

## Apostates vs. infidels: explaining differential use of suicide bombings by jihadist groups

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This presentation addresses the question of why some jihadi groups have used suicide bombings so much more often than others. We tend to think that all jihadists blow themselves up at some point or other, but this is not the case. There were hardly any suicide attacks in Algeria and Egypt in the 1990s, and even today, most incidents are concentrated in a few areas, such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nobody has so far addressed this question, and none of the existing theories on suicide bombings seem to offer a good answer. If you take Robert Pape’s theory which says that suicide terrorism is a response to foreign occupation, then there is a real problem of accounting for attacks by transnational groups such as al-Qaida. On the other hand, the ideological argument that salafism or jihadi salafism is producing suicide attacks, does not account for the fact that jihadi salafi groups such as the GIA virtually never used suicide bombings, despite being extremely violent.

I am going to argue that the answer lies in the ideology, but not ideology in the sense that most people think about when discussing religious groups. What matters is *who the group defines as its primary enemy*, and whether that enemy is Muslim or non-Muslim. Groups who frame their struggle as being against an external enemy are more likely to undertake suicide bombings. Groups may use suicide attacks against Muslim *targets*, but nearly always in the context of a larger struggle against a non-Muslim enemy. Al-Qaida’s ideology generates suicide terrorism, not because it is salafi, but because it advocates war on a socially distant enemy. Ideologies that designate an external enemy often develop in contexts of foreign occupation, but they are not *confined* to occupied territories. The bottom line is that both Assaf Moghadam and Robert Pape are partially right: it’s about ideology, but the ideology thrives on occupation.

My talk is divided into four parts. I start by describing briefly the extent of the variation we’re trying to explain. Then I examine three sets of explanations from the existing literature about why groups use suicide missions. In the third part I present my own hypothesis in detail. Finally I test my hypothesis and discuss the outcome.

Before I begin, I want to thank Assaf Moghadam for sharing his dataset on suicide bombings with me. It is easily the best one available: it has 1945 incidents and takes us all the way through from 1981 to mid-2008.

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Let me start with some metrics on the puzzle with which we are dealing.

In his book, Assaf Moghadam shows that the phenomenon of suicide terrorism has transformed over the past seven years. The number of attacks has skyrocketed, the tactic has spread

geographically, and Islamist groups have overtaken secular groups such as the Tamil Tigers as the leading perpetrators of suicide attacks. There has been what Moghadam rightly calls a “globalization of martyrdom.”

At the same time, it is a very uneven globalization. Geographically speaking, 82 percent of the increase (1612) from March 2003 to July 2008 has occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the group level we see that four groups are responsible for 64 percent of all recorded attacks by Islamist groups. Of the 41 Islamist groups identified as perpetrators, only nine carried out more than ten attacks (see figure 1).

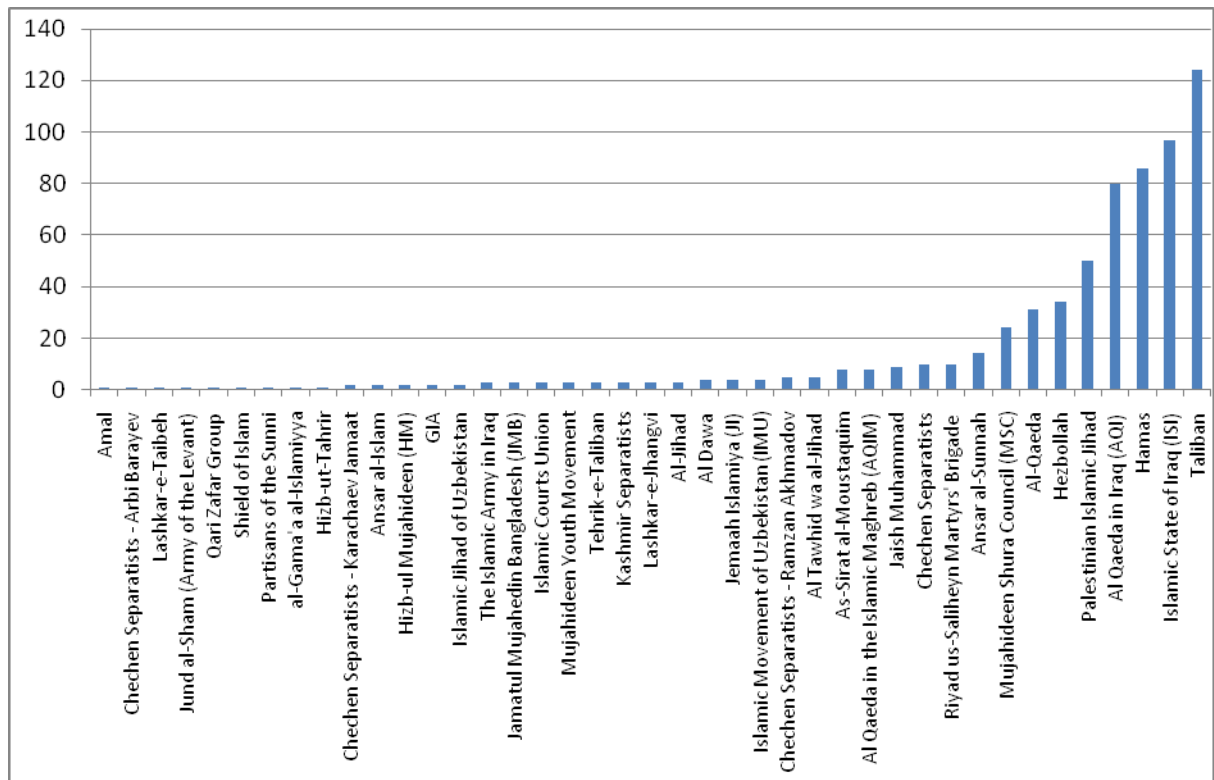


Figure 1: Islamist groups' use of suicide bombings

More interesting, but also more difficult to measure, is the variation in the *relative* use of suicide attacks by individual groups. The central al-Qaida organization has used nothing *but* suicide attacks since 1998. By contrast, the Algerian groups GIA and GSPC, responsible for hundreds if not thousands of violent acts, almost never used suicide attacks. How can we make sense of this variation?

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I am going to consider three sets of explanations drawn from the existing literature. The first focuses on *resources*, the second on *conflict structures*, and the third on *ideology*.

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Let's start with resource-based explanations. I will consider three of these.

The first covers groups that have uneven access to *human resources* because of some socio-economic characteristic of the recruitment pool. Perhaps groups in poor countries use more suicide terrorism because poverty has widened the recruitment pool. Perhaps it's the other way around - that groups in more developed countries use more suicide terrorism because they have access to better cadres.

Two problems arise. First, studies of individual militants show no clear correlation between specific socio-economic characteristics and recruitment to either terrorism in general or suicide missions in particular. Even if there was such a link, it would still not explain variation at the group level, because there is not the slightest correlation between group use of suicide terrorism and GDP per capita in the home country of that group (figure 2).

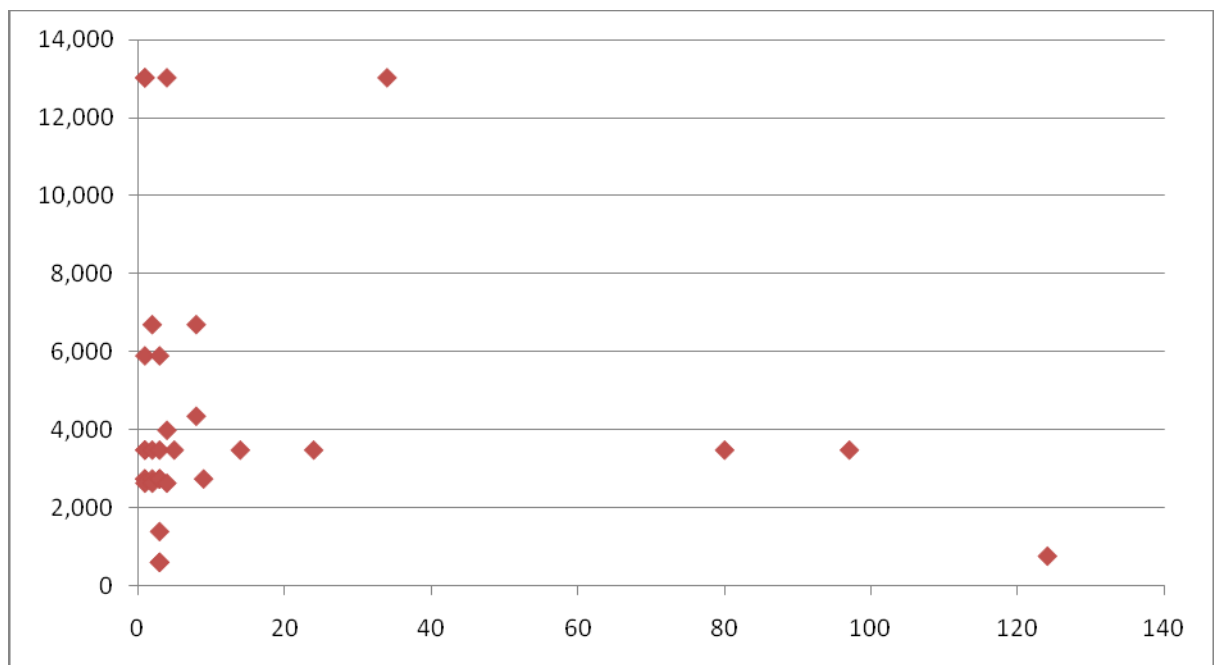


Figure 2: Country GDP and Islamist group use of suicide bombings

The second possible explanation is that groups have uneven access to the *material resources* needed to produce suicide terrorism. Groups with a safe haven and money might be better placed to set up the infrastructure needed to socialize recruits into becoming suicide bombers. This explanation is difficult to assess. Most groups have *some* kind of safe haven and *some* money, but finding precise metrics is extremely difficult. There is anecdotal evidence against a correlation. The GIA did have a safe haven but didn't use suicide terror. Al-Qaida carried out most of its suicide attacks after it *lost* its safe haven in Afghanistan.

The third explanation is that there is a threshold of expertise needed to produce substantial numbers of suicide bombers which only some groups reach. Those groups that acquire it perfect it, while others give up, leading to a polarization in the distribution of attacks.

This explanation is appealing but difficult to verify, because it is not quite clear what kind of expertise would be needed and it is not clear what would determine the differential distribution of these resources.

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A second set of explanations would focus on the *structure of the conflicts* in which groups are involved. I will consider three explanations.

The first explanation focuses on the level of asymmetry. Eli Berman and David Laitin have argued that suicide attacks are more likely to be used in conflicts where conditions for regular insurgency are difficult, i.e. the more asymmetric the conflict, the higher the likelihood of suicide terror.

This explanation is also very hard to test because it is difficult to measure and compare asymmetry. Moreover, Berman and Laitin's claim about the inverse relationship between insurgency and suicide terror is largely invalidated by recent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, where suicide bombings are used extensively *alongside* regular insurgency tactics.

The second explanation suggests that religious difference between a group and its targets facilitates the use of SMs. This is another idea from Berman and Laitin, who used their own dataset to conclude that "89.9 percent of the suicide attacks were aimed at victims whose religion was different from the attackers".

The problem is that Berman and Laitin's dataset was very small and ended in 2002. Since then there have been hundreds of attacks on Muslim targets in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. I haven't done the maths yet, but I am almost certain their claim no longer holds.

I should mention that the precise calculations would vary depending on how one classifies sectarian violence, which has been very common in Iraq. Shiites are technically Muslims, but Sunni militants do not view them as such. Also, security forces are often Shiites (and even when they are not, Sunni militants may think they are). This makes coding a tricky task.

The third possible explanation is that there are different ideal types of conflict, and that struggles against foreign occupation generate more suicide attacks than other conflict types. This is basically the Pape argument.

If we test Pape's theory on Moghadam's dataset, we find that 88 percent of all suicide attacks in history occurred in contexts of occupation (Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Russia/Chechnya). We also find that 59 percent (24) of all Islamist groups identified as SM perpetrators came from areas under occupation, and that these groups were responsible for 88 percent (567) of incidents by Islamists.

These numbers are significant, but they are by no means unequivocal. The fact that 12 percent of all attacks are not accounted for is problematic, especially since this 12 percent includes many of the most deadly and spectacular attacks in recent years.

However, most important is the problem of determining the relative use of suicide attacks by groups in each category, because of the lack of a precise picture of the universe of violent actions by the same groups. For example, we know that all of al-Qaida Central's attacks have been suicide attacks, yet it does not originate in a territory under literal occupation. (What you have in Saudi Arabia is not an objective occupation but a subjective one).

At the same time, the occupation factor should not be dismissed, and I do think that Pape is putting his finger on something important. As I shall explain below, there is a very strong focus on liberation of territory in al-Qaida's discourse and al-Qaida's ideology may be considered a form of macro-nationalism fuelled by resistance to non-Muslim occupations of Muslim territory more generally. However, this involves a broadening of the notion of occupation which Pape's theory, as it stands, cannot incorporate.

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The third type of explanation is that suicide terrorism is associated with a particular subcurrent of radical Islamist ideology which only some groups have adopted. Scott Atran, Assaf Moghadam and others have linked the proliferation of suicide terrorism to the diffusion of a suicide-generating religious ideology. Moghadam has argued that “the main reason for the global spread of suicide missions lies in two related and mutually reinforcing phenomena: al-Qaida’s transition into a global terrorist actor and the growing appeal of its guiding ideology, salafi jihad.”

Moghadam, of course, was concerned with a different question than the one we are dealing with here. He was trying to explain the diffusion of suicide bombings, and I think offers a much more convincing explanation than Pape, who says it is all about tactical learning. He also stresses the fact that he is not making a causal claim, which I think is appropriate. It is very difficult to prove a causal link between salafi jihadism and suicide terrorism, for three reasons.

First is the problem of defining the terms salafi and jihadi salafi. These terms are widely used in the literature, but it is almost impossible to find a clear definition that allows us to say precisely which actors are salafi/salafi jihadi and which are not. The one that Moghadam presents in his book is the most rigorous I have seen, but it still produces some coding choices that many would dispute.

The second problem is that even if we accept Moghadam’s definition, there is still not a very clear correlation between salafi jihadism and suicide terrorism. Salafi jihadi groups were only responsible for 51 percent (311) of all suicide attacks by Sunni groups between 1981 and 2008. (The real number is probably higher, because of many unknown perpetrators in Iraq, but probably not high enough to make a big difference). Without a precise picture of the universe of attacks by Sunni groups, this figure says very little about the role of salafi jihadism in generating suicide attacks.

The third and more serious problem is that there is very significant chronological and inter-group variation in the use of suicide bombings by groups within the salafi jihadi category. If jihadi salafism produces suicide terrorism, why did jihadi salafi groups carry out hardly any SMS in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s? (In this period there were many groups that people would label salafi jihadi, especially in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Saudi Arabia).

Overall, I find that none of the existing explanations offers a satisfactory answer to the question.

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So I am going to propose a new hypothesis which focuses on the relationship between a group and its declared enemy. This is fundamentally an ideological argument, but it is one that emphasizes the political over the theological dimensions of ideology.

The idea is that different jihadi ideologies have different enemy hierarchies, and that those ideologies that designate a non-Muslim main enemy tend to produce more self-sacrificial behavior among their followers.

My starting assumption is that militant groups fight for different things. I have previously argued that there are five ideal types of militant activism: revolutionary, vigilantist, sectarian, irredentist, and pan-Islamist. Table 1 lists these ideal types together with associated hypotheses regarding their use of suicide bombings.

Type	Primary Enemy	Social distance to enemy	Discursive theme	Propensity for SMs	Martyrdom culture
<b>Revolutionary</b>	Regime	low	Corruption of the ruler	Low	weak
<b>Vigilantist</b>	Sinful Muslims	low	Moral depravity of society	Low	weak
<b>Sectarian</b>	Shiites	varies	Treason of the Shiites	varies	varies
<b>Irredentist</b>	Local occupier	high	Suffering of the nation	High	strong
<b>Pan-Islamist</b>	West/non-Muslims	high	Suffering of the umma	High	strong

Table 1: Ideal type rationales for violent Islamist activism

*Revolutionaries* fight for state power against a Muslim regime perceived as illegitimate. *Vigilantists* use violence to correct the moral behaviour of fellow Muslims. *Sectarians* kill to intimidate and marginalise the competing sect. *Irredentists* fight for a specific territory against a local non-Muslim occupier, while *Pan-Islamists* fight to defend the entire Islamic nation and its territories from external aggression.

Two important points should be made. First, these are ideal type rationales, and most actors work to promote several or all of these agendas at the same time. However, at any given time, all actors have one rationale which is stronger than the other four. The dominant rationale shapes the priorities of the actor and determines the direction and form of most of its violence.

The second point is that the constellation of rationales in an actor’s ideology is dynamic. The ideology may change over time to become more or less socio-revolutionary or more or less pan-Islamist.

How do we determine an actor’s dominant rationale? Mainly from his discourse. Sometimes the enemy hierarchy is explicitly stated. At other times we have to deduce it from the dominant discursive theme or frame in the groups’ statements. Each rationale has an accompanying ideal-type discursive theme or “frame”. For example, the revolutionary discursive theme is the mismanagement of the Muslim ruler. Revolutionary discourse includes examples of oppression, torture and corruption, as well as the secularism and hypocrisy displayed by the local regime. The pan-Islamist discourse focuses on the external threat to the life and territories of all Muslims. Pan-Islamists offer lists of examples of non-Muslim infringements on Muslim territory and symbols of Muslim suffering at the hands of non-Muslim. So for example, when a group - over time - talks more about Palestine, Chechnya and Kashmir than it does about poverty and corruption in its home country, we can assume that the pan-Islamist rationale is dominant. I stress *over time* because groups can vary their rhetoric for opportunistic reasons.

There is a lot one can do with this framework, but what matters here is how socially distant the enemy is. We can sort these ideal types into two categories – which I call nationalist and non-nationalist - according to whether the main enemy is Muslim or non-Muslim. So, irredentism and pan-Islamism are nationalist type ideologies, while revolutionary Islamism and vigilantism are

non-nationalist types. Put very simply, nationalists fight the outside invaders, non-nationalists fight the corrupt insiders. Sectarianism represents an intermediary category.

My hypothesis, then, is that groups with nationalist type jihadi ideologies are more likely to undertake suicide bombings.

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To test this hypothesis, I adopted an approach similar to that used by Moghadam. I coded groups according to my typology and measured their suicide terrorist activity. This is how I sorted the groups. I am sure you don't agree with everything, but we can discuss specifics in the Q&A.

<b>Pan-Islamist</b>	<b>Irredentist</b>	<b>Sectarian</b>	<b>Revolutionary</b>
Al-Qaeda	Islamic Courts Union	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi	al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya
As-Sirat al-Moustaquim	Mujahideen Youth Movement		GIA
Al Tawhid wa al-Jihad	Tehrik-e-Taliban		Al-Jihad
Jund al-Sham (Army of the Levant)	Al Dawa		Hizb-ut-Tahrir
Jemaah Islamiya	Hezbollah		Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
Hizb-ul Mujahideen	Chechen Separatists		Islamic Jihad of Uzbekistan
Al Qaeda in Iraq	Kashmir Separatists		Jamatul Mujahedin Bangladesh
Islamic State of Iraq	Palestinian Islamic Jihad		
Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	Amal		
Mujahideen Shura Council	Jaish Muhammad		
	Taliban		
	Hamas		
	Ansar al-Sunnah		
	The Islamic Army in Iraq		
	Riyad us-Saliheyn Martyrs' Brigade		
	Ansar al-Islam		
	Lashkar-e-Taibeh		

*Table 2: Islamist perpetrators of suicide bombings sorted by dominant rationale*

Figures 3 and 4 show what I found:

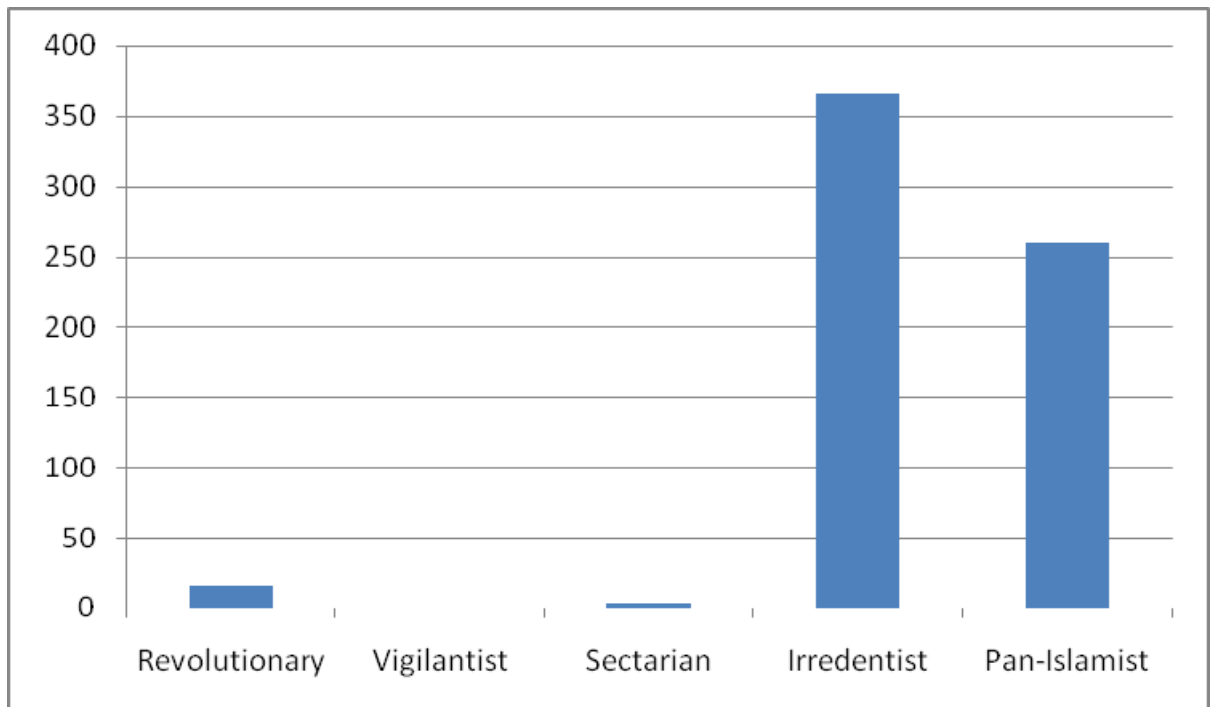


Figure 3: Suicide bombings by Islamist groups sorted by dominant rationale

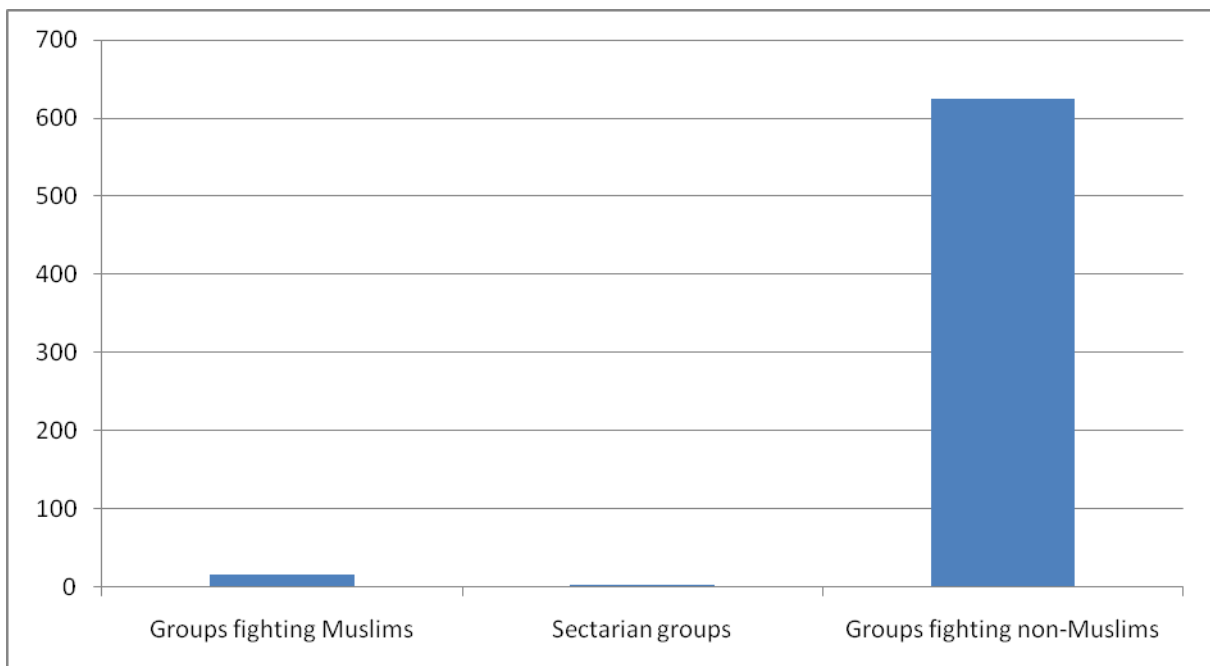


Figure 4: Suicide bombings by Islamist groups sorted by nature of primary enemy

What these figures suggest is that groups fighting non-Muslims have historically undertaken around 40 times more suicide bombings than have groups fighting Muslims. Of course, this fact alone means very little. I am well aware of the point made by Scott Ashworth and others that in order to make robust causal claims about suicide terrorism, we need a detailed picture of the

universe of actions – not just the suicide attacks – by these groups. The problem is that such data does not exist and is unlikely to exist in the foreseeable future. However, I think that there may be a way around this obstacle, and I'll get there in a second.

Bear with me as I go into some detail. Of the 1945 incidents in the Moghadam dataset, only 16 were attributed to revolutionary groups. However, there are good reasons to believe that at least four of these incidents were in fact not suicide bombings. I have looked closely at the newspaper coverage of the attacks from the 1990s, and in three cases, the driver's death seems to have been unintentional, and in one (Peshawar Dec. 1995), I was simply unable to find any reports mentioning a suicide operative.

If we take away these four misreportings we are left with 12 incidents. One could also argue that the IMU operation in Tashkent in 2004 with four simultaneous bombers should count as one incident and not four as in the dataset. If we do that we are left with nine attacks by revolutionary groups in the entire history of suicide bombings.

These details matter because if the number is close to zero, we arguably do not need the universe of acts committed by these groups to establish a correlation. Given the very large number of attacks by Egyptian and Algerian militants in the 1990s, the proportion of suicide attacks in these groups' attack record is most likely negligible. We may not be able to quantify the precise correlation between nationalist type ideologies and suicide bombings, but we can say with a very high degree of certainty that groups fighting non-Muslims are more likely to use suicide bombings than groups fighting Muslims.

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Another point that I want to highlight is that there are many examples groups that increased their use of suicide bombings after adopting a more nationalist type ideology.

This was notably the case with the GSPC in Algeria, which first began using suicide bombings in 2007, after changing its name to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and adopting a markedly more pan-Islamist rhetoric.

Similarly, the Indonesian group Jemaah Islamiya began as a revolutionary organization but turned pan-Islamist in the early 2000s, only to undertake major suicide attacks from 2002 onward.

The Islamic Courts Union in Somalia is another example. It had existed as a revolutionary group since the 1990s, but only launched suicide bombings in November 2006, five months *after* Ethiopia invaded (with strong US support) and after it had adopted a more pan-Islamist rhetoric.

This is very important because it suggests that the dynamic we are dealing with is primarily ideological, and not material or structural. The propensity to use suicide bombings follows the ideology, and groups can adopt nationalist type ideologies regardless of their original grievances or material situation.

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Now, of course, things are not crystal clear. I can see two major objections to this argument.

The first is that many of the groups that I call pan-Islamist direct their suicide attacks against Muslim targets. To this I have three responses.

First of all, I distinguish analytically between a group's principal declared enemy and the targets of its operations. To say that a group fighting non-Muslims is more likely to undertake suicide bombings does not necessarily mean that those operations will be directed against non-Muslims. In fact, in some contexts, such as Iraq, Pakistan or Afghanistan, a majority of suicide attacks are directed against Muslim targets.

My second point is that this behavior can be largely explained with the logic of collaboration. Groups involved in a struggle against non-Muslim enemies will attack Muslim targets in order to punish or deter collaboration with the outside enemy.

You might think that I am twisting the evidence here, but this is a dynamic that is well known from other contexts. The IRA, for example, directed much if not most of its violence against fellow Irish Catholics. In the 1980s and 1990s, Palestinians killed more suspected collaborators than Israelis. Yet nobody would suggest that the IRA and the PLO were not nationalist movements that saw the British Government and Israel as their main respective enemies.

In most of the cases where Islamist suicide bombings are directed frequently against Muslim targets, there is a non-Muslim enemy nearby. If you look at the way in which suicide bombings against government targets are justified in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc, it is nearly always on the basis of treason and collaboration. We can assume that if there was no external enemy nearby, it would be much more difficult to legitimize these attacks.

My third point is that in most cases of suicide attacks on Muslim targets, they occur late in the group's campaign. This was the case in Iraq, in Saudi Arabia, Algeria Yemen and Pakistan. In most of these cases, militants began attacking the government because non-Muslim targets became much harder to reach and because the government started going after the militants.

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The second objection consists of pointing out the variation in the use of suicide bombings among nationalist type groups. For example, one could argue that it is unfair to highlight the absence of suicide bombings in 1990s Algeria and Egypt when there were no attacks in Afghanistan, Bosnia or Chechnya in the same period. This is a legitimate objection, but it can be addressed by viewing suicide bombings as part of a set of self-sacrificial behaviours that includes the cultivation of martyrs and quasi-suicidal operations.

It is true that there were no suicide bombings in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, but here you had very elaborate cultures for the celebration of martyrs fallen in battle. You did not have a similar culture in the Egyptian and Algerian groups of the 1980s and 1990s.

My second point is that many nationalist type groups that do not engage in suicide bombings do use quasi-suicidal tactics such as raids in which the attackers' chances of survival are extremely small. I don't have firm data on this but anecdotal evidence suggest they do this to a greater extent than do revolutionaries. A number of the Arab operations in 1980s' Afghanistan and 1990s' Bosnia fall into this category. The best example is Lashkar al-Tayyiba, which perfected the tactic of quasi-suicidal raids against the Indians from 1999 onwards.

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I am going to conclude very briefly by saying that there are certainly limits to the external enemy hypothesis, but it does a better job than the other explanations in accounting for variation.

Those Islamist groups that use suicide bombings do so not because they are under occupation, nor because they are jihadi salafi, but because their ideology designates a socially distant enemy.

Now, the precise reasons why this is the case – how the mechanism works – is an issue for further research. I think there may be two deeper causes. One is nationalist altruism. There is some evidence that conflicts framed in nationalist terms generate more self sacrificial behavior. It's a very simple idea: people fight harder when they are facing an outside enemy. The other underlying cause is theology. It may be that the classical Islamic tradition contains elements which make it more difficult to award martyrdom status to a Muslim killed in combat against other Muslims. So when groups are fighting non-Muslims, they can more easily resort to the apparatus of classical martyrology. I suspect that this theological tradition is in itself a proxy for nationalist altruism, but this of course is speculation.

The bottom line is that I think Moghadam is right in saying that the diffusion of suicide attacks is driven by ideology. If the tactic has spread, it is primarily because groups with nationalist type ideologies are becoming stronger and more numerous. The question of *why these ideologies are spreading* is a different matter, and here I think Pape is on to something important. The fact that you have had more non-Muslim military interventions in the Muslim world has probably helped such ideologies gain traction.