

Examining the Impact of Religion on Suicide Terrorism

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Abstract: Is religion the main factor for why religious-based terrorist organizations employ suicide terrorism? Or is it caused by other variables? This paper attempts to answer these questions by examining the link between religion and suicide terrorism. In particular, this research examines and analyzes Robert A. Pape's book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* and provides updated information on suicide terrorism. To investigate the connection between suicide terrorism and religion this article will include and combine previous research from subject matter experts. This study concludes that religion is a significant contributing factor for why religious-based terrorist organizations implement suicide terrorism attacks. As this paper highlights, more research is still needed to not only confirm whether these findings are accurate and but also answer new questions prompted by this research.

Keywords: Religion, Culture, Suicide Terrorism, Ideology, Secular

Introduction: the Religious Call of Suicide Terrorism

The topic of religion's impact on terrorism has been investigated extensively but the impact of religion has on terrorism has not been determined. Robert A. Pape's book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* provides expert insight on religion's debated role in suicide terrorism. Pape argued that the presence of an occupying force, not religion, was the main cause for suicide terrorism. However,

Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism was published in 2007 and therefore up-to-date data is needed to confirm and verify whether this is still presently the case. To address this gap, this paper examines other expert accounts and statistical data sources that have been published over the past fourteen years on the topic of religious suicide terrorism since Robert A. Pape's infamous book and hypothesis and compares them to determine whether his conclusion on the impact of religion is still accurate or is no longer accurate due to new data and information¹⁴¹.

Before analyzing the data from 2008–2021, the history of suicide terrorism from 1980–2007, with special attention to the impact that the 2001 attacks played on religious suicide, needs to be examined and investigated to understand the history and evolution of suicide terrorism. Terrorists in Lebanon began implementing the tactic of suicide attacks in the 1980's, which soon became implemented by the Liberation Tigers of Sri Lanka, the Kurdish areas of Turkey, and Chechnya. The Palestinian attacks during the Al Aqsa intifada further demonstrated the effectiveness and support for suicide terrorism which brought it to the attention of other religious terrorists who supported the martyrs¹⁴². The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, was the beginning of a new age of terrorism which became more lethal and caused increased fatalities. Many experts attribute this "change of face" to the revival of religious fundamentalism¹⁴³. Laqueur recognized this new wave of religious terrorism which differed from the previous 20–30 years when secular, political, or nationalist terrorism were predominant. This new face of terrorism is drawn to suicide attacks because of the respect and admiration that

¹⁴¹ A., & Moghadam, A. *Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win*. Taylor & Francis. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100600561907>.

¹⁴² Crenshaw, M. "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay". Taylor & Francis. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636410701304580?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

martyrs garner, along with the promise of the afterlife with God¹⁴⁴. The trend of suicide attacks in Afghanistan drastically increased from 2005–2006. In 2005 there were only 27, but in 2006 it jumped to 139 suicide attacks¹⁴⁵.

Robert A Pape's book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Terrorism* provides statistical data on suicide terrorism. At the time of publication, in 2007, there were only 315 suicide attacks for Pape to examine¹⁴⁶. As of 2018 that number spiked to a total of 5,600 suicide terrorist attacks¹⁴⁷. Pape examines the root causes of terrorism and argues that religion is not the primary reason behind the increase in suicide terrorism. Additionally, he rules out the arguments that poverty or irrationality contribute to suicide terrorism. Pape explains that from 1980–2001, many of the countries which reported the use of suicide terrorism are classified as middle-income societies. In addition, the U.S Department of Homeland Securities compiled 47 articles seeking to explain the cause for the rise of suicide terrorism and determined that the attacks were planned and meticulous, which demonstrated that the attacks were not conducted because of irrational thinking¹⁴⁸. Experts further state that in cultures and societies which are supportive of suicide attacks and honor the deceased, the attacks are viewed as an act of "benevolent self-destructive activities" where the attacker views their own life "as less commendable than that of the gathering's honour, religion, or some other aggregate intrigue"¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Mustafa Demir & Ahmet Guler (2021) The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on suicide terrorism, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, DOI: 10.1080/19434472.2020.1866052.

¹⁴⁶ Assaf Moghadam (2006) Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of *Dying to Win*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 29:8, 707–729, DOI: 10.1080/10576100600561907.

¹⁴⁷ Mustafa Demir & Ahmet Guler (2021) The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on suicide terrorism, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, DOI: 10.1080/19434472.2020.1866052.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Kabra, P. (2019). *Suicide terrorism – Physical and mental destruction* (thesis).

The crucial argument which Pape underlies is that terrorists adopt suicide terrorism tactics because it has proven to be an effective and lethal means of spreading terror and gaining fame and notoriety. Demir and Guler confirm this argument after investigating the results of the 9/11 attacks on suicide terrorism. They share in their study the following:

Using data obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) between 1981 and 2018, this research examines the effect of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on suicide terrorism and different types of terrorist organizations that commit suicide terrorism before and after 9/11 and the changes in the trends in the outcomes. The results of negative binomial regression tests comparing pre-9/11 and post-9/11 and monthly interrupted time series analyses showed that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had significant impacts on the above-mentioned outcomes. The results suggested that the 9/11 attacks have played a critical role in inspiring and encouraging terrorist organizations – religious-based ones in particular – to adopt suicide terrorism as an attack strategy¹⁵⁰.

Pape provides excellent reasons for what could be causing this trend towards suicide terrorism but fails to explain why religious organizations are increasing in their use of and effectiveness of suicide terrorism while secular terrorism has seen a sharp decline since the rise of the new wave of terrorism¹⁵¹. This new wave of suicide terrorism is not limited to religion or Islamic fundamentalism, but as mentioned earlier, 81% of these attacks are being carried out by Islamic fundamentalists, suggesting that religion is a critical variable when examining motivations and patterns of suicide terrorism. This trend undermines Pape's previous findings in the 1980s and 1990s which suggested that the majority of suicide attacks in South Lebanon were predominantly

¹⁵⁰ Mustafa Demir & Ahmet Guler (2021) The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on suicide terrorism, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, DOI: 10.1080/19434472.2020.1866052.

¹⁵¹ Assaf Moghadam (2006) Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:8, 707–729, DOI: 10.1080/10576100600561907.

communists and Christians, failing to accurately describe the new wave of terrorism in the 21st century¹⁵².

In addition, Pape's choice to ignore the global definition of suicide terrorism may present skewed results, which warrants further research. Pape's definition of terrorism includes suicide attacks against military targets which allows Pape to include many of the secular Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) attacks in his data points. Only a small percentage of the LTTE's attacks targeted civilians which may influence Pape's argument against religion being a major factor in suicide terrorism. The Tigers of Tamil Eelam are rightly defined as a terrorist organization; however, this raises an issue on whether experts should include attacks that target military targets as terrorism or whether those attacks would be considered acts of war and insurgency rather than acts of terror¹⁵³. Traditionally these attacks would be considered as guerrilla warfare, hybrid warfare, or as an insurgency rather than terrorism. This change in definition causes a discrepancy when reviewing the 315 attacks which Pape details, leading critics to wonder how many of those attacks should be removed if the traditional definition of terrorism being used against non-combatants would still apply to the record. Robert Pape also identifies 16 separate suicide terrorist campaigns between 1980–2001¹⁵⁴. Of these sixteen, ten are argued as being primarily driven by religious demands. For the remaining six, all but two were influenced by religion as a motivating factor. The two campaigns which were not affected by religion were both orchestrated by the Marxist Kurdish Worker's party against the Turkish government¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵² Assaf Moghadam (2006) Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:8, 707–729, DOI: 10.1080/10576100600561907.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Pedahzur, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203964910>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

These facts suggest that religion has a large effect on whether suicide terrorism is implemented or not.

When analyzing data, it is crucial to ensure which definition of terrorism is applied and what is applied to the data points. For example, the case of the train bombs in Spain in March 2004 illustrates some of the problems of classifying suicide terrorism. The bombings caused 191 deaths, making them one of the most destructive terrorist attacks since September 11th, which involved the coordination of multiple bombs by a relatively large conspiratorial group. Although the bombings were initially conventional since the bombs were left on trains, most of the group members later blew themselves up when cornered by the police. This leads to a gray area where it is unclear if this was a purposeful suicide attack and therefore counted in the data, or if this was a conventional terrorist attack which ended with the terrorists changing their plans due to intervention¹⁵⁶.

Research conducted by the Chicago Project identified more than 40 organizations which implemented suicide terror attacks between 1982 and 2013. These 40 organizations took part in 25 separate suicide campaigns. Hezbollah is cited as the first terror organization to implement suicide terrorism in their campaign against Israel. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were not the first group to implement suicide terrorism, but until 2001 the LTTE were the most lethal and numerous in their use of suicide attacks. The Chicago Project accounts for 72 suicide terror attacks conducted by the LTTE in their separatist mission, which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 victims and over 2500 casualties in Sri Lanka and India. The Chicago Project also identified 174 suicide attacks between 1980–1990 which resulted in the deaths of over 2700 people. While the attacks were largely aimed at military

¹⁵⁶ Martha Crenshaw (2007) "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay", *Security Studies*, 16:1, 133–162, DOI: 10.1080/09636410701304580.

targets (which is being defined as insurgency and not terrorism), 17% were targeted at civilians and 15% were political targets, making roughly a third of the total suicide attacks designated as terrorism attacks¹⁵⁷.

Many analysts argue that religious ideology is the primary factor which determines the level of suicide terrorism. This is especially true of groups which mix religious and ethnic grievances and pursue a “pure” religious message¹⁵⁸. In the past few decades this has been particularly true regarding Islamic terrorist groups. There is nothing inherently different about Islam which makes it more prone to violence or to committing acts of terror. Any group is capable of committing extreme violence, whether they are religious or secular, communists or nationalists, or left-wing or right-wing extremists¹⁵⁹. However, the facts have demonstrated that in recent years Islamic terrorist groups are not only more likely to commit acts of terror, but also more likely to commit acts of terror and suicide terror attacks. Experts theorize that another potential explanation of the increased fatality count which religious groups extoll could be their ability to dehumanize their enemies. Enemies’ civilians and combatants are viewed as the physical beings and representations of evil, condemned as the enemy of their religion¹⁶⁰.

While there are many experts who support the hypothesis that religion plays a factor, perhaps even a primary factor, there are also many experts who do not support this notion. For example, Ghabdian suggests that it is not a religious trend, but rather a political one due to the “repressive political environment in the Middle East, the dictatorial rule

¹⁵⁷ Harmon, Vanessa & Mujkic, Edin & Kaukinen, Catherine & Weir, Henriikka. (2018). Causes & Explanations of Suicide Terrorism: A Systematic Review Suggested Citation. *Homeland Security Affairs*. 14. 1–60.

¹⁵⁸ Peter S. Henne (2012) *The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:1, 38–60, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.608817.

¹⁵⁹ Peter S. Henne (2012) *The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:1, 38–60, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.608817.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

of most of the governments in the region, and their use of coercion, are behind violence and counter-violence by the disenfranchised and the marginalized groups in the society”¹⁶¹. For these reasons, coupled with the facts of economic inequality and rising unemployment among the younger generation, Ghadbian argues that the conditions combine to form a breeding ground for terrorist and extremist organizations¹⁶². Atran agrees with Ghadbian and contradicts arguments of anti-democratic and anti-western culture as a universal driver among individuals who decide to engage in suicide terrorism. Rather, Atran places blame on Middle Eastern governments which failed to “guarantee basic civil liberties and political rights for their citizens explains to a large degree their support for suicide terrorism”¹⁶³. Other experts such as Merari, conclude that suicide bombings are “neither an Islamic phenomenon nor a religious phenomenon: religion is just one more element in the persuasion, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient”¹⁶⁴.

The purpose of this research is not to say that all Muslim terrorists are motivated by religious intent or that those who practice Islam are dangerous members of society. Rather the purpose of this paper is to examine the correlation between religion and suicide terrorism to educate policy makers and the public on this issue. The goal is not only to understand the correlation behind religious extremism but also examine how to prevent the next rise in religious terrorism from outside the Islamic faith. Through examining how this new wave of terror aligns with religion, it will assist policy makers and intelligence officials to make decisions that best prepare for and prevent religious suicide terrorism.

¹⁶¹ Capell, M., Sahliyyeh, E. Suicide Terrorism: Is Religion the Critical Factor?. *Secur J* 20, 267–283 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.sj.8350029>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

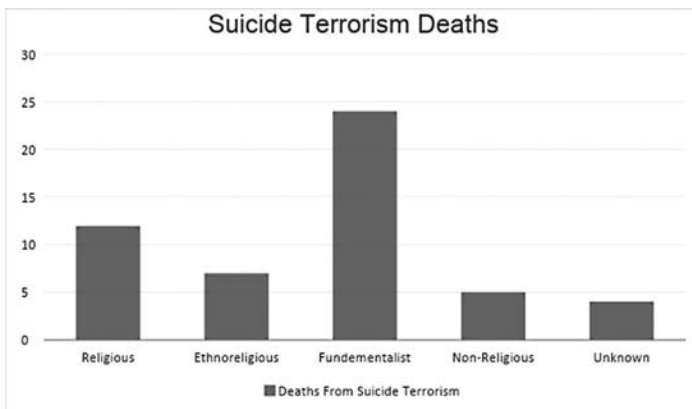
¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Research Data

Examining the RAND Terrorism Incident Database, Bruce Hoffman discovered that 78% of all suicide attacks since 1968 have occurred post-9/11. Islamic terrorists conducted 81% of the total number of suicide attacks. Of the 35 groups that employed suicide attacks during this timeframe 31 are classified as Islamic Terrorist groups¹⁶⁵. Throughout 1981 to 2018 there have been a total of 5,600 suicide terrorist attacks which makes up roughly 4% of the total worldwide terrorism attacks, including those which did not implement suicide attacks. Despite the low percentage of suicide terrorist attacks, these attacks make up almost 19% of the total deaths as a result of terrorism. Religious suicide terrorism also proved to be extremely deadly, especially given the relatively small quantity of attacks. Religious suicide terrorism claimed 59,000 out of 314,000 fatalities (18%) and 132,000 injuries out of 475,000 (27.8%)¹⁶⁶.

Figure 1. Lethality of Terrorism Attacks



Source: Peter S. Henne's "The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence", 24:1, 38–60, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.608817, pg. 48.

¹⁶⁵ Assaf Moghadam (2006) Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:8, 707–729, DOI: 10.1080/10576100600561907.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

In Henne's book "The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence," he shares (see above figure):

A preliminary analysis of the data indicates the greater lethality of attacks by religious groups. Out of 2200 attacks, 841 were by religious groups, 253 were by non-religious groups, and 1,108 were unknown. Out of attacks by religious groups, 619 were by ethnoreligious groups and 222 were by fundamentalist groups. The mean number of deaths from attacks was 8; for religious groups it was 12, and non-religious groups was 5. For ethnoreligious groups, the mean was 7, and for fundamentalists it was 24. The mean number of deaths from unknown groups was 4. This suggests that groups with a religious ideology are more likely to cause a great number of deaths from suicide attacks than non-religious groups, but among religious groups fundamentalists were more violent¹⁶⁷.

To study the causes of suicide terrorism, it is best to analyze suicide terrorism from three different angles or levels – the individual, organizational, and environmental. This produces a framework using the data from Palestinian, Chechen, and Sri Lankan suicide terrorism campaigns. This model can also be repurposed for analysts to understand risk factors to determine possible policy making decisions¹⁶⁸. By examining suicide terrorism on one of these three levels, it simplifies the research process and allows the reader to better understand the research target group, model, and purpose. In addition, the three levels face an array of different challenges, solutions, and variables; therefore it is vital to differentiate which level is being investigated.

¹⁶⁷ Peter S. Henne's "The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence", 24:1, 38–60, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.608817, pg. 48.

¹⁶⁸ Peter S. Henne (2012) The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence, 24:1, 38–60, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.608817.

Table 2. Statistics of Suicide Attacks

	Total	Total	Transnational	Transnational	Domestic	Domestic
Variables	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.
Attacks ¹⁶⁹	3.92	624	0.96	442	3.79	533
Casualties ^b	27.57	2448	37.30	426	24.82	2022
Attack-specific¹⁷⁰						
Religious Group	0.69	2448	0.82	426	0.63	2022
Officials	0.34	2448	0.33	426	0.41	2022
Military	0.17	2448	0.06	426	0.21	2022
Business	0.08	2448	0.1	426	0.06	2022
Social Services	0.07	2448	0.07	426	0.07	2022
Major City	0.57	2448	0.63	426	0.38	2022

Source: Santifort-Jordan, C., & Sandler, T. (2014). An Empirical Study of Suicide Terrorism: A Global Analysis. *Southern Economic Journal*, 80(4), 981–1001. Retrieved July 15, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23807680>.

An empirical study of suicide terrorism by Santifort-Jordan and Sandler, as shown in Table 2, provides a summary of statistics and variables regarding religious suicide terrorism from 1998 to 2010. In order to present the data as realistic as possible the researchers chose to exclude outlier suicide terrorism attacks such as the 9/11 suicide attacks and the August 7, 1998, suicide attacks on the U.S embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The data shows that the average number of suicide terrorist attacks (including non-religious) that a country faces per year is 3.92,

¹⁶⁹ Comes from country-specific panel data sets.

¹⁷⁰ Comes from observation-level data.

0.96 transnational suicide terrorist attacks and 3.79 domestic suicide attacks, with religious suicide terrorist attacks making up the bulk of the total suicide attacks. Religious suicide terror attacks account for 2.70 average suicide attacks (69%) of the total of 3.92 worldwide suicide terror attacks, 0.78 (82%) out of 0.96 transnational suicide terrorist attacks, and 2.38 (63%) of total domestic suicide terrorist attacks¹⁷¹.

The data in Table 2 shows what is already expected with regards to the frequency of transnational terrorism versus domestic suicide terrorism, due to domestic suicide terror attacks being easier to plan and carry out. However, when examining the average number of casualties, the researchers discovered that the transnational suicide terror attacks have an average of 37.30 casualties per attack versus the 24.82 at the domestic level¹⁷². The data also portrays some interesting information for the targets of suicide terrorists. For transnational suicide terrorism attacks target officials 33% of the time, military 6%, businesses 10%, social services 7%, and 63% of the time target a major city. Domestic suicide terrorist attacks target officials 41% of the time, 21% are military targets, 6% are businesses, social services 7%, and a major city only 38% of the time¹⁷³. This data presents a multitude of data which can inform officials on the potential targets of suicide terrorism attacks to help prevent future attacks from taking place. The data also displays a clear trend that roughly 3 out of 5 domestic suicide terror attacks and 4 out of 5 transnational suicide terror attacks will originate from a religious terrorist organization¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷¹ Santifort-Jordan, C., & Sandler, T. (2014). An Empirical Study of Suicide Terrorism: A Global Analysis. *Southern Economic Journal*, 80(4), 981–1001. Retrieved July 15, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23807680>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

The new wave of suicide terrorism which began decades ago has been undeniably linked to the rise in religious Islamic fundamentalism. However, more research and data are required to ascertain the impact of other contributing factors such as society, culture, and the presence of an occupying force. The other contributing factors could assist in explaining the unusually high relationship between suicide terrorism and religion. Suicide terrorism has also proven to be an extremely lethal form of terrorism and continues to increase in popularity among religious terrorist organizations. It is currently unclear why other extremely violent secular or political terrorist organizations do not also adopt this method of terror attacks due to increased casualty ratio which has been attributed to suicide terrorism. Further research is required to investigate this relationship. Upon the completion of the fore mentioned research, it may become clearer why religious terrorist organizations are much more likely to implement suicide terrorism than other non-religious terror organizations.

The conclusion of this research should inform policy makers of the extreme dangers of suicide terrorism and make obvious the need for solutions to mitigate the dangers, lethality, and prevalence of religious suicide terrorism. Some of the potential solutions to combat domestic suicide terrorism that should be considered include: religious outreach programs which creates a counter-narrative to combat terrorist recruitment and propaganda, increased abundance of metal detectors and security check points at large public venues, and close discussion with religious community leaders. Some recommendations to prepare for and prevent transnational suicide terrorists are increased scrutiny and security at border crossings over land, sea, and air, and for nations which a visa is required to gain entry to maintain a strict screening process which investigates those who apply for admittance. None of these recommendations are new which may lead many to dismiss these

suggestions, however, as with any security issues there must be a balance between security and freedom. Further research is required on all of the above subjects to determine the impact of the results. Finally, researchers and investigators must remain vigilant to subtle changes to suicide terrorism tactics along with the innovation of new techniques being developed to slip by the counterterrorism efforts of researchers, investigators, policy makers, and security officials.