The Myth of the Myth of Martyrdom

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Abstract
Lankford asserts that suicide terrorism is attributable to suicidality. We argue in this commentary that this assertion is not well supported theoretically or empirically. In addition, we suggest that failure to acknowledge religious beliefs as motivationally causal for suicide terrorism may place innocent people at risk of murder in the service of political correctness and multiculturalism.

Main text
Lankford asserts that suicide terrorists are suicidal individuals that just happen to use terrorist organizations to execute their death wish. We propose in this commentary that this assertion is false and, moreover, may be dangerous insofar as it distracts from a more important causal factor: religious belief. Methodological inconsistencies and unsubstantiated assertions may generate an unfounded confidence that “we may understand suicide terrorists better than they understand themselves. Which means we should be able to stop them” (p. 149).

Lankford declares that we cannot trust what suicide attackers and their families say, but then supports his arguments by doing just that: directly quoting them. This double standard reflects a methodological problem that renders the evidence Lankford presents anecdotal cherry-picking. For example, Lankford discounts failed suicide terrorist Wafa’s explicitly stated desire to kill dozens of Jews, but accepts as reliable her statements that she didn’t care about politics or which terrorist organization sponsored her attack (p. 25). Lankford comments that 9/11 hijacker al Nami’s family “feared a bipolar disorder” (p. 88), apparently corroborating Lankford’s assertion that the terrorist was suicidal. Thus, despite his assertion that we cannot take terrorists or their families at their word, Lankford does precisely that.
Lankford argues that the suicide terrorists’ primary motive is suicidality. He avoids implicating religious beliefs as a cause of suicide terrorism, asserting that mention of religious motivation for these attacks promotes the terrorists’ agenda (pp. 38-39). Yet, beliefs about martyrdom and a glorious afterlife are crucial in motivating suicide terrorism. All one has to do is listen to what the terrorists say, *verbatim*. There are countless examples of suicide terrorists announcing their goal: kill many infidels, incidentally sacrificing their physical bodies, to reach paradise:

- “God would have given me paradise... It is written in the holy Quran to do jihad against the infidels” (Charlesmartel686, 2007, 1:55, 4:55).
- “Yes, I will [kill via suicide bombing]... Even if it includes my family... Those who are not taking part in Jihad are not innocent...” (Umer123khan, 2009, 1:21)
- “I wanted to be a martyr for God... God would have given me happiness in paradise.” (Rehov, 2009, 3:05).

Harris (2005) and Dawkins (2001) note what might otherwise be obvious but for political reasons is not often stated: religious beliefs motivate suicide terrorism. Currently, these are typically Islamic beliefs, which include explicit concepts of martyrdom and jihad that explain the character of suicide terrorism. Suicide bombers often receive extensive training and deploy calculated attacks that require sophisticated mental capacities and incredible courage. Dawkins raises the issue of identifying the source of this courage, and much of what we know about Islam suggests that it would be dangerous to disregard the direct link between doctrines of Islam and suicide terrorism. Lankford warns that a sponsoring terrorist organization on U.S. soil, “regardless of its ideology”, would be successful because 34,000 Americans commit suicide each year (p. 166). Local terrorist organizations are a danger—not because thousands commit suicide, but because political correctness favors pandering to religions, especially those easily offended.

The claim that, “[W]e may understand suicide terrorists better than they understand themselves” (p. 149), may be presumptuous and does not reflect a clear understanding of modern psychology. It may not be reasonable to pose hypothetical situations that require the reader to pretend to be in the suicide terrorist’s situation (e.g., pp. 1-2, 6, 46) because there are contextual factors (e.g., religious indoctrination) not available to the reader. Such mental exercises might be especially questionable if, as Lankford claims, suicide terrorists are not psychologically normal, whereas most readers are. It also might not be appropriate to speculate on what would be better to do (in hindsight) to maximize casualties (e.g., p. 25) or what others would have done in the “exact same circumstances, regardless of the odds or options” (p. 138), because that was not part of the suicide attacker’s psychology. Perhaps the person who knows best what was going through his mind is *that* person. Finally, the many references to ill-defined concepts and phenomena [e.g., “at some deeper level they know their high-risk behavior will eventually end their lives, and they are comforted by this fact” (p. 147), “even in the most desperate of situations, human beings have an amazing capacity for hope” (p. 138), “If you would really do anything to succeed... that’s not a sign of courage or commitment. It’s a sign that you lack the character and principle required for true heroism” (p. 104)] are not consistent with theoretical and empirical advances of modern psychological science.

Lankford uses emotional, hyperbolic language to promote or support claims and assertions: “The truth is out there... So let’s keep digging” (p. 63), “We need to know how to recognize the next
Mohammad Atta – before it’s too late” (p. 88). Furthermore, beyond asserting that “they simply don’t know what they’re talking about” (p. 170), Lankford frames his arguments such that those who disagree with him are spreading terrorist propaganda (e.g., pp. 38-39, 49); labeling suicide terrorists as “sacrificial” or as “martyrs” “plays directly into the hands of the terrorist leaders, increasing the power of their propaganda” (p. 8).

Lankford states that “setting the record straight is not just important for educational purposes – it’s also the best chance we have to deter future suicide terrorists” (p. 173). We agree, but there is no need to expose what is well-documented: suicide terrorists are motivated by their religious beliefs. Lankford asserts that once suicide attackers recognize they will be judged mentally ill they will “think twice” about volunteering (p. 174). This claim does not take into account the psychological stranglehold that religious indoctrination commands.

Lankford’s *Myth of Martyrdom* exposes the myth of the myth. His claim that the cause of suicide terrorism is the attackers’ suicidality and that this insight is the key to stopping terror is not substantiated theoretically or empirically. A failure to acknowledge religious beliefs as motivationally causal to suicide terrorism may place innocent people at risk of murder in the service of political correctness and multiculturalism.

**References**


