

Executive Summary of Profiling Islamic Suicide Terrorists¹

By Michael Taarnby

Current Situation

On Thursday May 8, 2004 the FBI warned state and local officials to be on the alert for suicide bombers. This tactic is especially threatening in congested urban areas like New York City, because it allows the terrorist to accurately place explosives, to be flexible in timing the detonation, and to capture extensive media coverage subsequent to the attack.

Overview

Michael Taarnby, a researcher at the Center for Cultural Research at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, prepared this report for the Danish Ministry of Justice. In completing his study, Taarnby examined 193 suicide operations carried out by Islamic terrorist organizations between 1982 and 2003. According to his study, 247 individual suicide bombers participated in these attacks.

Taarnby concludes that the general trend of suicide bombing operations during this period began with people willing to die in the name of idealism and religion. The next generation of suicide terrorists came out of Palestine and were motivated by a sense of frustration with conditions in the world around them. The final, and most troubling generation for New York City, are suicide terrorists motivated by a search for personal identity. This final group is recruited outside of family influence, and the individuals comprising this group are often recruited in European countries (pages 38-39).

The report consists of an overview of Islamic suicide terrorism, a profiling of Islamic suicide terrorists, a discussion of relevant case studies (including Richard Reid, Mohammed Atta, and Nizar Trablesi), and some general remarks on potential trends in the future. The section on profiling suicide terrorists, where Taarnby identifies 5 categories of Islamic suicide terrorists and 5 motivational factors, is particularly interesting for the potential value it has with respect to preventing attacks. This following is a summary of those categories and factors. The categories of Islamic suicide terrorists are presented in order of concern to New York City.

Categories of Islamic Suicide Terrorists²

Category V: The Uprooted (11% of 247 individuals studied)

- No patterns of identifying with patriotism or traditional nationalistic adherence
- Extensive international experience in western and third world countries; while travel is extensive, the subjects tend not to establish roots in any one location; rootlessness is a common experience which unites individuals

¹ Taarnby, Michael, *Profiling Islamic Suicide Terrorists*; A Research Report for the Danish Ministry of Justice, November 27, 2003.

² See pages 19-26.

- Conversion to religious zealot is a byproduct of international travel and experience, as opposed to resulting from childhood or adolescent upbringing
- Desire to be active participant in current world affairs; need to make a difference outweighs kinship ties, careers, and starting a family of their own
- No friends or intimate contact with people outside the cell; almost complete absence of female companionship
- Reclusive; tend to reflect in solitude; do not complain to their families about their situation or personal well-being
- Being labeled a mass murderer is a sign of recognition
- Interested in WMD
- Tend to be Europeans or Middle Easterners (particularly Saudi Arabians)

Category II: The Afghan Arab (12%)

- Emerged in the 1990's
- Mujaheddin who spent only a few weeks in the Afghan camp
- Mujaheddin who fought in combat in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia and Chechnya
- Self-reliance and faith in the supreme being
- Motivated by religion and political grievances
- Tend to be members of GIA, al-Qaeda, JEM, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, AAI in Kurdistan
- Sunni Muslims who follow the Wahhabist ideology

Category IV: The Avenger (10%)

- Direct and personal loss of a husband, friend, or relative by invading forces during civil war
- Revenge for injustices
- Ordinary in Islamic religious beliefs
- Integrity and honor of the family are valued
- Conservative cultural beliefs
- Will use women
- Tend to be Chechen Rebels, Al-Asqa Martyr's Brigades, Hamas, PIJ

Category I: The Oppressed Shi'a (11%)

- Similar religious perspective and shared experience as an oppressed community
- Recruited in Lebanon during the civil war and among exiled Iraqi Shia's
- Young men
- Poor or lower-middle class
- Uneducated
- No international experience
- Dedicated to rid their country of foreign invaders
- Tend to be members of Hezbollah, Amal and Al-Da'waa

Category III: The Frustrated (56%)

- Exclusively related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- Palestinians who feel a personal sense of despair and vulnerability
- Use of women and children
- Tend to be PIJ, Hamas, Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigades, Salafia Jihadia.

Motivational Factors for Suicide Bombers³

Religion- All Islamic suicide terrorists are Muslim. For them, jihad in the modern context is different than jihad as described in the Quran. Suicide terrorists interpret jihad as a means of fighting the enemies of Islam, otherwise known as infidels, imperialists and bad Muslims. It is thought that by performing these religious duties through suicide missions, they have given their life for the good of the Muslim community, thus, they will automatically be admitted to Paradise.

Social- Suicide terrorists find a social bond in their network, and they refer to each other as "brothers." Blowing themselves up is considered a symbol of dedication and a way to impress their fellow "brothers." Religious extremism and Islamic fundamentalism provide a new identity and a chance to network and socialize with like-minded people. Choosing someone for martyrdom is considered prestigious and labels that person a true and reliable Muslim. Islamic organizations control their members' lives through worshipping, proselytizing, fundraising and training activities to ensure dedication and dependency. Thus, the organization is the members' crutch spiritually, and socially and it becomes their only world.

Cultural- There are two subcategories:

1. **Traditional**-Existing traits and notions of heroism in suicide missions are enforced in schools, TV, music, sermons, and posters of occupied territories. Self-sacrifice is the cornerstone of Islam. In Palestine there is strong support for suicide bombing. Traditional culture and propaganda is very persuasive in gaining support. Indeed, it supports the concept of family honor. In a culture where suicide is shunned, someone who is depressed can carry out a suicide mission and still preserve his family's honor.
2. **Artificial**- Found in European Islamic territories since the 1990's. These militants pledge no allegiance to their country or culture, but only to their imaginary community, the "Muslim Umma." They are Western educated; they are a disgruntled youth and have become "born again" Muslims. They are in doubt about their faith and identity and they may have been uprooted.

Political- They have a strong dislike to America and the Western world, which they think are trying to subdue all Muslims. They use U.S. events such as the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, involvement in Middle Eastern oil, and military presence in the

³ See pages 14-19.

Gulf region to bolster their animosity. They are distrustful of the Middle Eastern governments due to corruption, unemployment, and poverty.

Psychological- People who blow themselves up, do so in the name of Allah, and are clinically sane. The disturbed are weeded out because they cannot be trusted and may jeopardize the mission. The suicide candidate submits and is obedient to the terrorist organization and believes he is on a mission from God. Al-Qaeda requires psychological stamina for its jihad. Mental preparation and religious indoctrination is valued more than terrorist training or battlefield experience. Level of maturity is more important than age, although most are young men in their 20's. They lack empathy for other people. Some are immature and depressed and need an escape from their inadequate lives. The fantasy world of jihad provides this for them by reinforcing the idea that they are the victim and have been treated unjustly.