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The West has its own suicide bombers

By John Feffer
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The actor Will Smith is no one's image of a suicide bomber. With his boyish face, he has often played comic roles. Even as the last man on earth in *I Am Legend*, he retains a wise-cracking, ironic demeanor. And yet, surrounded by a horde of hyperactive vampires at the end of that film, Smith clasps a live grenade to his chest and throws himself at the enemy in a final burst of heroic sacrifice.

Wait a second: surely that wasn't a suicide bombing? Will Smith wasn't reciting *suras* from the Koran. He wasn't sporting one of those rising-sun headbands that the Japanese kamikaze wore for their suicide missions. He wasn't playing a religious fanatic or a political extremist. Will Smith was the hero of the film. So how could he be a suicide bomber? After all, he's one of us, isn't he?

As it happens, we have our suicide bombers too. "We" are the powerful, developed countries, the ones with an overriding concern for individual liberties and individual lives. "We" form a moral archipelago that encompasses the United States, Europe, Israel, present-day Japan and occasionally Russia.

Whether in real war stories or inspiring vignettes served up in fiction and movies, our lore is full of heroes who sacrifice themselves for motherland, democracy, or simply their band of brothers. Admittedly, these men weren't expecting 72 virgins in paradise and they didn't make film records of their last moments, but our suicidal heroes generally have received just as much praise and recognition as "their" martyrs.

The scholarly work on suicide bombers is large and growing. Most of these studies focus on why those other people do such terrible things, sometimes against their own compatriots but mainly against us. According to the popular view, Shi'ite or Tamil or Chechen suicide martyrs have a fundamentally different attitude toward life and death.

If, however, we have our own rich tradition of suicide bombers - and our own unfortunate tendency to kill civilians in our military campaigns - how different can these attitudes really be?

Western jihad

In America's first war against Islam, we were the ones who introduced the use of suicide bombers. Indeed, the American seamen who perished in the incident were among the US military's first missing in action.

It was September 4, 1804. The United States was at war with the Barbary pirates along the North African coast. The US Navy was desperate to penetrate the enemy defenses. Commodore Edward Preble, who headed up the Third Mediterranean Squadron, chose an unusual stratagem: sending a booby-trapped *USS Intrepid* into the bay at Tripoli, one of the Barbary states of the Ottoman empire, to blow up as many of the enemy's ships as possible. US sailors packed 10,000 pounds of gunpowder into the boat along with 150 shells.

When Lieutenant Richard Sommers, who commanded the vessel, addressed his crew on the eve of the mission, a midshipman recorded his words:

"No man need accompany him, who had not come to the resolution to blow himself up, rather than be captured; and that such was fully his own determination!" Three cheers was the only reply. The gallant crew rose, as a single man, with the resolution yielding up their lives, sooner than surrender to their enemies: while each stepped forth, and begged as a favor, that he might be permitted to apply the match!

The crew of the boat then guided the *Intrepid* into the bay at night. So as not to be captured and lose so much valuable gunpowder to the enemy, they chose to blow themselves up with the boat. The explosion didn't do much damage - at most, one Tripolitan ship went down - but the crew was killed just as surely as the two men who plowed a ship piled high with explosives into the *USS Cole* in the Gulf of Aden nearly 200 years later.

Despite the failure of the mission, Preble received much praise for his strategies. "A few brave men have been sacrificed, but they could not have fallen in a better cause," opined a British navy commander. The pope went further: "The American commander, with a small force and in a short space of time, has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages."

Preble chose his tactic because his American forces were outgunned. It was a Hail Mary attempt to level the playing field. The bravery of his men and the reaction of his supporters could be easily transposed to the present day, when "fanatics" fighting against similar odds beg to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Islam and garner the praise of at least some of their religious leaders.

The blowing up of the *Intrepid* was not the only act of suicidal heroism in US military history. We routinely celebrate the brave sacrifices of soldiers who knowingly give up their lives in order to save their unit or achieve a larger military mission. We commemorate the sacrifice of the defenders of the Alamo, who could have, after all, slunk away to save

themselves and fight another day. The poetry of the Civil War is rich in the language of sacrifice. In Phoebe Cary's poem *Ready* from 1861, a black sailor, "no slavish soul had he," volunteers for certain death to push a boat to safety.

The heroic sacrifices of the 20th century are, of course, commemorated in film. Today, you can buy several videos devoted to the "suicide missions" of American soldiers.

Our World War II propaganda films - so-called "wartime entertainments" - often featured brave soldiers facing certain death. In *Flying Tigers* (1942), for example, pilot Woody Jason anticipates the Japanese kamikaze by several years by flying a plane into a bridge to prevent a cargo train from reaching the enemy. In *Bataan* (1943), Robert Taylor leads a crew of 13 men in what they know will be the suicidal defense of a critical position against the Japanese. With remarkable sangfroid, the soldiers keep up the fight as they are picked off one by one until only Taylor is left. The film ends with him manning a machine gun against wave upon wave of oncoming Japanese.

Our warrior culture continues to celebrate the heroism of these larger-than-life figures from World War II by taking real-life stories and turning them into Hollywood-style entertainments. For his series of "war stories" on Fox News, for instance, Oliver North narrates an episode on the Doolittle raid, an all-volunteer mission to bomb Tokyo shortly after Pearl Harbor. Since the bombers didn't have enough fuel to return to their bases, the 80 pilots committed to what they expected to be a suicide mission. Most of them survived, miraculously, but they had been prepared for the ultimate sacrifice - and that is how they are billed today. "These are the men who restored the confidence of a shaken nation and changed the course of the Second World War," the promotional material for the episode rather grandly reports. Tokyo had the same hopes for its kamikaze pilots a few years later.

Why suicide missions?

America did not, of course, dream up suicide missions. They form a rich vein in the Western tradition. In the Bible, Samson sacrificed himself in bringing down the temple on the Philistine leadership, killing more through his death than he did during his life. The Spartans, at Thermopylae, faced down the Persians, knowing that the doomed effort would nevertheless delay the invading army long enough to give the Athenians time to prepare Greek defenses. In the first century AD in the Roman province of Judea, Jewish Zealots and Sicarians ("dagger men") launched suicide missions, mostly against Jewish moderates, to provoke an uprising against Roman rule.

Later, suicide missions played a key role in European history. "Books written in the post-9/11 period tend to place suicide bombings only in the context of Eastern history and limit them to the exotic rebels against modernism," writes Niccolo Caldararo in an essay on suicide bombers. "A study of the late 19th century and early 20th would provide a spate of examples of suicide bombers and assassins in the heart of Europe." These included various European nationalists, Russian anarchists, and other early practitioners of terrorism.

Given the plethora of suicide missions in the Western tradition, it should be difficult to argue that the tactic is unique to Islam or to fundamentalists. Yet some scholars enjoy constructing a

restrictive genealogy for such missions that connects the Assassin sect (which went after the great sultan Saladin in the Levant in the 12th century) to Muslim suicide guerrillas of the Philippines (first against the Spanish and then, in the early twentieth century, against Americans). They take this genealogy all the way up to more recent suicide campaigns by Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and Islamic rebels in the Russian province of Chechnya. The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, who used suicide bombers in a profligate fashion, are ordinarily the only major non-Muslim outlier included in this series.

Uniting our suicide attackers and theirs, however, are the reasons behind the missions. Three salient common factors stand out. First, suicidal attacks, including suicide bombings, are a "weapon of the weak", designed to level the playing field. Second, they are usually used against an occupying force. And third, they are cheap and often brutally effective.

We commonly associate suicide missions with terrorists. But states and their armies, when outnumbered, will also launch such missions against their enemies, as Preble did against Tripoli or the Japanese attempted near the end of World War II. To make up for its technological disadvantages, the Iranian regime sent waves of young volunteers, some unarmed and some reportedly as young as nine years old, against the then-US-backed Iraqi army in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

Non-state actors are even more prone to launch suicide missions against occupying forces. Remove the occupying force, as Robert Pape argues in his groundbreaking book on suicide bombers, *Dying to Win*, and the suicide missions disappear. It is not a stretch, then, to conclude that we, the occupiers (the United States, Russia, Israel), through our actions, have played a significant part in fomenting the very suicide missions that we now find so alien and incomprehensible in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Lebanon and elsewhere.

The archetypal modern suicide bomber first emerged in Lebanon in the early 1980s, a response to Israel's invasion and occupation of the country. "The Shi'ite suicide bomber," writes Mike Davis in his book on the history of the car bomb, *Buda's Wagon*, "was largely a Frankenstein monster of [Israeli Defense Minister] Ariel Sharon's deliberate creation."

Not only did US and Israeli occupation policies create the conditions that gave birth to these missions, but the United States even trained some of the perpetrators. The US funded Pakistan's intelligence service to run a veritable insurgency training school that processed 35,000 foreign Muslims to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. *Charlie Wilson's War*, the book and movie that celebrated US assistance to the mujihadeen, could be subtitled: Suicide Bombers We Have Known and Funded.

Finally, the technique "works". Suicide bombers kill 12 times more people per incident than conventional terrorism, national security specialist Mohammed Hafez points out. The US military has often publicized the "precision" of its airborne weaponry, of its "smart" bombs and missiles. But in truth, suicide bombers are the "smartest" bombers because they can zero in on their target in a way no missile can - from close up - and so make last-minute corrections for accuracy.

In addition, by blasting themselves to smithereens, suicide bombers can't give away any information about their organization or its methods after the act, thus preserving the security of the group. You can't argue with success, however bloodstained it might be. Only when the tactic itself becomes less effective or counterproductive, does it recede into the background, as seems to be the case today among armed Palestinian groups.

Individual motives for becoming a suicide bomber or attacker have, when studied, proved to be surprisingly diverse. We tend to ascribe heroism to our soldiers when, against the odds, they sacrifice themselves for us, while we assume a glassy-eyed fanaticism on the part of those who go up against us. But close studies of suicide bombers suggest that they are generally not crazy, or - another popular explanation - just acting out of abysmal poverty or economic desperation. (Although, in the case of the sole surviving Mumbai suicide attacker put on trial in India recently, this seems to have been the motivation.)

"Not only do they generally not have economic problems, but most of the suicide bombers also do not have an emotional disturbance that prevents them from differentiating between reality and imagination," writes Anat Berko in her careful analysis of the topic, *The Path to Paradise*. Despite suggestions from Iraqi and US officials that suicide bombers in Iraq have been coerced into participating in their missions, scholars have yet to record such cases.

Perhaps, however, this reflects a narrow understanding of coercion. After all, our soldiers are indoctrinated into a culture of heroic sacrifice just as are the suicide bombers of Hamas. The indoctrination doesn't always work: scores of US soldiers go absent without leave or join the peace movement just as some suicide bombers give up at the last minute. But the basic-training techniques of instilling the instinct to kill, the readiness to follow orders, and a willingness to sacrifice one's life are part of the warrior ethic everywhere.

Suicide missions are, then, a military technique that armies use when outmatched and that guerrilla movements use, especially in occupied countries, to achieve specific objectives. Those who volunteer for such missions, whether in Iraq today or on board the *Intrepid* in 1804, are usually placing a larger goal - liberty, national self-determination, ethnic or religious survival - above their own lives.

But wait: surely I'm not equating soldiers going on suicide missions against other soldiers with terrorists who blow up civilians in a public place? Indeed, these are two distinct categories. And yet much has happened in the history of modern warfare - in which civilians have increasingly become the victims of combat - to blur these distinctions.

Terror and civilians

The conventional picture of today's suicide bomber is a young man or woman, usually of Arab extraction, who makes a video proclamation of faith, straps on a vest of high explosives, and detonates him or herself in a crowded pizzeria, bus, marketplace, mosque or church. We must expand this picture. The September 11 hijackers targeted high-profile locations, including a military target, the Pentagon. Hezbollah's suicidal truck driver destroyed the US Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983, killing 241 US soldiers. Thenmozhi Rajaratnam, a female Tamil suicide bomber, assassinated Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi

in 1991.

Suicide bombers, in other words, have targeted civilians, military installations, non-military sites of great significance, and political leaders. In suicide attacks, Hezbollah, Tamil Tiger and Chechen suicide bombers have generally focused on military and police targets: 88%, 71%, and 61% of the time, respectively. Hamas, on the other hand, has targeted civilians 74% of the time.

Sometimes, in response to public opinion, such movements will shift focus - and targets. After a 1996 attack killed 91 civilians and created a serious image problem, the Tamil Tigers deliberately began choosing military, police and government targets for their suicide attacks. "We don't go after kids in Pizza Hut," one Tiger leader told researcher Mia Bloom, referring to a Hamas attack on a Sbarro outlet in Jerusalem that killed 15 civilians in 2001.

We have been conditioned into thinking of suicide bombers as targeting civilians and so putting themselves beyond the established conventions of war. As it happens, however, the nature of war has changed in our time. In the 20th century, armies began to target civilians as a way of destroying the will of the population, and so bringing down the leadership of the enemy country.

Japanese atrocities in China in the 1930s, the Nazi air war against Britain in World War II, Allied fire bombings of German and Japanese cities, the nuclear attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US carpet bombing in Cambodia and Laos, and the targeted assassinations of the Phoenix program during the Vietnam War, Russian depredations in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the tremendous civilian casualties during the Iraq War: all this has made the idea of conventional armies clashing in an area far from civilian life a quaint legacy of the past.

Terrorist attacks against civilians, particularly September 11, prompted military historian Caleb Carr to back the George W Bush administration's declaration of a war against terror. "War can only be answered with war," he wrote in his best-selling *The Lessons of Terror*. "And it is incumbent on us to devise a style of war more imaginative, more decisive, and yet more humane than anything terrorists can contrive." This more imaginative, decisive, and humane style of war has, in fact, consisted of stepped-up aerial bombing, beefed-up special forces (to, in part, carry out targeted assassinations globally), and recently, the widespread use of unmanned aerial drones like the Predator and the Reaper, both in the American arsenal and in 24/7 use today over the Pakistani tribal borderlands. "Predators can become a modern army's answer to the suicide bomber," Carr wrote.

Carr's argument is revealing. As the US military and Washington see it, the ideal use of Predator or Reaper drones, armed as they are with Hellfire missiles, is to pick off terrorist leaders; in other words, a mirror image of what that Tamil Tiger suicide bomber (who picked off the Indian prime minister) did somewhat more cost effectively. According to Carr, such a strategy with our robot planes is an effective and legitimate military tactic.

In reality, though, such drone attacks regularly result in significant civilian casualties, usually referred to as "collateral damage". According to researcher Daniel Byman, the drones kill 10

civilians for every suspected militant. As Tom Engelhardt of TomDispatch.com writes, "In Pakistan, a war of machine assassins is visibly provoking terror (and terrorism), as well as anger and hatred among people who are by no means fundamentalists. It is part of a larger destabilization of the country."

So, the dichotomy between a "just war", or even simply a war of any sort, and the unjust, brutal targeting of civilians by terrorists has long been blurring thanks to the constant civilian casualties that now result from conventional war and the narrow military targets of many terrorist organizations.

Moral relativism?

We have our suicide bombers - we call them heroes. We have our culture of indoctrination we call it basic training. We kill civilians we call it collateral damage.

Is this, then, the moral relativism that so outrages conservatives? Of course not. I've been drawing these comparisons not to excuse the actions of suicide bombers, but to point out the hypocrisy of our black-and-white depictions of our noble efforts and their barbarous acts, of our worthy goals and their despicable ends. We - the inhabitants of an archipelago of supposedly enlightened warfare - have been indoctrinated to view the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a legitimate military target and September 11 as a heinous crime against humanity. We have been trained to see acts like the attack in Tripoli as American heroism and the *USS Cole* attack as rank barbarism. Explosive vests are a sign of extremism; Predator missiles, of advanced sensibility.

It would be far better if we opened our eyes when it came to our own world and looked at what we were actually doing. Yes, "they" sometimes have dismaying cults of sacrifice and martyrdom, but we do too. And who is to say that ending occupation is any less noble than making the world free for democracy? Will Smith, in *I Am Legend*, was willing to sacrifice himself to end the occupation of vampires. We should realize that our soldiers in the countries we now occupy may look no less menacing and unintelligible than those obviously malevolent, science-fiction creatures. And the presence of our occupying soldiers sometimes inspires similar, Will Smith-like acts of desperation and, dare I say it, courage.

The fact is, were we to end our occupation policies, we would go a long way toward eliminating "their" suicide bombers. But when and how will we end our own cult of martyrdom?