

Suicide Attacks on the Rise

By Captain Billy J. Huntsman

Based on the history of suicide attacks around the world, we can expect the increased presence of military personnel in Afghanistan to result in an increased number of suicide attacks there. Military leaders should study and understand these attacks, which are extremely dangerous and usually unpreventable.

Although suicide attacks are carried out at the operational level, they should not be viewed as merely an operational tactic, but as a means to a strategic goal. The strategic goal of political coercion involves repelling or removing an occupying force. In Afghanistan, North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces are the target.

Origin

Scholars have debated the origin of suicide attacks for years. Most have pointed to the infamous attacks by the Zealots and Sicarii in the 1st Century as the first. The two Jewish sects used daggers to publicly attack political and military heads of state to repel Roman occupiers—knowing that they would not survive the attacks since high-ranking officials were generally protected by guards. Later, the Nizari (also known as the Hashshashin, from which the word *assassin* is believed to originate) were a fierce branch of Shia Muslims who conducted suicide attacks during the Middle Ages, using the same tactics as the Zealots and Sicarii.

Religion is not the cause of suicide attacks, as nonreligious groups have also been involved in suicide attacks throughout history. However, religion has been used as a tool to recruit attackers. There has been some debate about religious groups and organizations in relation to total numbers of suicide attacks. Some scholars claim that most Islamic groups fall under the umbrella of the al-Qaida terrorist network and, thus, attribute most suicide attacks to the al-Qaida. Yet, it is difficult to prove that the chains of command of the individual Islamic groups are directly linked to al-Qaida and that their operational control is coordinated by upper al-Qaida echelons. According to Mr. Robert A. Pape, a leading expert on suicide attacks, “Iraqi attacks have not been carried out through a particularly well-organized strategic operation, but rather via a loose, ad hoc constellation of many small bands that act on their own or come together for a single attack.”¹

Success

Historically, suicide attacks have been effective. A 23 October 1983 suicide attack against a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, took the lives of 241 personnel and resulted in the withdrawal of

U.S. peacekeeping forces from Lebanon. Although not a suicide attack, American forces were also killed in Somalia in 1993. Due to public outrage, U.S. peacekeeping forces were removed from Somalia following the Battle of Mogadishu. These incidents served as precursors to al-Qaida attempts to cause great destruction and death for the purpose of coercing the United States into changing international policy.

Statistics indicate that suicide attacks are still effective. The 188 attacks that took place from 1980 to 2001 killed an average of 13 people each—excluding the attackers themselves and the unusually large number of fatalities that occurred on 11 September 2001. Overall, suicide attacks amounted to just 3 percent of all terrorist attacks, but accounted for 48 percent of the total deaths due to terrorism from 1980 to 2001—again, excluding the fatalities of 11 September 2001.²

While suicide attacks are successful, they appear to be a “weapon of last resort” for the weaker party.³ The more that insurgents are able to maintain their strength, the less likely they are to use suicide attacks; and the weaker the enemy becomes, the more desperate insurgents become to accomplish “successful” attacks (and, thus, the more likely they are to resort to suicide attacks). Suicide attacks are “double-edged swords” for insurgents—as they lose public support, they gain international Islamic radical support.

In addition to being successful, suicide attacks are simple with regard to planning, preparation, and equipment. A successful attack requires little planning because there is no need for an escape route or rescue attempt. A single person with a highly populated target can cause massive damage and instill a fear of future attacks on the public and military personnel.

Word Play

Suicide or martyrdom? Take your pick; the end result is the same. But to the individual carrying out the attack, the difference between suicide and martyrdom is great. Suicide is “the act or an instance of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally—especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind.”⁴ With suicide, personal psychological trauma leads an individual to kill himself to escape a painful existence.⁵ Martyrdom is “the suffering of death on account of adherence to a cause and especially to one’s religious faith.”⁶ With martyrdom, high levels of social integration and respect for community values lead normal individuals to commit suicide out of a sense of duty.⁷

Japanese kamikazes were examples of personnel performing their “duty” during World War II. They voluntarily flew planes, which were laden with fuel and explosives, into American ships in a last-ditch effort to stop the Americans from approaching. Although the kamikazes were poorly trained pilots, they received spiritual training designed to reinforce their dedication to the cause. There have been numerous studies, reports, and books published regarding the actual effectiveness of the kamikazes; but while the accounts vary, the reactions of the Sailors and Marines on those ships were the same—fear and disbelief. The actions of the kamikazes led to an overarching question: How can you stop someone who does not fear death?

To counter enemy intentions, one must understand the enemy. Military leaders must view suicide attackers as the attackers view themselves—as martyrs. They must recognize that suicide attackers believe in their cause. These individuals pay the ultimate price for their beliefs; they give their lives to protect their land, people, and religion. In effect, they serve as enemy smart bombs—able to change direction and purpose within seconds, thereby increasing their chances of causing large numbers of casualties. Suicide attackers should be understood and respected as weapons—just as military personnel understand and respect their own weapons.

Blueprint

Hundreds of attempts have been made to describe what the enemy looks, acts, and lives like. But, suicide attacks have been conducted by all types of people—males and females, adults and children, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Therefore, there is no single profile or blueprint for what the military should expect in a future attacker. For this reason, everyone must be viewed as a potential suicide attacker.

However, it is possible to identify sources, recruiters, and training processes for suicide attackers. Recruiters are usually known and respected in their communities. They generally have the characteristics of a leader; they tend to be intelligent, articulate, charismatic, and influential. They consider people who are in misery or have particular needs to be susceptible candidates for recruitment. They search for individuals who have lost loved ones to occupying forces, and they promote revenge (with the promise of heavenly rewards) as a driving force. They also prey upon young people, using religion as a tool to recruit and mold their minds into making the ultimate sacrifice. Recruiters use anything at their disposal (money, promises, religion) to recruit prospective attackers.

There are many different levels of training—recruiter, bomb maker, operational planner, and attacker. Recruiters, bomb makers, and operational planners are difficult to train and are considered high-level contributors. The loss of personnel at these levels is a heavy blow to the organization; thus, these personnel are protected. However, suicide attackers are easy to train. All they need to know is how to push a button and what location to attack; they



This kamikaze attack killed 350 people.



Indoctrination starts at an early age. This youth wears a simulated explosive device around his waist.

do not need to be prepared for contingencies such as detonation failures or capture. They are merely pawns that are easily sacrificed in combat. And the softest targets can easily be located and detonated to ensure maximum damage.

As countermeasures have improved, U.S. forces have successfully reduced the impact of insurgent suicide

attempts. But as the military has learned, so have the insurgents. They have begun to focus their suicide attacks on the civilian populace and use their improvised explosive devices against U.S. forces.

Training Material

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence (G-2) Handbook No. 1.03 is a centralized source of information on suicide bombing in the contemporary operational environment.⁸ The 42-page handbook, which is a valuable resource for all experts in the field of terrorism, is quick and easy to read and should be designated as mandatory reading material for all military leaders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Knowledge is power.⁹ To win, military leaders must share that knowledge with their Soldiers in a timely manner. Troops need up-to-date information; and they need to be apprised of current tactics, techniques, and trends. Therefore, training and leadership courses should be immediately and continuously updated with every change of war. The process of obtaining approvals for training modifications at every echelon in the Army bureaucracy is often too slow.

The flexibility that suicide attackers show in using different methods and tactics to accomplish their goals is one example of how conflict situations can change quickly. Military personnel must learn to predict these changes to effectively counter the attacks. To do this, they must learn to enter the minds of suicide attackers.

Endnotes:

¹Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3, August 2003.

²"Patterns of Global Terrorism," U.S. Department of State, 1983–2001.

³Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, New York, 2005.

⁴Frederick C. Mish, editor, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, Massachusetts, 2004.

⁵Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, F. Alcan, Paris, France, 1897.

⁶Mish, 2004.

⁷Durkheim, 1897.

⁸TRADOC G-2 Handbook No. 1.03, *Suicide Bombing in the COE*, 10 August 2006, <<http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/terrorism/sup3.pdf>>, accessed on 9 November 2009.

⁹Sir Francis Bacon, *Religious Meditations, Of Heresies*, 1597.

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