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The Suicide Bomber as a Medium of Terrorist Communication:

A Contribution from Social Systems Theory

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Abstract

This paper examines how suicide bombers are framed in terrorist communication, focusing on the empirical case of al-Qaeda's suicide campaigns. Relying on the concept of media of communication in social systems theory and on signaling theory, three main communicative levels of terrorist propaganda underlying the representation of suicide bombers are identified. First, on the level of power, armed organizations aim to coerce and deter their enemy by staging a complex set of communicative forms that signal their militants' determination and resolve. Second, on the level of influence, armed groups exploit the symbolic qualities of suicide missions to gain support from a presumed constituency by referring to suicide attackers' reputation and their ultimate sacrifice for a superior cause. Finally, by combining references to values and influence, bombers' behavior and last wills are used as recruitment tools to attract new fighters by appealing to principles rooted in the prestige of martyrs. All of these communicative forms support the hypothesis that the representation of heroism and martyrdom is a crucial component of suicide terrorism. The synergy between the psychological impact of costly actions like suicide missions and the suggestive framings exalting the military, moral and religious qualities of attackers constitutes a sophisticated weapon of a more recent asymmetric warfare involving radical Islamist organizations. From this perspective, suicide terrorism should be analyzed as a combat method conducted not only on a military, but also on a psychological level.

Keywords

Al-Qaeda; Martyrdom; Medium and form; Radical Islamism; Signaling theory; Suicide terrorism; Social systems theory; Symbolic media of interchange.

Introduction

This paper examines the communicative logic behind the representation of suicide attackers as a propagandistic aspect strictly coupled with and aimed at amplifying the consequences at the military level of suicide missions, focusing on al-Qaeda suicide campaigns. The main objective is to offer a framework to understand the process of terrorist framing of suicide bombers as an integral and crucial part of the so-called 'strategic logic' of suicide terrorism. Generally, scholars argue that terrorism, including suicide missions, is contingent on an imbalance of power, that is, on an asymmetry of resources and combatants between armed groups and their enemies. This argument suggests that tactics such as suicide attacks compensate for such disproportion (Kushner, 2003, pp 54-56; Boyns and Ballard, 2004; Münkler, 2005; Thornton, 2007; US Army-Marine Corps, 2007). Terrorist leaders are thus viewed as rational actors who select combat methods that are expected to provide the desired type and degree of damage to be inflicted on the enemy, relative to the costs of resources (including militants) for military operations (della Porta, 1995; Crenshaw, 1998; Kalyvas, 2006).

Adopting suicide attacks is usually linked to several presumed 'technical' advantages: great damage with fewer combatants and casualties, compared with higher casualties caused by 'traditional' guerrilla warfare; disguised bombers' ability to enter heavily defended locations that are difficult to destroy using 'conventional' attacks; bombers' capacity to modify direction to maximize casualties (in this sense, bombers are truly intelligent weapons); the impossibility, for the enemy, of obtaining information from attackers, except when they have second thoughts or are captured; and, finally, the minimal cost of attacker training (Hoffman, 2003; Gambetta, 2005; Pape, 2005; Pedahzur, 2005;

Hafez, 2007; Ayers, 2008; Hassan, 2008; Moghadam, 2008). In certain contexts, a further incentive to launch suicide attacks could be the low cost of bombers, as in the Sunnis' campaign in Iraq since 2003, thanks to a plentiful supply of volunteers from the Middle East and Northern Africa (Cordesman, 2008; CTC, 2007, 2008; Gambetta, 2006; Hafez, 2007; Hegghammer, 2007; Tosini, 2010; Acosta, 2016).

Such technical peculiarities are certainly decisive in destroying hard targets like military barracks and armored vehicles and highly defended locations such as police stations and government buildings. The question, then, is why certain organizations such as the Sunni insurgents in Iraq have adopted suicide missions (instead of other tactics) against soft targets, especially among the Iraqi Shiite population, when other methods could have massacred unarmed civilians without the cost of sacrificing militants as bombers (Hafez, 2007). As Anthony H. Cordesman suggested,

> It was not always clear that suicide-bombing techniques were tactically necessary. In many cases, timed devices could produce the same damage. Events in Iraq showed, however, that suicide bombers had a major psychological impact and gained exceptional media attention. They also came to serve as symbols of dedication and commitment, could be portrayed as a form of Islamic martyrdom, and attracted more political support and attention among those sympathetic to the cause involved (Cordesman, 2008, pp. 652).

Consequently, other properties of suicide terrorism should be considered beyond their military advantages. Generally speaking, armed groups aim to terrorize and influence one or more main targets or audiences behind their direct targets (i.e., victims) by combining demonstrative acts and symbolic messages (Jenkins, 1976; Schmid & Jongman, 1988; Horgan, 2005; Schmid, 2011; Tosini, 2012, 2015). Likewise, using suicide bombers has to do with a variety of psychological consequences in addition to their military impacts (Hoffman & McCormick, 2004). Of course, such effects are amplified by the greater efficacy of suicide attacks (compared with other tactics) in creating spectacular operations, which, in turn, attract mass media attention. For example, data on

suicide attacks in Iraq discussed by Nick Ayers (2008, pp. 87) show that "if a spectacular incident occurs, it is more likely a result of a suicide attack than a conventional one".

These psychological aspects require analyzing terrorist acts, including suicide missions, in terms of their communicative features. More specifically, a comprehensive analysis should take into account both signaling qualities of violent actions and symbolic contents associated with language and other signs employed in terrorist communiqués. Indeed, both the self-sacrificial behaviors of fighters involved in suicide missions and messages such as bombers' last wills are often combined because of an assumption of their expected ability to convey certain psychological effects that are instrumental to terrorist campaigns. Here, our attention is directed to representations of attackers and their identity as orchestrated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, which have been involved in a significant number of suicide bombings in the most recent wave of contemporary terrorism, especially in the context of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq since 2003 against Anglo-American forces and their Shiite allies. We also refer to the 2005 London attacks, the first and probably paradigmatic case of suicide bombings in Europe, which are part of the same global pan-Islamic jihad launched by al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups in connection with international military operations following the September 11 incidents. Drawing on empirical evidence such as martyrdom videos and biographical accounts of bombers, we explore why al-Qaeda selects certain modalities depicting militants and how they aim to impact several audiences.

We conceptualize fighters' highly symbolic behaviors and their identities assembled in such videos and other documents as communicative forms exploited by armed groups to provoke emotions and to signal political and religious meanings. This analysis relies on the conceptualization of media of communication in social systems theory (Section "Media and Forms in Terrorist Communication"). Additionally, we turn to signaling theory to show how those communicative forms attempt to exert pressure on three main audiences, based on distinctive features of bombers: coercing the enemy and its community or causing them to overreact (Section "Symbolic Asymmetric Warfare"); inducing

the insurgents' presumed constituency to trust and support the armed struggle and attracting potential recruits as bombers (Section "Propaganda by Martyrs"). Overall, the paper aims to support the hypothesis that suicide terrorism should be analyzed as a combat method conducted not only on a military, but also on symbolic and psychological levels.

Media and Forms in Terrorist Communication

Our main hypothesis is that meanings associated with actions and identities of fighters recruited as suicide attackers might be theorized as communicative forms constructed and staged by armed groups to affect perception of different kinds of actors, namely the terrorists' enemy, constituency, and other possible recruits. They are forms relying on a huge number of potential combinations of empirical possibilities derived from available suicide attackers and their symbolic qualities. In this sense, the figure of a suicide bomber constitutes a *specific case* of a reservoir of elements endowed with symbolic contents and employed for communicative purposes. Following systems theory, any reservoir with these general characteristics can be conceptualized as a medium of communication.

The concept of medium originally derives from the contribution of neurophysiology (Heider, 2005 [1927]; see also Luhmann, 2000 [1995], 2012 [1997]) and refers to *a set of elements whose (re)combinations generate forms of the same nature*, such as the empirical case of images registered within a nervous system, reproduced on the basis of light waves. Social systems theory identifies two main kinds of media: *the physical-chemical medium of life* and *the symbolic medium of meaning*, which give rise to respective forms within biological systems and nervous systems, on the one hand, and within psychic systems and social systems, on the other (Luhmann, 1990, 2013 [2002]). *The medium of meaning embraces all potential references to symbolic contents* that both psychic systems and social systems can actualize in their operations (i.e., cognitive processes and communications, respectively). *Language can also be analyzed as a medium*. Its elements are signs of varying origin (e.g., sounds in oral communication, and letters in the case of writing) endowed

with meaning, which combine and bring about forms such as words, sentences, and texts (Luhmann, 1995 [1984], 2000 [1995], 2012 [1997]; Esposito, 2004; Tosini, 2006).

On a specific level of communication, the person of a suicide attacker can be conceptualized as a medium. It consists of a variety of meaningful elements (such as the militants' self-sacrificial behaviors and symbols related to their military and religious status), whose manipulation and combination by armed organizations gives rise to forms of terrorist communication to pursue political objectives (Cook & Allison, 2007). Such forms are coherently part of and organized into more comprehensive narratives or framings describing terrorists' enemies, purposes, and beliefs (Snow & Byrd, 2007). In the case of the al-Qaeda network, on the one hand, bombers' identities are framed within a pan-Islamic nationalism (or supra-nationalism), dictating violent campaigns in defense of Islamic countries (e.g., Afghanistan and Iraq) against military occupation, exploitation, or political interference by foreign oppressors (particularly Israel, the US, and their allies), while appealing to the religious duty of all Muslims to concretely place Islamic solidarity in the service of their fellow Muslims (Bin Laden *et al.*, 2005 [1998]; Sageman, 2004; Al-Zayyat, 2004; Gerges, 2005; Pape, 2005; Hegghammer, 2007, 2010; Lacroix, 2008; Riedel, 2008; Tosini, 2009).

On the other hand, attackers are framed as noble and extraordinary figures according to the radical conception of martyrs. A culture of martyrdom, which has justified numerous organizations in the last three decades – for example, Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, and al-Qaeda and its affiliates – derives from complex and radical interpretations of Islamic thought (for a more comprehensive analysis of martyrdom, see Denaro, 2006; Cook, 2007). Whereas numerous scholars trace the origins of this culture back to Sunni thinkers such as Taqi Al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, and Sayyid Qutb, more recent accounts identify other sources in certain Shiite interpreters, especially since the 1960s, such as Ruhollah Khomeini, Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (Freamon, 2003). These Shiite sources were crucial in justifying not only the wave of young Iranian 'martyrs' during the Iran-Iraq war of the

1980s (Reuter, 2004), but also the suicide attacks by Hezbollah in the 1980s and 1990s (Kramer, 1998). These developments also had a decisive impact on Sunni extremists, such as Hamas and al-Qaeda (Cook, 2005, 2007; Cook & Allison, 2007). Today, despite differences between the Shiite and Sunni radical conceptions, both traditions generally conceive of jihad and martyrdom against enemies such as foreign powers as a legitimate resistance and a religious duty in the path of Allah (Khosrokhavar, 2009).

In this context, the suicide behaviors of fighters, as well as their last wills and other biographical documents concerning their identity, are strategically worked out by terrorist groups to function as 'weapons' of a symbolic and psychological asymmetric warfare accompanying organizational activities on the military level of suicide attacks. *Armed actors rationally engage in framing suicide bombers and rely on certain communicative forms to signal messages aimed at constraining a variety of audiences.* Indeed, achieving certain effects not only through demonstrative acts but also through the symbols of language and other signs constitutes the typical and distinctive logic of terrorists' *modus operandi* (Jenkins 1976; Schmid & Jongman 1988; Horgan, 2005; Schmid 2011; Tosini, 2012). To make their use and representation of suicide bombers effective, armed groups such as al-Qaeda should select and work on communicative forms (based on militants' meaningful behaviors and identities) according to specific strategies: the communicative strategies of power, influence, and values, which correspond to the three audiences examined here (i.e., terrorists' enemy, the terrorists' constituency, and other possible recruits, respectively). Power, influence, and values, too, are media – we call them *symbolic media of interchange* (according to Parsons, 1963, 1968, 1969, 1975) – and consist of specific social mechanisms that, at the level of interactions between the ego and alter, condition communication and impact the alter's motivations (see also Luhmann, 1976, 1995 [1984], 2012 [1997]; Prandini, 1998; Gould, 2001; Chernilo, 2002; Tosini, 2006).

To various degrees, power, influence, and values (i.e., 'value-commitments', as termed by Parsons) parallel the use of money (in this sense, they might be treated as functionally equivalent to currency). Forms of money are payments, i.e., combinations of symbols, displayed by the ego to the alter, to signal economic credit. Likewise, all other symbolic media of interchange are based on corresponding linguistic and non-verbal signs (emitted by the ego), whose couplings give birth to their own communicative forms (directed to the alter). They are: claims and symbols of force and political authority associated with the emission of commands (in the case of power); expressions and symbols of solidarity and common identities and interests (influence); and claims and symbols of moral sentiments and moral authority accompanying appeals to fulfill certain norms or values (value-commitments).

Of importance, symbolic media of interchange enter social interactions in a more specific way than those linguistic acts meant simply to transmit information from the ego to the alter. Rather, in the case of symbolic media of interchange, information is modeled according to certain combinations of signs (i.e., the forms of symbolic media) aimed at *exerting pressure on the alter*: "Such mechanisms", Parsons (1963, pp. 43) argues, "are ways of structuring intentional attempts to bring about results by eliciting the response of other actors to approaches, suggestions, etc.". These media can nonetheless be distinguished by the ways they exert pressure. A typology might be proposed by crisscrossing two variables (see figure 1), as follows: the first, called 'channel', refers to the possibilities of either controlling the situation in which the alter acts or affecting his or her intentions independently of changes in his or her situation; The second, the kind of sanctions the media use, focuses on the positive or negative consequences the alter faces.

Figure 1: A typology of symbolic media of interchange (based on Parsons, 1963, 1968, 1969, 1975)

Sanction / Channel		Intentional	Situational
Positive	Mode	Persuasion	Inducement
	Medium	INFLUENCE	MONEY
Negative	Mode	Activation of commitments	Deterrence
	Medium	VALUE-COMMITMENTS	POWER

This typology characterizes media of interchange as *devices specialized in the symbolic reference to the potential use of certain (positive or negative) sanctions via a dimension (i.e., situational or intentional channel) of the individual sphere.* Money operates by inducement, depending on the receiver's (i.e., the alter) confidence about obtaining desired goods in the future. Power succeeds by deterring the alter from refusing compliance with the ego's commands because of the potential

negative consequences, with physical coercion as one of the most frequent. The ego exerts influence on the alter when the latter conforms to the former's expectations because of the alter's confidence in the ego's solidarity. Finally, the case of value-commitments identifies those circumstances in which obligations are fulfilled by activating the alter's aversion to certain emotions, such as shame and guilt, that might be caused by disregarding given values or principles. In this sense, the relative success of such media is a measure of utility (in the case of money), effectiveness (power), solidarity (influence), and moral integrity (value-commitments) achieved through the social interactions involving the ego and alter.

Apart from those institutional and organized contexts (e.g., the modern economy and the modern state) to which the theory of symbolic media of interchange is commonly applied, we think that the same theory can be extended to the analysis of terrorist communication. Our hypothesis is that the basic micro-mechanisms at the level of social interactions underlying the functioning of such media are also at work in the case of political communication exploiting actions and identities of suicide attackers. As illustrated below, *terrorist communication follows the modalities of symbolic media of interchange while selecting their specific strategies to model communicative forms concerning actions and representations of suicide bombers.* Terrorist organizations communicate according to the media of power, influence, and values, which serve to amplify and enforce the potential of the highly symbolic status embodied by the self-sacrificial behavior of their fighters, while attempting to impress the enemy and its community, the terrorists' constituency, and potential recruits.

Symbolic Asymmetric Warfare: Addressing the Enemy and Its Community

As far as the enemy is concerned, terrorist communication follows the logic of the symbolic medium of power while exploiting the extraordinary military qualities of suicide attackers. Generally speaking, armed organizations are rational actors, who aim to coerce their enemy.

Relying on certain combat methods (instead of other tactics) depends on calculations concerning their capacity to achieve given political goals more efficiently. This instrumental rationality refers to leaders' and other militants' subjective decision-making and, as such, can be affected by shortcomings that prevent the maximization of their lines of action (with respect this conception of subjective and bounded rationality, see Elster, 2007; Boudon, 2009). Nonetheless, we hypothesize the existence of criteria of rationality that inspire terrorists as they search for adequate means in the service of their strategic objectives. For example, Sheikh Nawwaf al-Takruri underlines (originally in 1997 with reference to the Palestinian suicide campaigns against Israel) the advantages of the 'martyrdom operations' as follows:

1) They are a deterrent by means of causing terror among the enemy.
2) They cause the highest number of casualties on the part of the enemy with the fewest number of casualties on the part of the Muslims.
3) They equalize what would otherwise be unequal conflicts (such as that against Israel).
4) They cause the Israeli to think twice before perpetrating crimes against the Palestinians.
5) They cause happiness and fortitude to enter into the hearts of the Muslims, and despair to enter into the enemies.
6) They give the Muslim community the spirit of jihad and martyrdom, and cause Muslims to focus upon fighters and martyrs examples rather than other popular heroes or symbols.
7) They bring non-Muslims to the knowledge of what is Islam (cit. in Cook, 2007, p. 150; similar arguments were also adopted by the current leader of al-Qaeda – see Al-Zawahiri, 2001, pp. 200-201).

Turning bodies into weapons makes a difference not only for military effectiveness but also for terrorist propaganda. Suicide fighters represent extraordinary cases of militancy because of a direct physical involvement through their voluntary self-annihilation. To make their messages successful while employing the medium of power, armed groups take advantage of the communicative and symbolic potential implied by suicide missions. Following signaling theory, one might contend that terrorist leaders rationally rely on the expected ability of suicide attacks to work as effective signals

of coercive power behind their organizations' demands. Diego Gambetta, who published several applications of signaling theory, offers the following description of its main theoretical principles:

> Typical situations that signaling theory covers have two key features: (i) There is some action the receiver can do which benefits a signaler, whether or not he has the quality k, for instance marry him, but (ii) this action benefits the receiver if and only if the signaler truly has k, and otherwise hurts her, for instance, marry an unfaithful man. This applies to conflict situation too: if we know that our opponent is going to win a fight, we may choose to yield without fighting at a lesser cost for both. Thus k signalers and receivers share an interest in the truth, but the interests of non-k signalers and receivers are opposed: non-k signalers would like to deceive receivers into thinking they have k, in order to receive the benefit, while receivers have an interest in not being deceived (the interests of the ks and non-ks are also usually opposed because the activity of the latter damages the credibility of the signals of the former). The main result in signaling theory is that *there is a solution in which at least some truth is transmitted, provided that among the possible signals is one, s, which is cheap enough to emit, relative to the benefits, for signalers who have k, but costly enough to emit, relative to the benefit, for those who do not. If s is too costly to fake for all or most non-k signalers then observing s is good evidence that the signaler has k* (Gambetta, 2009a, pp. 172-173; see also Gambetta, 2009b).

An attempt to adopt this approach in the analysis of suicide bombings reveals that terrorist organizations presumably count on the highly discriminating features of suicide attacks (i.e., the signal s), namely their capacity for convincingly proving great commitment and resolve (i.e., the quality k) as typical features of their members. Sacrificing one's body as weaponry is a costly action and, consequently, a tangible and hard-to-fake signal for those who lack the same quality. Consequently*, armed groups might use suicide bombers for their propaganda purposes to transmit more determination and potential for violence (in comparison with other kinds of combatants)* that can be associated with their future military operations: "The applications of signaling theory show that the most feared opponents are those who can credibly signal fearlessness in combat. Suicide missions go one step further: what can be scarier that knowing there are people who value their lives *less* than your death?" (Gambetta, 2005, p. 266).

Suicide attacks enter terrorist communiqués with this highly discriminating potential. Armed groups make all possible efforts to exploit the signaling qualities of suicide missions. Martyrdom videos and other accounts merge suicide bombers' status with the organization's identity. They obsessively aim to emphasize the extraordinary nature of such self-sacrificial actions to credibly convey the military preparation, extreme devotion to a cause, radical opposition to the enemy, and unquestionable willingness to die of all militants who belong to al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Terrorist organizations rely on appropriate technical devices to render such portrayals of suicide combatants more and more suggestive and widely usable. In a variety of martyrdom videos, bombers are framed as exemplars of highly committed warriors engaged in a total war to protect their Muslim community. For example, as stated by Mohammad Sadique Khan (the ringleader of the 2005 London suicide attacks),

> Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our religion is Islam – obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following in the footsteps of the final Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad, Allah's blessings and prayers upon him. This is how our ethical stances are dictated. Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world, and your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets, and until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment, and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war, and I am a soldier (As-Sahab, 2006a).

Fighters typically emit commands and threats, relying on language, images, and other objects to signal determination by other comrades like them to perpetuate the armed confrontation and to escalate violence. Videos might include footage of the preparation and execution of 'martyrdom operations' and their destructive effects. Appropriate representations of attacks are instrumentally arranged to signal and amplify as much as possible the perception of coercive force behind al-Qaeda's claims of power.

Such a combination of signaling, self-sacrificial actions and their propagandistic representation generates a shock underlying a form of symbolic 'transcendence', as theorized by phenomenological sociology. According to Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, three main kinds of transcendence can be distinguished: the 'little' transcendence, which concerns spatial and temporal boundaries of one's experience; the 'medium' transcendence, in which the ego deals with the fact that the alter's world necessarily transcends the former's experience; and the 'great' transcendence, consisting of a boundary-crossing of one's experience in which "the natural attitude is shaken off, the pragmatic motive deactivated, the relevance-system of everyday action and everyday experience are mostly eliminated" (Schütz & Luckmann, 1989 [1983], p. 123; see also Schütz, 1962; cf. Endress, 2006; Strassheim, 2016). Symbolic relations are the specific mechanisms of the great transcendence: they affect one's experience by projecting his or her perception beyond the everyday life, namely towards different 'provinces of reality' (e.g., in the cases of the experience of death or personal crises). In this sense, the symbolic processes triggered by bombers' extraordinary behaviors and status (particularly, their capacity to signal determination and resolve) project the receiver's perception (al-Qaeda's enemies, in our case) towards a dreadful potential of violence and possible scenario of highly destructive terrorist actions.

Terrorist groups strive to expose their enemy's vulnerability and inability to exert deterrence by combining linguistic signs and other symbolic references associated with suicide attacks. As stated by Heinrich Popitz,

> The assassin and the martyr publicly deny the completeness of power [*Vollkommenheit der Macht*]. Both show that the decision over life and death does not lie only with the power holder. They show that the power itself to kill limits all power of humans over humans. Power can be complete, insofar as it can do the utmost harm. Power is incomplete because the decision to do the utmost harm cannot be monopolized – anybody can kill – and the decision to let oneself be killed cannot be denied to others (Popitz, 2017 [1992], p. 38; see also Poggi, 2001).

From this standpoint, *the major challenge to the completeness of power is the fusion of the attacker and the martyr embodied by the suicide bomber.* It is no accident that a common feature of martyrdom videos is the framing that people are willing to give up their lives without hesitation in defense of their fellow Muslims around the world. Here, terrorists additionally exploit a peculiarity of the cultural context: a profound divergence between bombers' and their victims' *Weltanschauung*. They insist on the shocking contrast of the self-preservation and individual-centered values particularly underlying Western culture with the fighters' world-life (in the sense of Habermas, 1985 [1981]) based on an absolute self-denial and indifference to death. In doing so, terrorists attempt to signal to the enemy community the insurgents' resolve and commitment to escalate violence up to unimaginable levels (Hafez, 2007; Hoffman & McCormick, 2004). In addition, they expect to generate the perception of their evident and abnormal danger, to prompt that community, depending on the political circumstances, either to defer from any compliance with the incumbents or to launch reprisals against the insurgents' constituency. This tactics is viewed as a way to radicalize the constituency itself and induce its members to embrace the armed struggle and support terrorists. As expected by al-Qaeda and other Sunni insurgents in Iraq since 2003, this radicalization has transpired with the Shiite militias' retaliation against the Sunni population in reaction to al-Qaeda's massive bombings targeting the Shiites (Cordesman, 2008; Hafez, 2007; Hashim, 2006; Moghadam, 2008; Nasr, 2006; Tosini, 2010).

Propaganda by Martyrs: Addressing the Constituency and Potential Recruits

Apart from the desired effects on the enemy, al-Qaeda's suicide bombers are sources of symbolic forms directed at two other audiences, namely their presumed constituency from the global Sunni community (e.g., Sunni Arabs in the case of the al-Qaeda's campaigns in Iraq since 2003), whose support the insurgents seek, and potential militants to be recruited from the same community (Cook

& Allison, 2007; Tosini, 2010, 2012). Here, we return to the concepts of the symbolic media of influence and value-commitments and analyze how they are manipulated in terrorist actions and martyrdom videos. Certainly, terrorists can use economic and material incentives to gain support and confidence form their constituencies (Pedahzur, 2005). They also frequently adopt treats and coercive methods to punish collaborationists and deter further compliance with the enemy (Kalyvas, 2006). Alternative ways of operating on a symbolic level can achieve valuable psychological results. Using suicide bombers, staging last wills and airing their biographical documents on the Internet are all rational alternatives in this context.

Addressing their community, terrorists' communication based on suicide bombers is structured mainly according to the medium of influence. Expressions and symbols of solidarity and common identities are the basic communicative forms of influence in general. As previously argued, influence is specialized in symbolizing specific positive sanctions. The ego exercises influence on the alter when the alter conforms to the ego's expectations because of the alter's confidence in the ego's solidarity. For example, bombers' messages are full of references to their devotion to their community. As stated by Shehzad Tanweer (another British-born member of the four-man suicide squad of 2005 London attacks),

> We are hundred percent committed to the cause of Islam. We love death the way you love life. I tell all you British citizens to stop your support to your lying British government, and to the so-called 'war on terror', and ask yourselves why would thousands of men be willing to give their lives for the cause of Muslims. […]. What you have witnessed now is only the beginning of a series of attacks, which, *inshallah*, will intensify and continue, until you pull all your troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, until you stop all financial and military support to the US and Israel, and until you release all Muslim prisoners from Belmarsh and your other concentration camps. And know that if you fail to comply with this, then know that this war will never stop, and that we are ready to give our lives, one hundred times over, for the cause of Islam. You will never experience peace, until our children in Palestine, our mothers and sisters in Kashmir, and our brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq feel peace (As-Sahab, 2006b).

Bombers want their constituency to be confident about al-Qaeda's determination, preparedness for ultimate sacrifice, and identification with the same constituency's economic, political, and religious objectives. To signal these dispositions, biographical accounts of bombers frequently exalt martyrs' nobility, zeal, and complete devotion to their 'brothers' and religion. For example, the current al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, used the following description to sketch the profile of Tanweer and the other attackers of the 2005 London commando:

> Shehzad's motivation for going to the bases of Qaeda al-Jihad was the oppression which the British are perpetrating in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. […]. [He] spent a period of time with Muhammad Sadique. Both of them were seeking martyrdom and whished that they could carry out a martyrdom operation.[…]. Between them was amazing love for the sake of Allah, and together they formed a great team […]. And he [Shehzaz Tanweer], may Allah have mercy upon him, was diligent in night prayers and infatuated with the Quran and would recite it often. If his brothers busied themselves with conversation, he would busy himself with the Quran. And he would contemplate what he would read of the Quran, and often he would pause at a particular verse, and then say to his brothers, "Look! This is exactly what is happening today" (As-Sahab, 2006b).

These representations emphasize the centrality acquired by the bombers' reputation as certified by leading figures such as al-Zawahiri. Indeed, this kind of reputation is a highly symbolic mechanism operating on the level of influence to prove militants' reliability, trustworthiness, and similar credentials. In pioneering the use of suicide bombings, armed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas have been keenly aware of the propagandistic relevance of celebrating their fallen (Oliver & Steinberg, 2005). For example, on the website of al-Qassam, Hamas's military wing, an entire section had been dedicated to its 'martyrs', including those involved in the so-called martyrdom operations (http://www.qassam.ps/martyrs.html). On the Iraqi battlefield, too, insurgents have produced memories of their fighters, as documented by the long series of al-Furqan's productions, titled *The Knights of Martyrdom* (al-Furqan, 2009), in a clear attempt to exalt the courage, greatness, and devotion of al-Qaeda's fighters (i.e., their reputation).

Such communicative references both to the fighters' solidarity towards the Muslim community and to their reputation draw on the bomber's extraordinary engagement as witnessed by his death for the benefit of the community. Like power, it is worth noting that such self-sacrificial action is potentially highly discriminating. Once again, it has to do with the distinctive signaling qualities embodied in the costly behavior of suicide missions. In the communication directed to the enemy, shocking features depending on militants' voluntary self-annihilation are exploited for coercive purposes. *Turning to their constituency, terrorist organizations want the suicidal act understood as an extreme self-sacrifice for common interests and identity*, thus gambling on bombers' ability to succeed as a tangible, hard-to-fake signal of solidarity and devotion of al-Qaeda's militants.

Generating this perception can also be instrumental to winning the competition with other armed groups for the constituency's support (Bloom, 2005). The fact of volunteers giving their life for their fellows is certainly something to exploit in the political arena. To be competitive, certain groups might thus decide to introduce suicide missions into their repertoire, as was probably the calculation behind al-Fatah's decision to establish its own martyr squad for the first time in 2002 to bid against Hamas for Palestinian support (Pedahzur, 2005).

Viewed from their impact on potential attackers, last wills and representation of bombers are part of insurgents' effort to attract new militants as martyrs. Bombers' behaviors and terrorist communiqués aim not only at legitimizing armed actions and obtaining the constituency's consensus; they should also be examined as a recruitment tool. Islamist organizations such as al-Qaeda work on beliefs and symbols meant to lift moral restrictions on suicide and on the massacres of unarmed civilians. To this end, they frame suicide missions as martyrdom and acts in the service of a religious cause. Armed groups make more or less explicit calls for all Muslims' highest moral obligation and noblest path: dying in battle for jihad against oppressors of the Islamic community. Statements from videos related to numerous suicide attacks focus on a tried and tested pool of normative imperatives to which any pious person must commit, according to radical Islamists – and

whose accomplishment becomes the authentic proof of moral integrity. An example is another excerpt from the last will of the London bomber Shehzad Tanweer:

O' Muslims of Britain, you, day in and day out on your TV sets, watch and hear about the oppression of the Muslims, from the east to the west. But yet you turn a blind eye, and carry on with your lives as if you never heard anything, or as if it does not concern you. What is the matter with you that you turn back not to the religion that Allah has chosen for you? You have preferred the *dunya* [temporal world] to Allah, His messenger, and the Hereafter.[…]. As Allah says, in *Surat Al-Touba*: "O' you who believe, what is the matter with you, that when you are asked to march forth in His cause, you cling heavily to the earth. Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But little is the enjoyment of this world as compared to the Hereafter." O' Muslims of Britain, stand up and be counted. […]. Fight against the disbelievers, for it is but an obligation made on you by Allah (Al-Sahab, 2006b).

Messages that praise jihad and martyrdom can also be found in videos of fighters involved in the Iraq insurgency since 2003. An example is a 2006 clip entitled *Convoy of Martyrs*, released by al-Qaeda-led Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq, where the following statement is made by two Saudi Arabian militants (against a background of scenery and songs emphasizing their greatness as combatants in defense of their religion):

Anyone who loves Allah should follow this path. I ask my mother and father to be patient. Let them know that their son is in the land of jihad, whether he leaves or dies, he will always be there, living, both now and in the hereafter. We shall meet in paradise. Allah is more merciful than both of you, my dear parents. Allah has called me and He shall protect me and make me achieve martyrdom… And, O' my brother Hassam, Allahu Akhbar, O' Hassam. I hope you are listening to me right now. I beg you to depart to the land of honor and manhood. Don't just sit there and stay behind, and don't listen to anyone who tries to stop you. Just go and kill the Americans. Just kill them and don't leave any survivors. Allahu Akhbar! Allahu Akhbar! (Globalterroralert, 2007).

As previously argued, the communicative forms underlying value-commitments consist of claims and symbols of moral sentiments and moral authority accompanying appeals for fulfilling certain norms or values. Value-commitments are specialized in symbolizing the reference to negative sanctions. This social mechanism has to do with those circumstances in which the alter's

conformity with the ego's expectations is achieved by activating the alter's aversion to certain emotions, such as shame and guilt, depending on the violation of given normative imperatives or principles. Provoking such emotions to exert pressure on potential militants is also emblematically illustrated by the February 2006 video, known as *Fatima's Fiancé*, also distributed by the al-Qaeda-led Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq. Here, the suicide bomber Abu Muawiyah al-Shimali refers to an alleged letter of December 2004 sent by Fatima, a female detainee at Abu Ghraib prison. In the letter, Fatima called on the Islamists to help female prisoner victims of rape, torture, and humiliation. She then invokes the Islamists: "Remain faithful to Allah. Leave their tanks and planes, come to us in Abu Ghraib prison, and kill us along with them. Destroy us along with them. Don't leave us to them. Kill us along with them, and then maybe we will have peace" (MEMRI, 2006). The indignation inspired by the letter and a desire for revenge are also part of the final statement by Abu Muawiyah al-Shimali himself. A script in the video states:

> Like all of us, Abu Muawiyah al-Shimali read the letter written by the sister in Abu Ghraib prison before she was martyred. He could not calm down, and resolved to avenge her death, and the deaths of all free Muslim women. He could find nothing more precious than his own soul to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and to redeem the honor of his sisters. He asked Allah to accept him as a martyr, and to marry him to this young woman (MEMRI, 2006).

In these and other examples, the major emphasis is clearly on the suggestive appeal to pride and manhood accompanying the commitment to defend Muslim women; the emphasis is also on the sense of shame and guilt that those who remain passive should feel, once confronted with abuses and violence against one's community (Hafez, 2006). Such appeals are frequently associated with claims of commitment to religious and moral values, which in turn resort to symbols of moral integrity. As with the signaling mechanisms examined for the media of power and influence, the most crucial emblem of this integrity is the martyrdom of suicide attackers because of the extreme commitment in giving one's life (Kramer, 1998; Freamon, 2003; Reuter, 2004; Cook, 2007; Khosrokhavar, 2009).

Indeed, martyrs' actions cannot be equated with those of other fighters. Martyrs are extraordinary figures of unquestionably high repute according to holy texts and religious leaders. This elevation is clearly signaled by their tangible death meant to fulfill those duties to which all Muslims are called. *Suicide as martyrdom is a costly action, a behavior that al-Qaeda wants perceived as a real proof of its combatants' commitment to certain religious values.* At the same time, such a self-denial is crucial in delineating those who have demonstrated being truly devoted and courageous Muslims and those who are indifferent to their morality or insufficiently resolved and, consequently, destined to an infamous sense of shame and guilt. Intertwining the use of bombers and last wills exalting their sacrifice and religiously legitimized status serves, in other words, to activate commitment (among potential recruits from the Sunni community) by way of potential intolerable emotions. These emotions are triggered by a negative self-perception that derives from comparing a lack of commitment to the call for jihad with admiration for martyred fellows, their death on the path of Allah, and their supreme evidence of faith and devotion – all that a real, pious Muslim must do to be definitively at peace with himself.

Moreover, the last wills mentioned above work as a powerful communicative channel adopted for justifying and encouraging any personal disposition to becoming a fighter, thanks to the recognition of their noble role (in addition to their promised place in heaven). Reference to prestige shows that factors facilitating recruitment include more than a search for an authentic way to witness and signal faith and overcome negative self-perception. In this context, the positive sanction of gaining reputation as a mechanism associated with the medium of influence plays a crucial role in addition to the medium of value-commitments (Pedahzur, 2005; Ricolfi, 2005). In this sense, bomber's reputations might become an attractive (and circulating) 'currency' and inspire others as prospective martyrs.

Conclusion

We have examined how terrorists frame suicide bombers, focusing on empirical cases associated with al-Qaeda's terrorist campaigns. To understand suicide terrorism more comprehensively, this article stressed the importance of taking into account three main communicative levels of terrorist propaganda underlying the representation of suicide bombers. First, on the level of the symbolic medium of power, armed organizations aim at coercing and deterring their enemy by staging a complex set of communicative forms that signal their militants' determination and resolve. Second, on the level of the symbolic medium of influence, bombers' behavior and martyrdom videos are manipulated to gain support from a presumed constituency, especially by referring to attackers' reputations and ultimate sacrifices for a superior cause. Finally, based on a combined use of the symbolic media of values and influence, propaganda behind suicide attacks and bombers' last wills is clearly directed at attracting new fighters by appealing to values rooted in their socialization and to the prestige of martyrs.

All of these communicative forms support the conclusion that the contemporary representation of heroism and martyrdom is a crucial component of suicide terrorism. As evidence from videos associated with suicide missions exemplifies, the synergy between the psychological impact of costly actions like suicide attacks and the suggestive framings exalting the military, moral, and religious qualities of bombers constitutes a sophisticated weapon in the more recent asymmetric warfare involving radical Islamist organizations. From this perspective, suicide terrorism should be analyzed as a combat method conducted not only on a military, but also on a psychological level. In this sense, suicide terrorism takes old arguments and ideas from the history of terrorism – arguing for the use of 'unconventional' tactics and exploitation of mass media – to their extreme.

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