TOWARD DEVELOPING A PROFILE OF SUICIDE TERRORISTS: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS*

Raghu N. Singh and Amir Abbassi
Texas A&M University-Commerce

ABSTRACT

Our major objective in this paper is to report findings of a small scale study aimed at developing an initial and general profile of suicide terrorists in the contemporary world. We employed Delphi procedures for listing characteristics and behaviors of suicide terrorists at psychological, demographic, economic, and sociopolitical levels of analysis. We first based their initial listing on the existing literature and media reports, which was then handed over to a panel of 73 'experts' in personal interviews conducted in two rounds. Our respondents finalized a list of 48 characteristics of suicide terrorists grouped under three major headings. Our research was guided by the sociological perspective and appears to have a suggestive role for future studies by providing several useful ideas on the subject of suicide terrorism.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The phenomenon of terrorism has, particularly during the past few decades, added a unique and probably one of the most dangerous styles of violence against the humanity in the form of the so called 'suicide terrorism.' Individuals engaged in this form of killing are "true believers" (Hoffer 1951 1-3), whose only reality is a blind faith in their 'just cause,' often legitimized in an apparent sense of desperation without the use of scientific logic for vested interests of their own collective body or group beyond which nothing seem to matter. They generally tend to lose sight of own personal meaning of life and become seriously committed to conversion of the world into their fantasies by turning into the so called human bombs. Studies have reported an increasing trend in suicide missions for achieving terrorist goals (Lutz & Lutz 2004).

Suicide terrorism has become a viable source of violence in the contemporary world because it is cost effective (for example, Al Quaidas used American resources and perhaps little funding of their own to cause one of the most deadly forms of destruction in history on September 11, 2001), relatively easier and quicker to execute, extremely difficult to detect, and very unpredictable as to when, where, how, or why it takes place. Examples of suicide missions are on the rise in various parts of the world despite of desperate efforts to detect them even in very contained locations such as Kashmir, Iraq, Israel, and Sri Lanka. It seems that we currently lack theoretical and methodological capability in almost all disciplines to be able to adequately understand or comprehend all dimensions of this complex process of violence in human society. We do, however, find in the literature numerous anecdotal and historical narratives of incidents and political movements involving suicide terrorists. We particularly find all sorts of interpretations and sometimes even emotionally charged articles on the subject on the web and in other popular media, often focusing on particular political and "religious" groups propagating justifications suicide terrorists have. Many of these analyses perhaps distort facts and usually provide limited knowledge of multiple causes and correlates of suicide terrorism and its impacts on lives of people across the globe. Available data on suicide terrorists are often sketchy, sensationalized, or classified under the jurisdiction of various countries. We need systematic research in natural and social sciences for effectively investigating forms and correlates of suicide terrorism in order to deal with this serious problem. We find the sociological perspective as a meaningful approach to study and interpret issues related to the problem. It is a broader perspective that incorporates analyses at various levels (individual, social, cultural, ecological, and so forth).

Objective

The major objective of the study we are reporting here is to use the sociological perspective toward identifying selected characteristics of suicide terrorists. In that regard, suicide terrorism is considered to be a social or a collectivity related phenomenon though it incorporates psychological or other possible components. The sociological perspective would also view suicide terrorism

as a process involving multiple and interacting circumstances and factors involved.

Our specific objectives include the development of ideas for 1) testing the accuracy as well as conceptual relevance of a particular method for profiling, screening or detecting suicide terrorists, and 2) outlining an actual profile of suicide terrorists in terms of an initial list of their probable individual, demographic, economic, cultural, political, and social characteristics. We view our study as an intellectual exercise in attempting to build a tentative and general profile of suicide terrorists and its sociological interpretations. In doing so, we did not attempt to target any particular nation, ethnic, religious, separatist or political groups as such.

Rationale

This study should have implications for improving the accuracy of identifying or detecting suicide terrorists. Studies like this may help, hopefully in the long run, in reducing economic and social costs associated with threats and occurrences of suicide terrorism in various parts of the world. It may also have implications for improving methodology of profiling suicide terrorists in a scientific manner rather than in arbitrary, labeling, or other simplistic methods often used by law enforcement agencies in various countries.

A few studies have demonstrated that profiling is emerging as a "legitimate adjunct" to criminal investigation (Turvey 1999). We have come a long way from the Italian physician, Lombrosos (1835-1909), and his limited and crude efforts toward biological profiling of criminals to more recent systematic efforts in that regard made by forensic pathologists and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents. However, criminologists have generally been concerned about profilers not publishing their analyses due to information sensitivity and there has been a lack of non-partisan professional organizations working on ethics and standards for developing and using criminal profiles. A few investigators have gone ahead by providing individual profiles of specific terrorists (Whittaker 2004: 62-73) rather than working on general profiles applicable to such criminals. Serious efforts are needed to improve upon both deductive and inductive methods of criminal profiling, including those who have been or are likely to be engaged in terrorist activities. It is possible that even minor attempts in conducting research using a profiling method, such as the one we are reporting in this paper, might help toward eventual refinement of investigative techniques in the field.

METHODOLOGY

In the search for better methods of profiling suicide terrorists, we selected the Delphi technique to develop at least an initial draft of a profile of suicide terrorists. This "intuitive technique" has methodological potentials for utilizing the knowledge of experts in a particular area of investigation (Singh & Webb 1979). The technique has relevance to what C. Wright Mills (1959) called "sociological imagination" as it connects to both history as well as biography of individuals being profiled.

Delphi Procedures

In general, the Delphi procedures for developing a profile of suicide terrorists consisted of the following steps.

First, we developed an initial profile of suicide terrorists based on the existing knowledge in the literature. The major step toward accomplishing that objective was to prepare an initial list of characteristics or behaviors of suicide terrorists that could be handed over to experts or judges who would rank them in terms of degree of importance and then could add to that list whatever they considered relevant and important. To achieve that goal, we consulted scientific literature, on-line materials as well as popular magazines and newspaper reports relevant to suicidology, terrorism in general, and suicide terrorism in particular. For example, the literature helped us in identifying the characteristics of people engaged in suicidal behaviors (Douglas 1967; Dublin 1963; Maltsberger & Buie 1980; Maris 1991; Maris, Berman, & Silverman 2000); those who have been notorious as terrorists in general (Kupperman & Trent 1999; Kushner 1998; Lutz & Lutz 2004; Simonsen & Spindlove 2004; Whittaker 2004); and ones who have been known to have participated in incidents of suicide terrorism (Cooley 2000; Kaarthikeyan & Radhavinod 2004; Sivan 1985; Swami 2003). We also looked into at least theoretically relevant causes and correlates of the characteristics of suicide terrorists in order to understand their background. Some of these correlates included variables connected to psychologi-

cal, ecological, demographic, social and cultural contexts.

Second, we selected a "panel of experts" consisting of professionals and community leaders who were assumed to be somewhat knowledgeable of the suicide terrorism area of study, or were capable of using realistic logic in helping us understand it. Professionals included scholars, researchers, and practitioners having a background in several disciplines, such as anthropology, criminology, jurisprudence, education, psychology, forensics, biology, business, history, religion, political science, economics, social work, and sociology at three state universities located in a metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. The community leaders included residents of that area who had a reputation of being leading actors and were immigrants from India, Pakistan, Egypt and Iran. These 'leaders' were conveniently accessible to us and we expected them to be somewhat knowledgeable about regions of the world which have been impacted by terrorist activities during the past few decades. Professionals and leaders were selected through a snow-balling or chain-referral technique based upon their reputation. Thus, we gave each respondent a list of our potential expert or knowledgeable persons in their category of expertise and then asked them to add names of influential people in various categories of the list, when possible. We identified 108 names of these professionals and leaders through that chain-referral technique and collected our data from 73 of them. The non-random sample in our exploratory study consisted of 18 faculty members (teachers/researchers) in sciences and technology, 21 in social sciences, and 15 in colleges of education. In addition, 19 community leaders participated in the study.

Third, we contacted and personally interviewed 73 respondents through a questionnaire consisting of profile items presented through an open-ended design to elicit a broad range of responses. We understand that many users of the Delphi technique employ mailed questionnaires for data collection. Interviewing respondents appeared to be a necessity for us because of the sensitive nature of our topic of study and because of the types of respondents involved. In addition, interviewing respondents ensured a satisfactory response rate (despite an initial loss of 35 potential respondents) and we took notes on their candid reactions to profile items and their comments helped us in evaluating their responses.

Fourth, we statistically analyzed responses from the first round of interviews to determine the degree of consensus among respondents on each item of the profile. Then, in a second round, we provided them with their average responses (mean, standard deviation, and interquartile range) on each item from the first round and asked them to reconsider their earlier responses if considered necessary by them. The standard deviation on an item represented a degree of consensus among respondents, while a mean response on the scale was an indicator of the degree of an item's importance in relation to other items. We assumed that in cases where a person's response is outside the group interquartile range, justification for the extreme response should be clearly stated. Of all respondents, we found the community leaders to be the most cooperative in the interview process. It took us five months to complete interviews in both rounds, though the second round of interviews went much faster than the first one. We asked our respondents in the second round to help us reassess former responses and finalize the ranking of various characteristics of suicide terrorists. We also asked them to help us group those characteristics into as many categories as possible. The grouping of characteristics enabled us and our respondents to conceptually relate them with each other and be able to interpret them and their ranking process. Six respondents could not be re-interviewed during the second round.

Usefulness of the Delphi Technique

The Delphi approach has been used in studies concerning several kinds of problem areas especially as a tool for forecasting. It has proved to be a valuable technique for planning and forecasting the long-term future (Singh & Webb 1979). A large number of studies sponsored by the Rand Corporation have employed Delphi procedures in developing criteria for decision making and policy formulation, including those in higher education (Custer, Scarcella & Stewart 1999).

A number of scholars have discussed the merits of the Delphi approach. We are summarizing a few advantages of using this approach as follows: 1) The Delphi approach

relies on the rationality of group judgment, or "n-heads are better than one." It is a process of eliciting and refining the opinions of a group of individuals. The individuals remain anonymous to each other; their opinions are continually refined and reiterated; and feedback to participants is controlled. 2) The Delphi approach is a variant of the panel or committee approach for arriving at a consensus of majority opinions. Its design eliminates or prevents face-to-face confrontation, specious persuasion, and the bandwagon effect of a majority agreement. It replaces direct discussion with a series of carefully controlled questionnaires that report back edited and new information to the participants, where they act in privacy and react to the successive inputs. 3) The Delphi approach uses some form of statistical index as a representative of the group opinion. Thus, there is no particular attempt to arrive at unanimity among the respondents, and a spread of opinions on the final round is the normal outcome. 4) The Delphi approach is very useful in such areas as profiles of terrorists where objective and valid measures are not easily accessible. 5) The Delphi approach provides flexibility for the research in various ways. There is no "cut and dried" set of steps to follow and it provides variations of possibilities during each phase of inquiry.

FINDINGS

The Delphi procedures facilitated the final selection and ranking of psychological, demographic/economic, and sociopolitical characteristics of people who were considered to be engaging in acts of suicide terrorism around the globe on the basis of consensus among professionals and community leaders as experts. Selected findings related to that are summarized below.

Characteristics of Suicide Terrorists

As stated earlier, we started with a rather long list of possible personality, social, cultural, economic, demographic, and political profiles of individuals and groups involved in suicide terrorism on the basis of literature. The respondents, based on consensus and rankings of traits, arrived at the following three categories of characteristics of suicide terrorists. These characteristics are listed under three subheadings in a rank order of average importance (from highly important to less important) as assigned by our respondents. We grouped some of the ranked characteristics in various categories through a consensus among respondents during the second round of interviews.

1) The psychological and personality profile of individuals/groups:

- being emotionally charged for militancy against particular govt./authority; dependent, particularly on some specific person(s) of authority or charisma; having a conviction that violence is the only way to defend self, family, community, or nation from the perceived aggressions or invasions by others;
- having low self esteem but a false/irrational sense of courage/confidence; a lack of specific goals and direction in life; having a sense of desperation; being depressed; pessimistic outlook; sense of having experienced significant loss/deprivation; having a nomadic (unsettled) lifestyle; loner and egocentric;
- being obsessive/compulsive; having anxiety disorder; serious temper/anger control problems; being rash/erratic, authoritarian and controlling; focused on blaming someone/something particular or general for own problems;
- being inflexible/rigid, resisting change; having persistence/perseverance in perusing same cause and behaviors over time; having experienced a dramatic change in the recent past;
- tend to label people/cultures/nations without giving it a second thought;
- individuals having a history of a certain degree of mental illness, emotional disturbance or psychopathology; a history of overt/covert suicidal tendencies; phobic/hateful of law enforcement and military people; substance abuser; fatalistic.

2) Demographic and economic characteristics of individuals/groups:

- largely young, single males recruited at tender age (though there is a recent trend of recruitment of females of all ages among some terrorist groups such as Tamil Tigers);
- none/unstable employment history; relatively lower socioeconomic status, including low or a conditioned/highly regulated/programmed educational

Table 1: Correlation Matrixes in Terms of Spearman's Rank Order Correlation (RHO) Coefficients Showing Interrelationships Among Four Sets of Sample in Profiling the Suicide Terrorists

	Total N (N=73)	Scientists (N=18)	Social Scientists (N=21)	Educationists (N=15)
Degree of consensus in ranking profile items				
Scientists	0.61*			
Social Scientists	0.42	0.29		
Educationists	0.59*	0.41	0.64*	
Community Leaders	0.38	0.26	0.57*	0.49*
Degree of importance assigned to profile items				
Scientists	0.73*			
Social Scientists	0.54*	0.43		
Educationists	0.44	0.33	0.55*	
Community Leaders	0.48*	0.40	0.49*	0.36

*Related t-test values significant at .05 or less.

background; a low rate of intergenerational/intragenerational mobility
- likely to belong to particular ethnic/nationality/religious background (which may vary from place to place and from time to time).

3) Sociopolitical background of individuals/groups:
- having expectation of or received viable publicity for a cause through mass media;
- a vocal lack of trust in legal recourses such as negotiations/collaborations/conflict resolutions and in organizations that provide help in those at international level;
- having been recipient of financial and emotional support from a terrorist group/individual(s); having access to a training facility for terrorism;
- having a commitment to the fanatic/radical interpretation of a particular religion;
- having been oversocialized and controlled from childhood; strong belief in familism/kinship ties and being suspicious of bureaucratic organizations;
- strongly committed to a separatist political ideology; tend to be highly involved in a particular cause/movement; having a tendency to support a dictatorial orientation in government; having been affiliated to a group that has a history of violence;
- having own or close family or friends' criminal and/or suicide history; having been a victim of violence/abuse; had a family member/friend who has been a victim of terror;
- ethnocentric and has a racial/religious prejudicial orientation toward select groups.

Interrelationship among Four Sets of Respondents

Data presented in Table 1 show the interrelationship among the four groups of respondents in terms of the degree to which they had consensus ranking items to profile suicide terrorists and the way they assigned importance to those items. Spearman rank order correlation (RHO) coefficients presented in the table indicate that several significant differences existed among the four sets of respondents in their levels of consensus over the profiling items as well as varying degrees of importance given by them to items. Data indicate that scientists and educationists had the strongest correlation to the total N in having consensus over selecting characteristics of suicide terrorists. On the other hand, while the social scientists and community leaders were in agreement with each other, they did not have significant consensus with others in the group the way the profiling items were ranked. However, social scientists and scientists did agree with each other in assigning importance to various profiling characteristics. The social scientists and educationists also agreed with each other in assigning importance to items.

Contribution of the Second Round

A second round of interviews with re-

Table 2: The RHO Coefficients for Responses in Round 1 and Round 2

In Terms of Degrees of Consensus	Scientists	Social Scientists	Educationists	Community Leaders
Personality Profile	0.97*	0.78*	0.81*	0.92*
Demographic Characteristics	0.99*	0.83*	0.93*	0.89*
Sociopolitical Profile	0.88*	0.70*	0.86*	0.79*

*Related t-test values significant at .001 level or less.

spondents was expected to improve levels of consensus on profile items that possibly had initially lacked in the first round. The RHO coefficients presented in Table 2, however, indicate that consensus over items was strongly correlated during both rounds and, therefore, did not significantly improve in the second round. However, several respondents did make contributions in helping us add new profile items and gave us additional help in ranking, grouping, and interpreting various profiling characteristics during the second round.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We realize that our effort to profile suicide terrorists may be considered by some to be rather tentative. We also do not know whether our listing of characteristics and behaviors of such terrorists is literally reliable and valid. Scientific data on profiles of suicide terrorists are not openly available in the literature, except in selected books and articles that talk about unique historical and individual characteristics of certain terrorist groups or persons. It is difficult to check on the validity of our list by comparing it with specific terrorist individuals or groups. We do, however, feel a sense of accomplishment in being able to develop an initial profile of suicide terrorists with the help of literature as well as of seemingly interested university teachers, researchers, and community leaders who spent considerable amounts of time in selecting, ranking and grouping profile characteristics through common sense, conceptual thought and rational logic. We are confident that the Delphi procedures enabled us meaningfully to become better organized and systematic in developing the profile.

The study reported here was rather exploratory and thus has a suggestive role for explanatory and relatively more conclusive research in the future. It seems that we have probably made a start in developing a profile of suicide terrorists and are hopeful that it will build into a more comprehensive and accurate profile through continued research and application efforts in the long run. We, in the meantime, urge that our profile should be used cautiously by avoiding efforts toward overgeneralization and reductionism. Of course, we can draw implications from our findings for thought and ideas for drawing future research hypotheses. For example, it is interesting to note that our respondents considered the usage of suicide in terrorist activity as unique or at least different from what has been traditionally considered as normal suicidal behaviors. Thus, they ranked psychopathology and mental illness as being of lower importance for suicide terrorism than what had been done earlier by many suicidologists for suicide in general (Dublin 1963; Maris 1991). Other characteristics of suicide terrorists help us realize that we need to be careful before we apply concepts, such as Durkheim's (1951) 'altruistic suicide,' to interpret their behaviors as terrorism is generally a self or group centered task and may not seem to have any relevance for altruism as such. Studies (Pescosolido & Georgianna 1989) recognize that the role of religion or altruism has to be carefully interpreted in light of factors such as the degree of religious fanaticism caused by certain political factors and other aspects of social integration operating in particular religious groups or situations.

As one of the implications of this study for future research, we need to use a larger sample using the Delphi methodology. We will need to expand the scope of our sample and include in it the law enforcement agents and scholars from those countries that have been exposed to suicide terror. We will particularly need to add to the sample those individuals who have had experience in handling cases in the field and thus can use an empirical logic in addition to the conceptual or theoretical logic in developing profiles of suicide terrorists.

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