

Jeffrey William Lewis. *The Business of Martyrdom: A History of Suicide Bombing.*

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Reviewed by Assaf Moghadam

The Business of Martyrdom is a thoughtful and enlightening take at the problem of suicide bombings; it offers more than its title suggests. Lewis, an instructor at Ohio State University, provides an overview of the modern history of suicide bombing starting with its use in Imperial Russia, using a framework of analysis that interprets suicide missions as a technology.

Lewis defines technologies not merely in their narrow, physical, sense but more broadly as "processes that integrate behavior, thinking, and physical materials and transform them into goods or services of greater utility" (p. 7). His understanding of technology is informed by Arnold Pacey's framework, who sees technology as an interactive process, combining technical aspects, culture/society, and organisation (pp.12-17). Lewis substitutes the technical aspects of Pacey's definition with the human suicide attacker, although he considers organisations to be the most critical of these three nodes because suicide bombings allow for organisational control of "what would otherwise be an individual act" (p. 4). Cultures and societies play a role not only in constructing martyrs, but also in the diffusion of this tactic. The spread of suicide bombings, as is true of any tactic, is heterogeneous, embraced or rejected depending on the technology's ability to "solve problems consistent with their values and norms" (p. 7).

The book is structured in accordance with the life cycle of technological systems. Part I of the book examines the innovation phase, during which new technologies are developed, and includes insightful chapters on suicide bombings in Imperial Russia, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka. Lewis argues that suicide bombings used by Russian anarchists foreshadowed the contemporary forms of suicide attacks. Unlike today's 'human bombs,' however, the bombs were not yet fully integrated with the bombers, allowing for the possibility of the attackers' survival. The chance of surviving the suicide mission afforded to Russian Anarchists was eliminated with the Japanese Kamikaze/Tokkotai, whose martyrdom operations more closely resemble contemporary tactics for that reason (61). The appropriation of the suicide bomber by organisations was completed by Hizballah and other groups in Lebanon during the 1980s.

Lewis' chapter on Sri Lanka might not offer much information that is new to the specialist, but his discussion does offer a fresh take on this particular case. Using his framework, Lewis convincingly explains why the first suicide bombing in Sri Lanka was followed by a three year hiatus—namely due to a lack of "dedicated organisational component for preparing and exploiting suicide attacks on a regular basis" (p. 107). He also distinguishes the use of suicide bombings by the LTTE from those employed by other groups by arguing that suicide bombings reinforced the political power of a single person, namely LTTE Leader Vellupilai Prabhakaran—a fact that, Lewis argues, also helps explain why LTTE suicide attacks essentially declined along with the LTTE leader's death (p. 111).

In Part II of the book, Lewis tackles the diffusion of the technology of suicide bombing. Lewis argues that the spread of suicide bombings depends on several factors, most importantly on the innovation's compatibility with the culture of the new society and the degree to which the

innovation is perceived to be "better for solving a given problem relative to other solutions"(pp. 139-140). To be sustainable, suicide attacks require "careful cultural construction and management" (p. 111). Lewis shows that such construction was lacking in the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army's campaign of 'proxy bombings'. The degree of the IRA's reverence for its martyrs simply did not meet the minimum required threshold, rendering suicide bombings "inconsistent with IRA cultural norms" (pp. 116-117).

Part III of the book, "Commodification," examines the global spread of suicide bombing, the signature technology of the global jihad movement. Lewis points at a tension in the most recent wave of suicide attacks. The more systematically organisations control the use of suicide bombings, the less 'authentic' martyrdom seems to broader audiences. This tension essentially plays the tactical aspect of suicide bombings off against the strategic dimension. Global jihadists have turned out to be poor managers of this contradiction, which helps explain the recent decline in the number of suicide bombings, at least when compared to the previous decade.

The book's dual purpose is to offer both an intellectual synthesis of the existing debate, as well as to formulate a new interpretation of suicide missions. Although it achieves both goals, the book could have benefited from a more thorough analysis of the existing literature and *The Business of Martyrdom's* place in it. The author does discuss some of the more important debates in the field early on in the book (pp. 13-17), but the academic readership would have been well served had Lewis revisited that discussion in the conclusion, in light of the book's main arguments. Such discussion would have been particularly helpful because Lewis' explanation does not amount to a radical new theory of suicide attacks, but rather to a reinterpretation that, thought-provoking as it is, closely relates to existing multi-causal approaches to understanding this phenomenon.

Some non-specialist readers may be deterred by the rather intricate nature of the book's main argument. Perhaps precisely because of its merit and strong explanatory power—after all, complex problems require complex explanations—Lewis' interpretation of suicide bombings is multifaceted, lacking the elegant simplicity of other explanations of suicide missions.

These minor points aside, Lewis has provided a highly valuable service to the field of terrorism studies. *The Business of Martyrdom* is a thoroughly researched, well written, and well-argued book – one that ranks among the most important and comprehensive works published on this topic to date.

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