

WHY THEY DO IT

Christian Caryl
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Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism

By Robert A. Pape
Random House, 335 pp. \$25.95

Making Sense of Suicide Missions

Edited by Diego Gambetta
Oxford University Press
378 pp. \$45.00

Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs

By Farhad Khosrokhavar
Translated from the French
By David Macey
Pluto Press, 258 pp. \$27.50 (paper)

Perfect Soldiers: The Hijackers – Who They Were, Why They Did It

By Terry McDermott
Harper Collins, 330 pp. \$25.95

The Road to Martyr's Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber

By Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg
Oxford University Press
214 pp. \$26.00

Suicide Terrorism

By Ami Pedahzur
Polity Press, 255 pp.
\$59.95: \$24.95 (paper)

Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror

By Mia Bloom
Columbia University Press
251 pp. \$24.95

ON a clear hot day near the end of October 2003, I was finishing breakfast in my Baghdad hotel room when the distant thud of an immense explosion shivered the windows. In Iraq we had long since become accustomed to sporadic attacks of various kinds, but it soon became apparent that this was something new. The next blast, equally huge, came around fifteen minutes later, while we were running down to our car. Another followed soon after that, as we were heading downtown: and then another. Whatever was

going on, it was definitely big. As we neared the center of the city we could see a plume of smoke rising into the sky. We stopped to ask passersby and policemen what had happened. “They hit the Red Cross,” someone told us. That had been the first explosion. Subsequent attacks, it seemed, were targeting police stations all around the city. And it wasn’t over yet.

By the time we reached the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the police and rescue services had cordoned off the site, but they couldn’t hide the devastation. The front of the building had evaporated into a blackened muddle of bricks and concrete. The burned-out hulks of cars line the street. One bystander told us that you could still see the incinerated bodies of their occupants sitting upright inside. The smell of burning rubber and charred metal made our eyes water. It was a sweltering day to begin with, but the added heat of the lingering fire made everything around us shimmer.

We began to query onlookers. One man in his twenties, a member of an Iraqi aid organization, had just finished a meeting with a friend in the building. As he was driving away, he was jolted by the blast. “There was an enormous boom and suddenly all this gravel was raining down on my car,” he told me. “The car bounced up and down.” The fate of the friend was unknown, but it was safe to assume that he was dead. Other witnesses told us that the attacker had driven into the entrance of the compound in an ambulance, wearing the uniform of a paramedic. He had blown himself up with the car.

By the time it was all over we would realize that we had witnessed one of the bloodiest days in Baghdad since the beginning of the U.S. occupation. Dozens were dead, hundreds wounded, all Iraqis except for one American soldier. The day’s campaign had been a masterpiece of coordination: the six attacks had taken place within a little more than an hour. In addition to the Red Cross, five police stations had been targeted. In one case the police, warned by their colleagues, had opened fire as the would-be bomber sped toward them in an SUV, throwing grenades as he went. The defenders had managed to immobilize the car and capture the bomber. He turned out to be a Syrian, who cursed his captors for collaborating with the infidel occupiers.

This detail was verified by U.S. military spokesmen – even though an American general had assured us just a few days earlier that the mounting attacks were the work of “former regime loyalists,” not fighters who were swarming in from the larger Arab world to attack the occupation. In any case, by attacking the police to such spectacular effect, the insurgents had driven home the message that the Americans were incapable of providing security to those who helped them, and that collaborators could expect pitiless retribution. As history has repeatedly shown, any occupying force that cannot ensure the safety of its supporters will be short-lived. The attack on the ICRC, meanwhile, essentially put an end to the last vestiges of independent humanitarian relief under the occupation, thus striking a huge blow to the reconstruction effort.

THESE goals could have been achieved, theoretically, with a conventional guerrilla attack – though it’s hard to imagine how the insurgents could have managed to pull one off at six different locations deep inside Baghdad. Suicide bombings offer many

advantages to the attacker: they are quick, cheap, and extremely accurate. As the Oxford sociologist Diego Gambetta puts it in his contribution to *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, the collection of articles he has edited, suicide missions “are the high-precision artillery of the militarily challenged.” A bullet or shell fired from a distance may or may not find its target, but the suicide bomber is an intelligent weapon that guides itself to the point where it can do the most damage. Palestinian suicide bombers thwarted by unexpectedly tight security at their primary objectives have been known to keep moving until they can find a target where the chances of success are more promising.

In *Dying to Win*, the American political scientist Robert Pape calculated that suicide bombings accounted for 48 percent of those killed in terror attacks throughout the world between 1980 and 2003 – even though suicide attacks made up only 3 percent of the total, “making the average suicide attack twelve times deadlier than other forms of terrorism.” And that doesn’t include September 11.

And then there’s the psychological impact – the unique quality of fear produced by an opponent whose desire to kill you is greater than his own will to live. How can you possibly deter a suicide bomber? How do you defend against an attacker who wants to die? How could the guards at the Red Cross expect to protect themselves from a suicidal infiltrator dressed as one of their own? The uncertainty and dread generated by attacks of this kind also have the affect which the insurgents welcome, of provoking overreaction by the other side. It was no wonder that, when in doubt, U.S. soldiers tended to start shooting any car that came toward their checkpoints too fast, more often than not resulting in horrific civilian casualties. We journalists traveled about in the same ordinary-looking Iraqi vehicles, so any time we came near a U.S. military base we made a point of slowing down, stopping the car at a safe distance, and getting out to show that we meant no harm. We would stand with raised hands, doing our hapless best to look friendly (even while sweating profusely), until the guards lower their guns.

Since then, suicide attacks in Iraq have become an almost daily occurrence. But the fear experienced by both Iraqis and Americans there is by no means unusual. It is the same fear felt by Israelis under threat from Palestinian suicide attackers, by New Yorkers and Washingtonians just after September 11, and by Londoners after the subway bombings on July 7. Residents of Moscow and Istanbul, Jakarta and Tunis have known it as well. Suicide bombing, it would seem, is increasingly becoming the weapon of choice for a new kind of global insurgency. The terrorized grope for explanations. It is hardly a surprise that many of us assume that suicide terrorists are religious zealots whose irrational fanaticism makes them seek death. Or perhaps, we think, they are depressed people who have nothing to live for, refugees from the ranks of the impoverished or ignorant. Yet the reality is far more complex, and, it should be said, far less comforting.

IN 1991, a young woman known by the single name of Dhanu arrived in the south Indian city of Madras. She had come there for reason that were not immediately apparent, but, as Robert Pape explains, she seemed determined to get the most out of her stay. The Indian police and press later reconstructed her movements:

...She went to the market, the beach, and restaurants every day, enjoying many luxuries rarely found in the jungles of Jaffna. She bought dresses, jewelry, cosmetics, and even her first pair of glasses. In the last twenty days of her life, she took in six movies at a local cinema.

On May 21 she attended a political rally for Rajiv Gandhi, the head of the Indian Congress Party. Shortly before the rally began she walked up to Gandhi and presented him with a garland. Then she pressed a button, activating an explosive belt wrapped around her body. At the time the idea of using a belt as a bomb, concealed under clothing, was a technical innovation. Since then, by virtue of its success, it has found countless emulators. The resulting blast killed her, Gandhi, and several bystanders, including one of her accomplices, who was supposed to be filming the attack on videotape for the people who had ordered it, the leaders of the separatist movement known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).¹

Dhanu's story tells us a lot about suicide terror. For a long time researchers assumed that people who performed suicide missions were loners, socially marginalized person acting out of pathological sadness or economic desperation. If that was ever true, it certainly is not today. In all but a few cases suicide terrorists are acting in the name of organizations conducting campaigns designed to achieve specific political goals. In the case of the LTTE, the cause in question is a fight for ethnic self-determination, and the enemy is the Sri Lankan government, which is dominated by the country's Sinhalese majority (Gandhi was selected as a target because his party, posed to return to power in an election, was considering dispatching Indian troops to Sri Lanka in an attempt to stop the conflict).

In Turkey the PKK, the Marxist-influenced Kurdish separatist group, used suicide bombings against the forces of the Ankara government. In Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, a variety of organizations, ranging from Marxists to Islamic fundamentalists, dispatched suicide terrorist against invaders from Israel, France, and the U.S. In Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad started using the weapon against their Israeli foes.

The suicide bomber is a prime example of an organization man or woman.² A suicide attacker brings the bomb to his or her target and pushes the button, but he or she is very rarely the maker of the bomb. An organization recruits, indoctrinates, and trains the bomber; an organization picks the targets and later makes the case for the legitimacy of the attacks by distributing promotional literature or "martyr videos," recorded by the

¹ In his brief history of the Tamil separatist movement included in Gambetta's collection, Stephen Hopgood argues that the LTTE never assumed explicit responsibility for this attack and that its sponsorship of the act can only be alleged. But the case for LTTE involvement seems strong nonetheless, and the details of Dhanu's last weeks appear well corroborated. Though the camera operator died, his videotape survived, providing us with an eerily clear picture of the attack's final moments.

² Women crop up in the case studies with surprising frequency. In the Chechen separatist struggle, it is almost exclusively men who do the conventional fighting, but women (the so-called Black Widows) have most frequently engaged in suicide terrorism. Women can feel just as passionate about national causes as men do, but traditional societies often regard women as unreliable in their use of conventional weapons. But suicide bombing seems to be a different story.

bomber before death. Freelance suicide attacks sometimes occur (most notably among the Palestinians), but they are strikingly rare.

The sociologists and political scientists who have been studying the question in recent years also agree on something else. Virtually all the organizations that have used suicide attacks have been fighting to evict occupying power from a national homeland. Usually the conflicts are extremely “asymmetric” (to use the current jargon), with the occupier enjoying vast superiority in weapons and resources (The Tamil Tigers, for example, have a hard time competing with the Sri Lankan military’s warplanes and helicopter gunships). Very often there is a deep cultural divide between the sides involved as well as one that is fatally aggravated by religious difference (Hindu Tamils versus Buddhist Sinhalese, Muslim Palestinians versus Jewish Israelis).

Beyond the organization is a broader community that sanctions and celebrates the bomber’s actions. In *The Road to Martyr’s Square*, their remarkable and creepy account of life in Gaza Strip in the early 1990s, Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg, who lived with various Palestinians there, give us a look at the Hamas milieu from within. It’s a world where the cult of “martyrdom” is celebrated in graffiti, videos, and posters, creating a toxic atmosphere of sadism, killing, and religious ecstasy. The book is valuable for its exhaustive documentation of the martyr cult’s various uses of propaganda, for example the “martyr postcards” handed out by families after successful bombings. Yet none of this, they write, should be mistaken for a natural outgrowth of Palestinian society – not least because it’s all a recent development.

AS the Israeli scholar Ami Pedahzur explains in *Suicide Terrorism*, the Lebanese Hizbollah initially kept its sponsorship of suicide bombings a secret when it began using the tactic in the early 1980s. The group’s leaders were concerned that the new tactic, inspired by the Iranian Army’s use of mass suicide soldiers in the war against Iraq, might alienate the people they wanted to reach in the towns and villages of Israeli-occupied South Lebanon. But soon it became apparent that publicizing the self-sacrificing actions of the “martyrs” who killed themselves to kill Israelis could bring a huge propaganda payoff. That was when the “tradition” of public rituals for the commemoration and celebration of suicide attacks began.³ Pedahzur writes,

Social support for suicide terrorism, of the “culture of death,” as it is described in other places, is very rarely a grassroots phenomenon. The organization’s leadership is engaged in trying to mobilize support and one of the prominent ways of doing this – among societies which are oppressed and feel weak and hopeless – is by supplying heroes and hope.

³ It is worth noting that those who promote the tactic of suicide bombing within the Muslim world must resort to contorted arguments to evade the strong Quranic ban on suicide. Proponents of suicide terror find a loophole in the Muslim belief that those who die in wars for the faith – including non-combatants killed by the enemy – are “martyrs” who can rely on especially favorable treatment in heaven. Suicide terrorism is thus rationalized as “martyrdom” in the name of jihad rather than as self-killing.

But who are these heroes? What motivates suicide bombers to undertake their missions? We know very little, of course, since it's rare for the volunteers to talk. We seldom know who they are until they've already pulled the trigger, and in Iraq in particular, we know hardly anything about them. But the studies at hand offer some starting points. One revelation is that the image of the suicide terrorist as a dead-ender couldn't be less accurate. Many of those who undertake suicide missions are above the norm in schooling and income. As *Perfect Soldiers*, the careful investigation of the September 11 hijackers by the *Los Angeles Times* reporter Terry McDermott, shows, the four pilots were all upper middle class Arabs who had come to Europe to attend universities. Mohammad Atta, the attack ringleader, was the son of a Cairo lawyer who defended a master's thesis in urban planning at his Hamburg university (some of the source I interviewed in Hamburg in the fall of 2001 told me that Atta's German was so good that he liked to correct the grammatical errors of native speakers).

Hanadi Jaradat, a twenty-seven-year-old Palestinian, had studied law in Jordan and was working as an apprentice lawyer in the West Bank town of Jenin. In October 2003 she entered a restaurant in Haifa and blew herself up along with twenty-one Israelis. Studies of Palestinian bombers suggest that they make up an accurate cross-section of Palestinian society, economically as well as educationally, but even that finding may be somewhat skewed. Pedahzur notes, by the spread of the tactic of suicide terrorism in the late 1990s. He points out that the Islamist groups who first made use of suicide terror tended to pick their recruits with great care, preferring relatively well-educated candidates with strong nerves and political convictions. When Fatah decided to use suicide bombers in the late 1990s, though, it accepted practically anyone who wanted to participate.

Revenge is certainly a factor. Pedahzur writes,

A review of the records and accounts of over 180 Palestinian suicide bombers confirmed that close to half of them – and a larger number during the years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada – embarked on their suicide missions shortly after they had lost a very close person. This person could have been a friend, family member or lover.

Mia Bloom in her study *Dying to Kill* suggests that having been a victim of sexual violence may be a motive for the surprisingly large number of female bombers. Dhanu Gandhi's assassin, had been gang-raped by enemy soldiers; some of the Chechen "Black Widows" may also have been violated by soldiers of the Russian Army. For such victims, there may be no way back into traditional society, and a suicide attack on the enemy may be one way to restore lost "honor."

Male bombers often seem to be seeking retribution for a broader sense of humiliation – perhaps at the hands of an occupier. Yet there are conspicuously few cases where attackers seem to be acting in response to a deep depression or other forms of mental illness. Terrorist groups generally prefer to recruit people who know what they're doing. An impoverished peasant who's been coerced into driving a bomb into a building may abandon the mission at the last moment. Atta and his friends, who took years to prepare

for their attacks while isolated within the enemy society and at a great remove from their handlers, and then steered their planes straight into their targets, were of an entirely different character.

WHAT clearly seems central is a deeply held conviction – a firm, specific belief, perhaps nursed over the course of years – that drives its holder to act. It may be religious, as was certainly the case with the September 11 plotters; it may involve obsessive loyalty to a political leader, as was true of those who killed themselves for the almost cult-like PKK and its head, Abdullah Ocalan. But easy labels like “fanaticism” sometimes fail in the face of a complex reality. The case of Ziad Jarrah, who piloted United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania, is particularly telling because of his hesitations. From all the evidence collected by McDermott and others, he was deeply in love with his Turkish girlfriend (and later wife) Aysel Sengun, and on several occasions his divided allegiances seem to have threatened the plot (we know of at least one instance where Atta felt he had to persuade Jarrah to stay committed). In the last hours before he boarded his flight, Jarrah wrote Aysel a final love letter, which is reprinted by McDermott:

I did not escape from you, but I did what I was supposed to. You should be very proud of me. It’s an honor, and you will see the results, and everybody will be happy. I want you to remain very strong as I knew you, but whatever you do, head high, with a goal, never be without goal, always have a goal in front of you and always think, “what for.”

Remember always who you are and what you are. Keep your head high.
The victors never have their heads down!

This is eerily reminiscent of the farewell messages to their relatives left behind by Japanese kamikaze pilots – the same references to honor and pride, the same consoling exhortations to carry on in the spirit of the dead beloved. One of the most powerful motives for heroism in wartime, as Diego Gambetta reminds us, is camaraderie: “Bonding in small ‘bands of brothers’ is a key feature of military combat training, as each soldier must know that he can count on the selflessness of his comrades to be able to fight effectively.”⁴ Gambetta also points out that the ethos of wartime heroism is perhaps not all that different from the forces that drive the suicide bomber. The chances of surviving an act worthy of the Victoria Cross, Britain’s highest wartime decoration, are roughly one in ten.

Equating war heroes and terrorists will undoubtedly seem offensive to many. But the comparison would probably feel entirely apt viewed from inside the world of a conspiratorial cell that sees itself as the vanguard of a heroic war against an all-powerful enemy. It is not for nothing that McDermott refers to the members of the Hamburg cell as “perfect soldiers.” None of what he says, of course, should be in any way construed as an apology or a justification of what the plotters did on September 11. But it is important to

⁴ My own father, who fought on the American side in World War II, explained to me that he and his fellow soldiers never saw themselves as fighting for grand and abstract ideals like freedom and democracy when they were wallowing in the mud on the front lines. What they were fighting for at that micro-level was their own buddies, their tiny group of comrades-in-arms.

distinguish between moral outrage and pragmatic comprehension. In order to defeat the terrorists, we have no choice but to understand them first – no matter what George Bush’s minions might claim to the contrary.⁵

AND that, of course, begs the question – how do you defeat them? By killing them? But they want to be killed. By far the most important countermeasure, of course, is advance information – not only broad analysis of terrorist strategy but tactical intelligence about their organization and immediate plans – the latter, in particular, something Americans do not seem particularly good at, thanks to their scandalous deficiencies in language skills and lack of close knowledge of regional life as well as their difficulties in infiltrating terrorist cells. Ami Pedahzur also emphasizes the importance of dialogue with “moderate forces” so that the concerns of the terrorists’ broader constituencies should be addressed wherever possible – precisely in order “to sidestep these organizations and eliminate their roles as brokers.” When using military forces is advisable, he stresses that civilian casualties have to be avoided at all costs.

The Turkish success in defeating the PKK’s suicide campaign is also frequently cited by experts. The Turks combined a program of concessions to Kurdish aspirations in the region with an intense, focused counterinsurgency campaign aimed at isolating and ultimately capturing the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. And once they had him, they didn’t kill him but put him on trial. Pedahzur wholeheartedly approves, pointing out that extrajudicial killing of terrorist leaders – as with Hamas officials in Israel – merely creates new generations of martyrs and undermines the moral claims of the democracies.

THE American political scientist Robert Pape, while undoubtedly agreeing with much of this, also advocates another strategy that can be summed up in a single word: withdrawal. **AS** the head of the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism at the University of Chicago, Pape has spent the past few years accumulating every scrap of information about suicide terrorists that he could get his hands on, and analyzing case studies on individual bombers and their organizational underpinnings in different parts of the world. His group’s effort represents one of the most comprehensive surveys of suicide terror thus far available, and his conclusions are worth examining.

Like many of the other scholars on the subject, Pape is deeply skeptical about the notion that suicide bombers are the warriors in a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West. Pape’s survey reveals that there is nothing intrinsically “Islamic” about the suicide bomber. By his estimate, Islamist groups account for no more than 34.6 percent of the suicide terrorist attacks staged in the past twenty years. The real common denominator of suicide terrorism campaigns, he argues, is that they are all, in one form or another, responses to occupation or foreign control of a national homeland. Religion, in his view, functions merely as an aggravating factor. The leaders who run the terror organization are

⁵ “Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 in the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers,” Karl Rove, the senior political adviser to President Bush, said at a fund-raiser in Midtown for the Conservative Party of New York State. See Raymond Hernandez, “Democrats Demand Rove Apologize for 9/11 Remarks,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2005.

trying, above all, to drive out invaders. And terrorist leaders use the strategy because it is so often successful. Once they have attained their goals, the campaigns cease. It's that simple.

From all this Pape draws a conclusion that many will challenge. The best way to counter the threat of suicide terrorism, he says, is to eliminate the conditions of occupation that give rise to the phenomenon in the first place. He argues the point by demonstrating a correlation between occupation and the nationalities of those who have committed suicide bombings. Recent suicide bombers, he stresses, tend to come overwhelmingly from countries that are either occupied or affected by the strong military presence of a foreign power. If Russia wants Chechen suicide bombings to stop, in other words, it should pull its forces out of Chechnya. And if the United States and its allies want to neutralize the threat of al-Qaeda, Pape argues, they should disengage from the Middle East – completely removing their forces from Iraq and other countries of the Persian Gulf that have disproportionately contributed cadres to the cause of suicide terror in recent years.

As Pape points out, during the period between 1995 and 2003 there were no suicide terrorists from deeply Islamic countries such as Libya, Iran, Syria, and Sudan which had no U.S. military presence of any kind. During the same period there were suicide attacks involving thirty-four militants from Saudi Arabia. He is by no means opposed to eliminating terrorist leaders, if that makes sense; but he believes that only a fundamental reconsideration of American foreign policy, a return to the “offshore balancing” of our relations among Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Persian Gulf, that we once used to ensure our interest there, will remove the underlying grievances that sustain the martyrs and their organizations.

NOT surprisingly, Pape has come in for considerable criticism for proposing that we “cave in” to the terrorists’ demands. But Pape’s book is an extremely important work precisely because it challenges us to engage in some robust demythologizing of the terrorist threat. At the same time it’s equally clear that he often overstretches to make good his point. He insists that al-Qaeda’s primary goal, repeatedly expressed by bin Laden, is to make the U.S. leave Saudi Arabia so that its presence will no longer defile the holiest places of Islam.⁶ He does not give much credit to al-Qaeda’s other proclaimed goals – such as toppling Arab secular regimes, destroying Israel, or establishing a fundamentalist caliphate. Elsewhere he seems eager to discount the cultural or religious motives behind the individual bombers’ actions. That Atta’s long residence in Germany had little effect on his evolution into a holy warrior is contradicted by the available evidence, which makes it quite clear that Atta’s conversion to full-scale Salafism (the radically purist version of Sunni Islam propounded by bin Laden and others) actually took place during his time in Germany.

⁶ A curious thing about Pape’s book is that it does not mention that the Pentagon completed a withdrawal of virtually all U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia in August 2003. One would think that this would have made at least some difference, since it essentially fulfilled bin Laden’s primary demand. But it doesn’t seem to have had much effect on al-Qaeda’s willingness to prosecute a campaign of suicide terror.

If Pape really believes his own claim, then he is missing a very important development. For it is precisely the same pattern of cultural dislocation embodied by Atta that will be shaping some of the attacks to come. Pape may well be right when he claims that most suicide terrorism campaigns until recently were motivated by efforts to liberate homelands. But what of the situation now? Gambetta states what should be more or less obvious: “9/11 simply accelerated a trend that began earlier: there has been an increase in the proportion of [suicide missions] carried out by Islamic groups since 1999.” Of all the suicide bombing campaigns now underway in the world, most seem to be driven, to some degree, by the grievances of Muslims.”

So something is changing, and that something has a great deal to do with Islam – particularly with Sunni Islam, and particularly with the aggressive version of Sunni Salafism propagated by bin Laden and his followers. And speaking of homelands – how does al-Qaeda define its own? So broadly as to include the entire *umma*, the worldwide Muslim community itself – and if one defines the homeland in these terms, the organizations’ tactics and demands will necessarily be far more diffuse, varied, and destructive. Pape tries hard to deal with the problem but ends by attempting to strike a balance between very general tendencies:

Al-Qaeda is less a transnational network of like-minded ideologues brought together from across the globe via the Internet than a cross-national military alliance of national liberation movements working together against what they see as a common imperial threat. For al-Qaeda, religion matters, but mainly in the context of national resistance to foreign occupation.

BY this interpretation, Mohammad Atta was leading the Egyptian Liberation Army branch of the Hamburg cell, Jarrah the Lebanese Independence Army branch. Marwan al-Shehi the United Arab Emirates Liberation Front, and so forth. Does this really square with the facts? I would tend to put my faith less in the “predictive power” of Pape’s model than in *Suicide Terrorism*, Farhad Khosrokhavar’s fascinating study of the cult of martyrdom among the rootless young men of the modern Muslim diaspora in Western Europe. Khosrokhavar, a sociologist of Iranian provenance now living in France, has spend much time interviewing young Islamists, including would-be suicide attackers, in French prisons. Discussing Britain, Khosrokhavar says that the primary candidates for suicide bombings are

Young second-generation Pakistanis, many of whom are highly educated and who are fascinated by the important role the association [with jihad] gives them: they are the vanguard of the new Islamic world that is about to come into being. They therefore feel that they have a prophetic role to play in their parents’ country of origin. That allows them to recover much of the dignity they have lost in Western societies, where they feel themselves to be the object of scorn and an almost palpable racism. Although they are not excluded from society, these young men are deeply discontented because of the discrimination they suffer. They have no access to the jobs and opportunities for which their level of education and their

abilities qualify them. They have been insidiously marginalized by stigmatization and racism, and their imagination amplifies the effects of both.

Because they feel themselves to be victims, they explain their failures in terms of their stigma, but they lose sight of their own inability to adapt to the new constraints of modern society. They also feel a vague but crushing sense of guilt about their parents' societies, especially when, like Pakistan, most Arab countries or even Afghanistan (which is Pashtu-speaking; the language is similar to Urdu) are hit by crises. Thanks to these associations, they become Islam's world actors, and they can therefore feel that they are reestablishing their links with the Islamic societies from which they have been cut off. They also have the impression that, as actors, they are more important than the Western societies that stigmatize them believe them to be. In symbolic terms, this allows them to feel superior to the West that despises them.

In other words, Khosrokhavar is describing people who sound like two of the July 7 bombers in London. It's an observation that seems all the more prescient considering that the first edition of Khosrokhavar's book was published in 2002 (the present version has just appeared in English for the first time). The diaspora subculture described by Khosrokhavar is one of splintered loyalties and frustrated aspirations, populated by restless young men who have grown up in the West while longing for an imagined community of the faithful that will outshine the dreary realities of the rundown storefront mosques and the Halal butcher on the corner.⁷ These men, teachers and computer technicians among them, are both tempted by the West and tortured by their own temptedness. When the first details of the London suicide bombers began to emerge, I had an intense feeling that I had already read about all this not long before; then I remembered Khosrokhavar.

CONTRARY to what we have been hearing from the press, these were not the first British-born Muslims of Pakistani extraction to have become involved in acts of suicide terror. That dubious honor, as Khosrokhavar reminds us, belongs to Asif Mohammad Hanif (of Hounslow in West London) and Omar Khan Sharif (of Derby) who volunteered for a joint Hamas-al-Aqsa Brigades suicide mission in Tel Aviv in April 2003. Hanif's bomb killed himself and three Israelis, Sharif's failed to detonate, and he was later found dead in the sea. It is not clear how he got there. Gambetta tells us that Sharif "was the youngest of six children of Kashmiri immigrants, and attended a £12,000-a-year prep school." Sharif's story made me think of Shehzad Tanweer, the sports science graduate who blew himself up in a subway tunnel near Edgware Road on July 7. Tanweer has been described as a fan of cricket, and had several girlfriends; his father owns a local fish and chips shop in their hometown of Leeds, and drives a Mercedes. And I can easily imagine that both of these men, Sharif and Tanweer, would have had something in common with Ziad Jarrah, the articulate member of the Hamburg cell who piloted United Flight 93.

⁷ Apparently this sense of compensatory belonging is enough to encompass quite a range of candidates. The July 7 team in London included two British-born Pakistanis, a Caribbean convert to Islam, and a Somali living in the UK.

The recent bombings in London underline the possibility, suggested by Khosrokhavar, that the political virus of suicide terror, once confined to specific national liberation struggles, may have jumped the species barrier into a qualitatively new kind of transnational threat. The same can even be said to apply to Iraq, where, even though the pathogens are evolving in the familiar environment of a war against alien occupation, they are achieving a startling new virulence. The record of suicide bombings there is reaching extraordinary proportions. According to an estimate published in *The Washington Post*:

About 400 suicide bombings have shaken Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003, and suicide now plays a role in two out of every three insurgent bombings. In May, an estimated 90 suicide bombings were carried out in the war-torn country – nearly as many as the Israeli government has documented in the conflict with Palestinians since 1993.⁸

Of the more than a thousand people killed by such bombings, most have been Shiites, a good many of them members, or would-be members, of security forces. Whether most of these suicide bombers are from Iraq itself or from Sunni Arab countries, as some Americans have claimed, we really don't know. That we know so little about them may be the most instructive and unnerving fact of all.

⁸ Dan Eggan and Scott Wilson, "Suicide Bombs Potent Tools of Terrorists," *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2005.