide attacks are often among the most powerful explosives, such as TNT or C4 (typical in Iraq), usually supplemented with shrapnel, ball bearings or nails. Some vests contain a radio transmitter which allows for remote detonation from a cell phone. This allows the planning cell to ensure that the operation goes through as planed regardless of whether or not the 'martyr' suffers from second thoughts, or if he suffers a heart attack, or is intercepted by security forces. If the attack seeks to cause civilian casualties, suicide volunteers are trained to detonate themselves in crowded places, such as bazaars or public spaces.[14]

In other cases, suicide bombers load their explosives in vehicles to crash them against their targets (VBIEDs, Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices). The use of VBIEDs increases the damage caused by the insurgents, but is a much more expensive and more complex mode of attack. The explosives used could be fuel, TNT, PE4, mortar ammunition, rockets or other artillery material. The most commonly used vehicles are motorbikes, sedans, or trucks. When cars are used several vehicles could participate in the same operation. The first car is sometimes used to distract people and break some door or barrier. Less often, suicide bombers utilize boats or airplanes to carry out their attacks, i.e. 2001 9/11 attacks.

5. Some new trends

There are other important trends not related with the technology of an attack. Two are the most significant: the implementation of suicide operations by small and isolated home-grown terrorist networks and suicide attacks which are carried out by women.

Until the end of the Twentieth Century well structured organizations used to have a near monopoly on the use of collective violence. This was also the pattern with respect to suicide terrorism; e.g., groups like Hezbollah, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or Kurdistan Workers Party. The violence (suicide or not) promoted by those groups with insurgent goals traditionally fulfilled two conditions: it was a violence almost exclusively carried out inside a specific country or territory, and it was a violence that generated large amounts of support from a particular constituency. However, this classical pattern is no longer the case. Terrorist attacks (including suicide operations) are increasingly perpetrated by small, less structured and isolated networks, such as al-Qaeda and other groups integrated into the global jihadi movement. Those networks do not need to emerge within a broader constituency, who support suicide attacks, or if they do, their supporters could be a virtual constituency.[15]

The March 11th attack, whose perpetrators finally committed suicide some days after the operation in the Madrid trains, is an example of suicide violence carried out by a home-grown jihadi network. Those attacks were planned and executed in order to help insurgent movements operating in far territories by forcing the withdrawal of Spanish troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.[16] Suicide operations conducted by networks like the Madrid 3/11 group also have shown that a total differentiation among trainers and executers, which is common in other suicide insurgent organizations, is not an essential condition for suicide violence.

Although some nationalist groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the Kurdistan Workers Party have used women as suicide bombers, until recently it did seem likely that jihadi salafists would use them. There are precedents in Lebanon, from the mid 1980s, and Sri Lanka during the 90s, but the participation of women in jihadi suicide attacks has increased significantly in the past few years with examples in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan or Chechnya.[17] Sometimes, women who commit suicide attacks are motivated by specific reasons like the need for revenge, the death of some member of their families, the desire to prove their equality with male peers or the aspiration to escape the predestined life expected for them.[18] There are several operative advantages in using women as suicide bombers. First of all, this avoids the profiling used against men. Secondly, by simulating pregnancy, women can carry more explosives than men. Finally, suicide attacks by women capture the attention of the media easily.

As well as the use of women as suicide bombers, there is also a new trend that consists of using suicide bombers with other (traditionally) non-aggressive profiles. For example, al-Qaeda in Iraq has been using children and mentally deficient people who either freely or unwittingly participate in suicide operations.[19]

6. Measures to counter suicide attacks

It is possible to distinguish two basic types of countermeasures to suicide campaigns: defensive and offensive measures.[20]

Defensive measures

Defensive measures try to keep suicide bombers from reaching their targets. These include the erection of physical barriers, the installation of cameras and surveillance systems, as well as the implementation of road blocks, border checkpoints, etc. Some restrictions can be imposed to block access to information needed for planning suicide attacks (i.e., information about key infrastructure and routes or information about targets).

Military units in conflict zones can apply further defensive measures: building perimeters, armouring light vehicles, using firearms to repel the approach of car-bombs, etc. It is not by coincidence that suicide operations recently carried out in Iraq have produced more civilian casualties than military ones, which does not mean that those operations have not damaged the work of allied counterinsurgency operations. However, by forcing military units to increase self-defense measures, suicide campaigns have contributed to the isolation of military units from the civilian population.

Offensive measures

Offensive measures are those that try to prevent or reduce the implementation of suicide attacks. A preliminary offensive measure could be pre-emptive attacks against groups that promote suicide bombings in order to reduce their resources and capabilities, i.e., destroying their training infrastructure, capturing their leaders and militants, cutting their sources of funding, etc. Nevertheless, such actions involve risks. Experiences like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also suggest that offensive operations could help to increase the number of sympathizers willing to replace insurgents that have been arrested or killed.[21]

Collecting intelligence about radical organizations is a secondary offensive measure that cannot be underestimated. Access to sufficient and rigorous information about the intentions of radicals, their plans, resources, infrastructure, procedures, etc. is of vital importance to prevent further attacks.

Finally, it is also crucial to use any available resource to reduce the insurgent group's capabilities for recruitment. Above all, this goal requires the implementation of measures to decrease the risk factors that contribute to the radicalization and polarization processes. The following countermeasures, further this final goal.

1. Mollifying any political, cultural, or socioeconomic condition that could promote the sense of threat or feelings of humiliation, revenge or hate within the real or virtual collectives who can support suicide bombers and their insurgent organization.
2. Appling specific operative measures to reduce access to propaganda distributed for disseminating the subculture of martyrdom.
3. Implementing information and counterpropaganda activities to counteract the arguments and ideas used to legitimate suicide violence. It should be noted that the chance of counteracting jihadi suicide violence requires an intense cooperation with moderate leaders, institutions and members of the Muslim community.

Luis de la Corte is a Professor of social psychology at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and an investigator at Athena Intelligence.

Andrea Giménez-Salinas is a Professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

NOTES:

[1] Silke has offered an interesting review about historic examples of suicide political violence; see Silke, A. (2006). The role of suicide in politics, conflict and terrorism. Terrorism and Political Violence 18, 35-46.

[2] Pape, R. A. (2005). Dying to win. The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. New York: Random House; Ganor, B. (2001). Suicide terrorism: An overview. Institute of Counterterrorism. available from: http://www.ict.org.il/articledet.cfm?articleid=128; DCSINT (2005). Suicide bombing in the COE. Washington: US Army Training and Doctrine Command-Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence and to Win.

[3] Gupta, D. K. and Mundra, K. (2005). Suicide bombing as a strategic weapon. An empirical investigation of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Terrorism and Political Violence 5, 17, 573-598.

[4] Hafez, M. (2007). Martyrdom mythology in Iraq: how jihadists frame suicide terrorism in videos and biographies. Terrorism and Political Violence 19, 1 95-115.

[5] Attran, S. (2006). The moral logic and growth of suicide terrorism. The Washington Quarterly, 29, 127-147. De la Corte, L y Giménez-Salinas, A. (in press). Terrorismo suicida: motivos y procesos psicosociales que lo promueven. Revista de Psicología Social.

[6] De la Corte, L y Giménez-Salinas, A. (in press). Terrorismo suicida: motivos y procesos psicosociales que lo promueven. Revista de Psicología Social. The theoretical model proposed by De la Corte and Giménez-Salinas has been partially inspired by a work of A. Pedahzur; see Pedahzur, A. (2004). Toward an analytical model of suicide terrorism. A comment. Terrorism and Political Violence 16, 4, 841-844.

[7] Josrojavar, F. (2002). Les nouveaux martyrs d´Allah. Paris: Flammarion.

[8] Bloom, M. (2005). Dying to kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror. New York: Columbia University Press; Pape, R. A. (2005). Dying to win. The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. New York: Random House; Goodwin, J (2006). What do we know about suicide terrorism? Sociological Forum, 21, 2, 315-330.

[9] Bloom, M. (2005). Dying to kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 94-97

[10] Gill, P. (2007). A multidimensional approach to suicide bombing. International Journal of Conflict and Violence 1, 2, 142-159.

[11] Gill, P. (2007). A multidimensional approach to suicide bombing. International Journal of Conflict and Violence 1, 2, p 146-148.

[12] DCSINT (2005). Suicide bombing in the COE. Washington: US Army Training and Doctrine Command-Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence and to Win.

[13] See the different positions of Pape, R. E. (2005). Dying to win. The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. New York: Random House; Bloom (2005) Dying to kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror. New York: Columbia University Press, and Gambetta, D. (2006). Making sense of suicide missions. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[14] Medea Group (2007). Suicide Bomber Tactics. Strategic Security and Analysis: Islamic Terrorist Field Training& Tactics, 2, 1 (5).

[15] Gill, P. (2007). A multidimensional approach to suicide bombing. International Journal of Conflict and Violence 1, 2, 142-159.

[16] De la Corte, L y Jordán, J. (2007). La yihad terrorista. Madrid: Síntesis, pp. 246-254.

[17] Medea Group (2007) Female Suicide Bombers-Practical Implications. Strategic Security and Analysis: Islamic Terrorist Field Training& Tactics, 2, 2 (5). Zedalis, D. D. (2004). Female Suicide Bombers, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. Schweitzer, Yoram, et al. (2006), "Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?", Memorandum, nº 84, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University.

[18] Beyler, C. (2003). Messengers of Death: Female Sucide Bombers. ICT Research Paper, 12; available from: http://www.ict.org.il/articlesdet.cfm?articleid=470

[19] "Al-Qaeda is targeting orphans, street children and mentally disabled children as suicide bomber recruits as well as women". Jihad Watch: available from: http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/022922.php

[20]   Kronin, A. K. (2003). Terrorists and suicide attacks. Washington: CSR Report RL32058.

[21] Again see Bloom, M. (2005). Dying to kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror. New York: Columbia University Press; Gupta, D. K. and Mundra, K. (2005), Gupta, D. K. and Mundra, K. (2005). Suicide bombing as a strategic weapon. An empirical investigation of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Terrorism and Political Violence 5, 17, 573-598; Gambetta, D. (2006). Making sense of suicide missions. Oxford: Oxford University Press.