

Are The Suicide Attackers Rational or Irrational Beings?

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Terrorism – An Undefined Threat

The strategies, tactics and the modus operandi of the terrorists keep on changing firstly, to align these to the aims of the terrorist organizations and secondly, dependent upon the counter strategies of the established authorities and security forces and lastly, on the response pattern of the target population. However, the primary purpose of terrorism remains the same that is cause fear and panic and shock the target population. Sheer violence, the randomness of terror acts and uncertainty add to the fear and shock quotient. Ambush, sniper fire, car bombs, stone pelting, and human bombs, are a few of the several ways used by terrorists. **Suicide attacks have gained ascendancy over the last two decades.**

December 1981 suicide car bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut by the Al Dawa terrorist group killing 61 people including Iraq's ambassador to Lebanon; October 1983 witnessed yet another suicide truck bombing by Hezbollah of a building housing American and French service members of Multinational force in Lebanon killing 307 people and recent in the memory in September 2001 when the whole world woke up with the shocking news of the suicide aircraft attack by the Al Qaida on the twin towers of WTO killing almost 3000 people and injuring about 25000. These are a few of the glaring suicide attacks.

Root causes of the suicide terrorism

The suicide attack is one of the tactics employed by the terrorists wherein the outcomes are prominent in form of killing the intended target population in large numbers, injuring many more and tarnishing the image of the established government authorities and the security forces, thus causing the *maximum possible damage with least of the resources and logistic hassles*. However, at the expense of the death of the perpetrator of the act. Since the act itself requires the death of the one carrying out the act, the willingness of the individual(s) to carry out the suicide attacks is most important.

Suicide attacks cause the maximum possible damage to the intended target by killing and injuring and for the maximum political effect, instantly and embarrassing to the governments. The choice of this modus operandi is primarily for the freedom of movement to the suicide attackers it offers coupled with the ability to move quickly and surreptitiously avoiding security measures of the security forces and most important is the surprise element it has. Suicide attack

is one of the lowest *costs yet effective tactics*, hence being used by the terrorists against the superior enemy, that is against the security forces and the government. The suicide attacks pay *high dividends in asymmetric warfare* against hard military targets.

Willingness and Motivation

The suicide attacks cannot fructify unless the *individual's willingness to sacrifice his/her life* for the cause. It demands ultimate psychological conditioning of the mind of the perpetrator of the act to even willing to embrace the death. This requires self-motivation as also the motivation espoused by the group or the organisation the individual belongs to. Self-motivation of the individual and the indoctrination by the terrorist group of the individual has to be of extreme nature to justify indiscriminate killing, the collateral damage and the natural aversion of a person to take one's life.

As the saying goes, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. What the government and the authorities think of the militant or the terrorist, the people may actually consider him as a freedom fighter fighting for a just cause. The religious cause is also one of the important factors to contribute towards suicide terrorism. The *culture of martyrdom* as propagated by the fundamentalist religious organisations and the other terrorist outfits attract the individuals toward attaining their moments of glory and then they are indoctrinated by these outfits in such a manner even to sacrifice their lives. This glory of achieving martyrdom for a just cause and displaying allegiance to the outfits attracts the people who are inclined towards the terrorist outfits and against the established governments or authorities.

Most of the suicide attacks are well planned and are strategic rather than being random in nature. Hence, these attacks are normally not carried out by lone wolves but by the terrorist outfits thus the aspect of solidarity amongst the group gains a lot of importance.

One of the causes is societal in nature wherein the concept of altruistic suicide plays the role. The suicide attacks are supported by the public itself as it does not have the means to wage war against the authorities and hence they have to take this means in the asymmetric war. And the society itself may benefit in terms of material and political gains. Honour and respect also play on the minds of a terrorist who may consider his/her duty to sacrifice himself/herself for the dignity and honour of society.

Are suicide attackers rational actors?

Suicide terrorism in general is considered to be the choice of the irrational people and berserk terrorist outfits. However, it is not so straight forward conclusion as the suicide terrorist acts have a large sense of rationality with shades of irrationality in executing such acts wherein the death of the individual is guaranteed.

As per the *Rational Choice Theory*, the people use their self-interests to make choices that will provide them with the greatest benefit. Individuals weigh their options and make the choices that they think will serve them the best. Terrorist acts and particularly suicide attacks though seem to be committed by the psychopaths or the deranged individuals but this is not normally the case.

Suicide attacks against the target population, or the military or the government authorities are the acts thought over considerably, planned meticulously, decided consciously taking calculated risks of the collateral killings and aftermath in form of public and government reactions locally, regionally and even globally.

As per Robert Pape, an American political scientist has concluded after his studies ranging from 1980 to 2003 that the *suicide terrorism is a rational act*. He states, “*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.*”

The rationality of the suicide attackers is not limited to their personal benefits, rather, it is very uncommon but they are more driven by the benefits going to be accrued to their terrorist outfits/organisations as also the cost to their opponents which in the case of suicide attacks weigh far more.

The rationality of the suicide acts can be attributed to the *rationality of individuals* carrying out the suicide attacks; *rationality of the causes and purposes* of the particular terrorist outfit; *rationality of the strategic aim and tactical execution* of the suicide attack; and the *rationality of individual and collective motivation* to carry out such tasks.

The rationality plays at twin levels, individual and collective. At the individual level, he/she is the best judge of the action that he/she is going to take, responsibility is his/hers to shape his /her life in whatever manner he/she considers. At the collective level, loyalty to the group/outfit/organisation with the tendency of evaluating the actions fruitful and beneficial to the group weighs high and compels the individuals to pursue the goals of the group consciously.

The Irrational Ratio?

To consider the suicide acts barely with the aspect of irrational behaviour displayed by the individual and the terrorist outfit may be wrong to assume. However, rationality is confined by human imperfections, by their inherent inability to perform all the necessary calculations before arriving at the decision. There is thus the cognitive limitation of the mind. And that is true for a law-abiding citizen and a terrorist.

In essence, the rationality of the suicide act is safe to presume. The rationality quotient may be considered weak or strong but then it is very subjective in nature as the suicide attacks are executed with well-thought aims and objectives but driven by numerous tangible and intangible factors. Suicide attackers are hence presumably the rational actors who exchange their lives willingly and knowingly for a cause whose outcome / she will not be able to see except his /hers certain death.

