Dying to Kill Us

By Robert A. Pape

Suicide terrorism has been on the rise around the world for two decades, but there is great confusion as to why. Since many such attacks — including, of course, those of Sept. 11, 2001 — have been perpetrated by Muslim terrorists professing religious motives, it might seem obvious that Islamic fundamentalism is the central cause. This presumption has fueled the belief that future 9/11’s can be avoided only by a wholesale transformation of Muslim societies, which in turn was a core reason for broad public support of the invasion of Iraq.

However, this presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is wrongheaded, and it may be encouraging domestic and foreign policies that are likely to worsen America’s situation.

I have spent a year compiling a database of every suicide bombing and attack around the globe from 1980 to 2001 — 188 in all. It includes any attack in which at least one terrorist killed himself or herself.

Religion is not the

Second, liberal democracies are uniquely vulnerable to suicide terrorists. The United States, France, India, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka and Turkey have been the targets of almost every suicide attack of the past two decades, and each country has been a democracy at the time of the incidents.

Third, suicide terrorist campaigns are directed toward a strategic objective. From Lebanon to Israel to Sri Lanka to Kashmir to Chechnya, the sponsors of every campaign have been terrorist groups trying to establish or maintain political self-determination by compelling a democratic power to withdraw from the territories they claim. Even Al Qaeda fits this pattern: although Saudi Arabia is not under American military occupation per se, the initial major objective of Osama bin Laden was the expulsion of American troops from the Persian Gulf.

Most worrisome, my research shows that the raw number of suicide attacks is climbing at an alarming rate, even while the rates of other types of terrorism actually declined. The worldwide annual total of terrorist incidents has fallen almost in half; there were 348 attacks in 2001 as opposed to 666 incidents in 1987. Yet the number of attacks in which the terrorists intend to kill themselves along with their victims has grown from an average of 3 per year in the 1980’s to 10 per year in the 1990’s, to more than 25 in both 2000 and 2001.
force behind suicide terrorism.

Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist campaigns have in common is the need to compel liberal democracies to support my conclusions. First, nearly all suicide terrorist attacks occur as part of organized campaigns, not as isolated or random incidents. Of the 188 separate attacks in the period I studied, 179 could have their roots traced to large, coherent political or military campaigns.

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And in terms of casualties, suicide attacks are far and away the most efficient form of terrorism. From 1980 to 2001, suicide attacks accounted for only 3 percent of terrorist incidents, but caused almost half of total deaths due to terrorism — even if one excludes as an aberration the unusually large number of fatalities on 9/11.

How should democracies respond? In the past, they have tended to react with heavy military offensives, only to find that this tends to incite more attacks and to stir public sympathy for the terrorists without hampering their networks (this has clearly been the case in the West Bank and Chechnya). In their frustration, some terrorized countries have then changed tactics, making concessions to political causes supported by terrorists.

Yet this doesn't work either: one likely reason suicide terrorism has been rising so rapidly in recent years is that terrorist groups have learned that the strategy pays off. Suicide terrorists were thought to compel American and French military forces to abandon Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to leave most of Lebanon in 1985, Israeli forces to quit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995, and the Turkish government to grant measures of autonomy to the Kurds in the late 1990's. In all but the case of Turkey, the terrorists' political cause made far greater political gains after they resorted to suicide operations.

When one considers the strategic logic of suicide terrorism, it becomes clear that America's war on terrorism is heading in the wrong direction. The close association between foreign military occupations and the
growth of suicide terrorist movements shows the folly of any strategy centering on conquering countries that sponsor terrorism or in trying to transform their political systems. At most, occupying countries will disrupt terrorist operations in the short term. But over time it will simply increase the number of terrorists coming at us.

Unfortunately, negotiating concessions with the terrorists is also not a solution. The current failure of that approach in Israel is an all-too-common pattern. Concessions are usually incremental and deliberately staggered — thus they fail to satisfy the nationalist aspirations of the suicide terrorists, yet encourage terrorist leaders to see their enemies as vulnerable to coercion.

In the end, the best approach for the states under fire is probably to focus on their own domestic security while doing what they can to see that the least militant forces on the terrorists’ side build a viable state on their own. Israel, for example, would be well advised to abandon the territory it holds on the West Bank but to go ahead with building the immense wall, 20 feet high and 20 feet wide, to physically separate it from the Palestinian population. This would create real security for Israel and leave the West Bank for a true Palestinian state.

For the United States, especially in light of its growing occupation of the Persian Gulf, it is crucial to immediately step up border and immigration controls. In the medium term, Washington should abandon its visions of empire and allow the United Nations to take over the political and economic institutions in Iraq. And in the long run, America must move toward energy independence, reducing the need for troops in the Persian Gulf. Even if our intentions in Iraq are good, our presence there will continue to help terrorist groups recruit more people willing to blow themselves up in the war against America.