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# A Sociological Understanding of Suicide Attacks

*Domenico Tosini*

## **Abstract**

Over the last 25 years, suicide attacks have become an alarming threat. They are a political tool which has been adopted by several organizations in Sri Lanka, Palestine and the Occupied Territories, Turkey, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan and, in particular, by the Al-Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq in its struggle against the US and its allies. Recent analyses have traced back the use of suicide terrorism to its 'strategic logic': organizations and their militants resort to suicide attacks mainly because they view this form of violence as an efficient weapon for their revolutionary and nationalist campaigns. An explanation based on the paradigm of rational choice theory or instrumental rationality alone is, however, insufficient. This article suggests the importance of combining the paradigm of instrumental rationality with that of axiological rationality. Only this kind of explanation is able to clarify the crucial role played by those cultural and symbolic elements which justify and encourage the martyrdom of suicide attackers. Moreover, by adopting a multi-causal analysis of the armed organizations, their constituencies and the attackers, as well as of their interaction, the article outlines a theoretical model of the most important social mechanisms underlying the use of suicide tactics.

## **Key words**

axiological rationality ■ culture of martyrdom ■ instrumental rationality ■ radicalization ■ social mechanisms ■ social networks ■ suicide attacks

## **1. Introduction**

SUICIDE ATTACKS (SAs) are violent acts whose fulfillment requires the death of at least one individual who does not expect to survive the mission (cf. Moghadam, 2006a). Although not completely unknown in history (Dale, 1988; Hill, 2006; Reuter, 2004; Weinberg, 2006), the number

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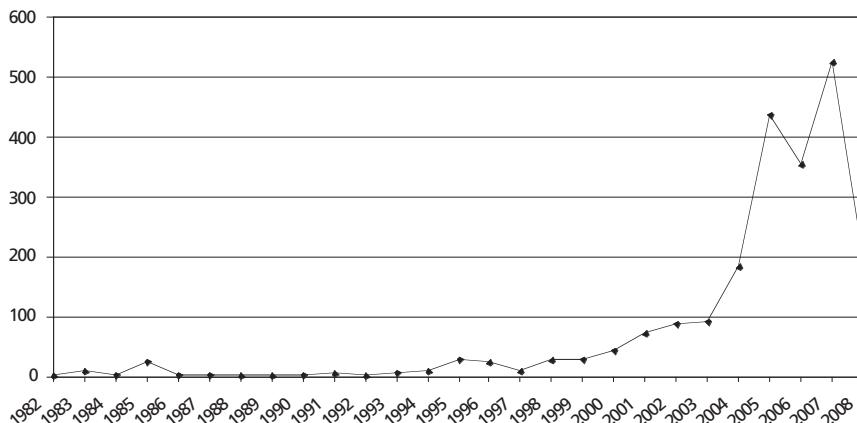


Figure 1 Suicide attacks worldwide (November 1982–June 2008)

Sources: Gambetta – Tzvetkova Suicide Attacks Dataset, Nuffield College, Oxford ([http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/datalibraryholdings\\_datasets.aspx](http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/datalibraryholdings_datasets.aspx)); Pape (2006); an updated version (accessed in January 2006) of the dataset maintained by the University of Haifa (formerly published in Pedahzur, 2005); The Global Terrorism Database (GTD2) (<http://209.232.239.37/gtd2>); The Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS) (<http://wits.nctc.gov>). For details about sources, see Note 1.

of SAs mounted by organizations has increased notably over the last 25 years, as is shown in Figure 1.

I estimate 2197 attacks related to several campaigns between November 1982 and the end of June 2008<sup>1</sup> – with 1240 attacks mounted by Iraqi insurgents since the military invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (cf. Bloom, 2005; Gambetta, 2006a, 2006b; Hafez, 2007; Pape, 2006; Pedahzur, 2005; Wright, 2008). This has provided a genuine challenge for social scientists (Goodwin, 2006a). The literature in the field continues to be characterized by the application of *rational choice theory* (RCT). Seminal works proposed that certain elements of conventional wisdom should be removed by stressing the rational calculations of organizations (i.e. their *strategic* logic) (Gunaratna, 2000; Hoffman, 2003; Pape, 2003, 2006). For example, the link between Islamism and SAs has been rejected by referring to purely secular cases, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Pape, 2003). As a result, religious beliefs are mainly viewed as a tool used by organizations to recruit new members and to gain support (Pape, 2006; see also Baym, 2008)). Focusing on the perspective of the attackers, others, for example, stress that achieving a sense of solidarity, rather than the adhesion to beliefs, is the main objective in joining an extremist group: 'a person who holds a belief that appears on the surface to be irrational may not be: *the rationality may consist not in the content of the belief but in the reason for holding it... the reason for the belief may be solidarity or social cohesion, not the coherence of the belief itself*' (Wintrope, 2006: 117).

Unfortunately, religion remains a significant factor in recent campaigns, such as those of Al-Qaeda, in particular Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) since 2003, and other Sunni extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Cook, 2002, 2004, 2005; Cook and Allison, 2007; Hafez, 2006; Moghadam, 2006b). As will be evident below, contributions based on RCT are undoubtedly useful in explaining terrorism; yet an overestimation of RCT exists and, consequently, so do *reductionist* explanations which view actions mainly as the result of *consequentialist* and *egoistic* assessments. As will be argued, rationality is *not only* instrumental (as in RCT). It can also be conceptualized as assuming certain beliefs unconditionally, without taking into account their effects or advantages, which corresponds to *axiological rationality* as theorized by methodological individualism (Boudon, 1998, 2003; 2007; Cherkaoui, 2007). In some cases, joining armed organizations or killing oneself while killing others can be contingent on a firm adhesion to specific values. The Islamist ideology of martyrdom and jihad is a crucial source of absolute beliefs and continues to play a primary role in framing SA campaigns and in motivating support (Cook and Allison, 2007; Cozzens, 2007; Hafez, 2006, 2007; Hoffman and McCormick, 2004; Tosini, 2007a, 2007b). In addition, purely cognitive explanations such as those based on RCT run the risk of overlooking the importance of group dynamics and social networks in recruitment (Della Porta, 1995; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Hafez, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Sageman, 2004, 2008).

Based on these premises, we will present an *ideal-type* (in Weberian parlance) of a collective action that results in a systematic use of SAs. Special attention will be paid to the crucial case of Sunni extremists in Iraq, because of their methodical use of this tactic and the high number of attacks and victims they claimed – about 56 percent of incidents and 52 percent of fatalities caused by all SA campaigns since the 1980s (see Table 1). Three main actors will be distinguished: the *armed organizations* or *terrorist cells* (section 2); the *community* or *informal groups* of supporters (section 3); and the *suicide attackers* (section 4). At the same time, the notion of a *social* or *generative mechanism* (Barbera, 2004; Boudon, 1998; Cherkaoui, 2005; Coleman, 1990; Hedström, 2005; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; McAdam et al., 2009; Manzo, 2007; Tilly, 2001) will be adopted in order to analyze the concatenation of the most important factors, motivations and social interactions which produce SAs. More analytically, three processes will be considered: the *situational mechanisms*, which identify constraints exercised by a structural context made up of resources, political opportunities and beliefs over actors' decisions; the *action formation mechanisms*, which focus on the individuals' decision-making process; and *transformational mechanisms*, which describe the interactions of the three actors mentioned above (cf. Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Manzo, 2007). A summary of the structure of our analysis can be found in Figure 2.

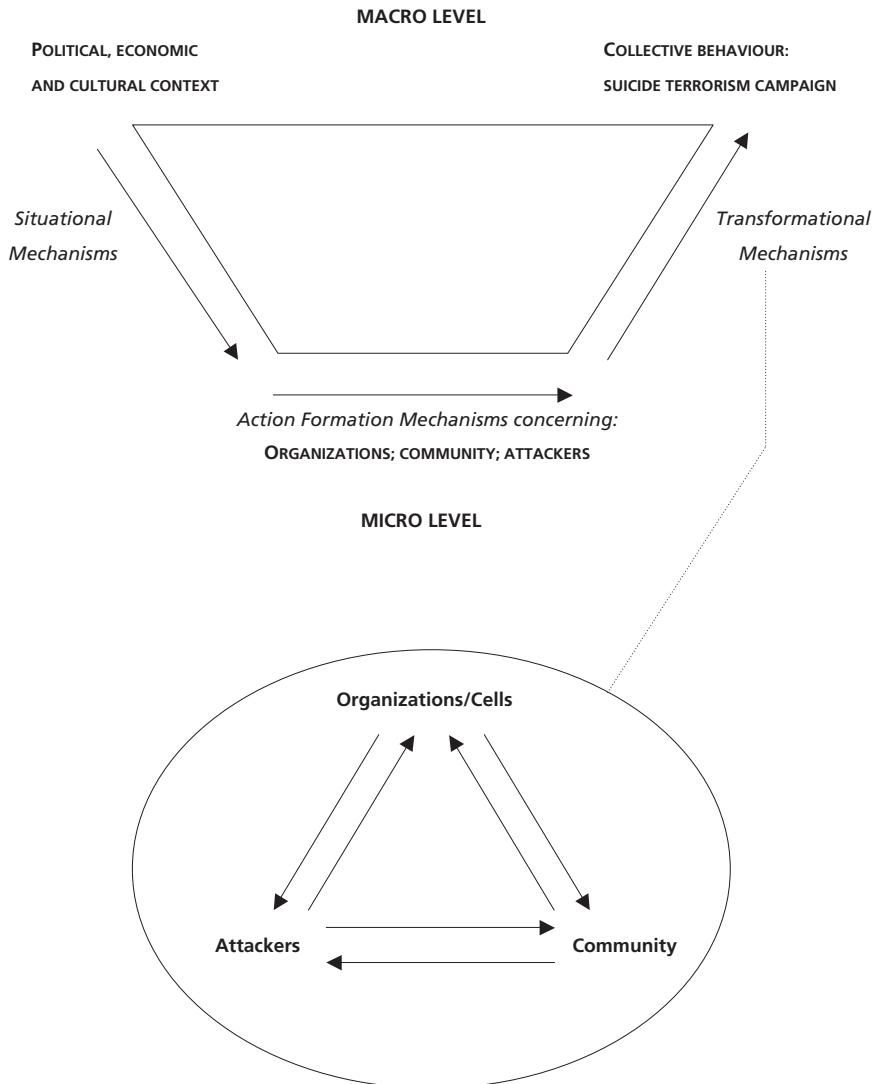


Figure 2 Generative mechanisms of a suicide attack campaign

## 2. Armed Organizations: The Instrumental Rationality of Political Violence

SAs are rarely carried out by isolated attackers. They are best understood as an *emergent phenomenon* involving several actors. SAs are, first of all, the consequence of a plan devised by elite members of armed organizations. Seminal works in the field argue that such organizations are generally engaged in a campaign for the liberation or independence of a territory (Pape, 2006). Our data confirm this hypothesis, and it is certainly true of the origin of modern SAs, first adopted in Hezbollah's campaign in Lebanon

in the 1980s against the American, French and Israeli occupations (Kramer, 1998; Ranstorp, 1997; Reuter, 2004). The same can be said of other cases: the SAs by the LTTE since 1987 in support of Tamil independence (Hopgood, 2006); the suicide terrorism of Hamas and other Palestinian organizations against Israel (Levitt, 2006; Ricolfi, 2006); the PKK's campaign for the independence of Kurdistan; the Chechens' fight for secession from Russia; and the struggle against India conducted by the Kashmiri separatists such as Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). To some extent, this argument can also be applied to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates (Gunaratna, 2002), as well as to the Taliban in Afghanistan and to the Iraqi Sunni insurgency – in particular, AQI and the Ansar Al-Sunnah Group (ASG) – whose *immediate* goal is the liberation of Muslim territories from what is seen as an occupation by the US and its allies (Cordesman, 2008; Goodwin, 2006a, 2006b; Hafez, 2007; Hashim, 2006; Karam, 2007; Michael and Scolnick, 2006; Nance, 2007).

However, for many Sunni extremists, nationalist motivations are often intertwined both with the *revolutionary objective* of changing existing regimes and with *sectarian* campaigns against the Shiites. The overthrow of 'infidel' governments in the Muslim world (the so-called 'near enemy') has been a fundamental aim in several jihadist campaigns which have maintained some linkage with the transnational network of Al-Qaeda (Gerges, 2005; Phares, 2005). Indeed, SAs have been used by Egyptian armed groups, by Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) in Indonesia, by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – formerly known as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat – in Algeria, by the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and others in Pakistan, and by the Al-Shabab Al-Majahedeen/Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in Somalia. Moreover, since the fall of Saddam Hussein, attacks by AQI and other Sunni extremists, for example, have aimed not only at ending foreign occupation, but also at opposing the emergent power of the Shiites (Hafez, 2007; Nasr, 2006), as demonstrated by numerous attacks (including SAs) against the Shiite population, e.g. those of 2 March 2004 at a Moslem festival parade in Karbala (between 98 and 171 deaths) and of 16 July 2005 targeted at the Shiite mosque of Al-Musayyib (nearly 100 deaths). A *purely* nationalist theory which stresses the importance of foreign occupation as the *necessary* condition of SAs (Pape, 2008) also overlooks the recent SA campaigns in Pakistan where, in the last decade, numerous attacks have been associated with internal religious and political conflicts. Since September 2006, in particular, a new wave of SAs (68 incidents, claiming about one thousand lives up to the end of June 2008) has been mounted by Sunni extremists, mainly against the Pakistani army and police, political leaders and civilians (cf. Schmitt, 2008). Thus, there is no irrefutable evidence available to establish an 'innate' link between SAs and nationalist campaigns. Due to certain decision-making processes analyzed in the following pages, SAs can be adopted for a plurality of objectives (Cook and Allison, 2007; Gambetta, 2006b; Goodwin, 2006a). My data on modern SA campaigns are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1* Suicide Attack Campaigns (November 1982–June 2008) (attacks and fatalities by different armed organizations)

Period	Organizations	Targets	Fatalities <sup>b</sup>		
			Attacks <sup>a</sup>	Min	Max
1 1982–1999	Hezbollah	US, France, Israel, South Lebanese Army	48	831	946
2 1987–	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	Sri Lanka	123	1,487	1,783
3 1993–	Hamas, Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	Israel	209	777	927
4 1995–	Al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremists such as AQIM, GICM, IMU, JI, Al-Shabab/UIC	US, its Western allies and several Muslim countries such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Uzbekistan	57 <sup>c</sup>	3,798	4,132
5 1995–	Sunni extremists such as Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Taliban	Pakistan	98	1,430	1,467
6 1996–	Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Turkey	27	40	47
7 1999–	Chechen Separatists	Russia	44	887	985
8 2000–	Kashmiri Separatists (e.g. LeT, JeM)	India	19	103	115
9 2001–	Al-Qaeda and Taliban	US and NATO-led coalition and their local allies in Afghanistan	292	1,287	1,305
10 2003–	Sunni extremists such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Ansar Al-Sunnah Group (ASG)	US-led coalition and its Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni allies in Iraq	1,240	11,830	12,786
Attacks whose attribution is unclear or which are isolated from the main campaigns					
Total number of attacks = 2,197; Total number of fatalities = 22,739/24,764			40	269	271

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Data include only those attacks which have been executed by at least one attacker killing herself or himself. <sup>b</sup> The attackers are excluded.

<sup>c</sup> Attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda's affiliates in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq are separately counted in campaigns 5, 9 and 10, respectively.

Sources: See Figure 1.

Regardless of their purpose, organizations can certainly be analyzed as rational decision-makers (Crenshaw, 1998; Della Porta, 1995). Their criterion for processing information is *instrumental rationality*, which corresponds to the Weberian concept of *Zweckrationalität* (Weber, 1966). RCT views this kind of rationality as the pillar of all actions. The strongest version of RCT consists of six postulates: any social phenomenon is the effect of individual decisions (*individualism*: P1); actions can always be understood (*understanding*: P2); actions are caused by reasons in the minds of individuals (*rationality*: P3); these reasons derive from consideration by the actor of the consequences of his or her actions (*consequentialism/instrumentalism*: P4); actors are concerned mainly with the consequences to themselves of their own actions (*egoism*: P5); actors are able to choose actions with the most favorable balance of costs and benefits (*maximization*: P6) (Boudon, 1998, 2003, 2007). Other versions tend, in different ways, to modify the last two postulates. The theory of *bounded rationality* replaces P6 with the observation (P6') that agents often experience limits in solving problems. Usually, they are not able to maximize the balance of costs and benefits. That is why one should speak of *satisfaction* instead of the *maximization* attributed by agents to a specific line of action. SAs, too, are a strategic choice which often fails fully to achieve those goals that organizations have in mind (cf. Pape, 2006); yet certain (presumed) tactical advantages, discussed below, drive some movements to adopt SAs. In other versions, P5 is complemented with the claim (P5') that, in some cases, individuals act to secure benefits not directly for themselves but for their intimates or for their community. In this sense, one can distinguish between instrumental rationality based on *egoistic* interests and that based on *altruistic* objectives (Tosini, 2007a, 2007b). In this sense, terrorism is often distinguished from an ordinary crime by noting that ‘the terrorist is fundamentally an *altruist*: he believes that he is serving a “good” cause designed to achieve a greater good for a wider constituency’ (Hoffman, 2006: 37).

SAs, too, can be explained by following the *consequentialist* version of rationality, however modified (P1+P2+P3+P4+P5/P5'+P6/P6'). To begin with, we have to focus on the political and cultural context in which organizations act (Bloom, 2005; Elster, 2006; Gambetta, 2006b; Pape, 2006). This means that the *situational mechanisms* made up of the influence exercised by specific political opportunities and resources on emergent organizations have to be clarified (Della Porta, 1995; Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Hafez, 2007; Jackson, 2006; McAdam, 1999). A case in point is that of the Iraqi insurgency. Figure 3 shows the development of SAs in Iraq from March 2003 up to the end of June 2008.

Changes in frequency are contingent on institutional and military events. Phases of escalation, for instance, were in reaction to specific political turning points. To exemplify: (1) the attacks of the second half of 2003 followed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)'s Orders No. 1 and No. 2 of May 2003 concerning the De-Baathification of Iraq and the disbandment of the former Iraqi army, respectively; (2) the incidents

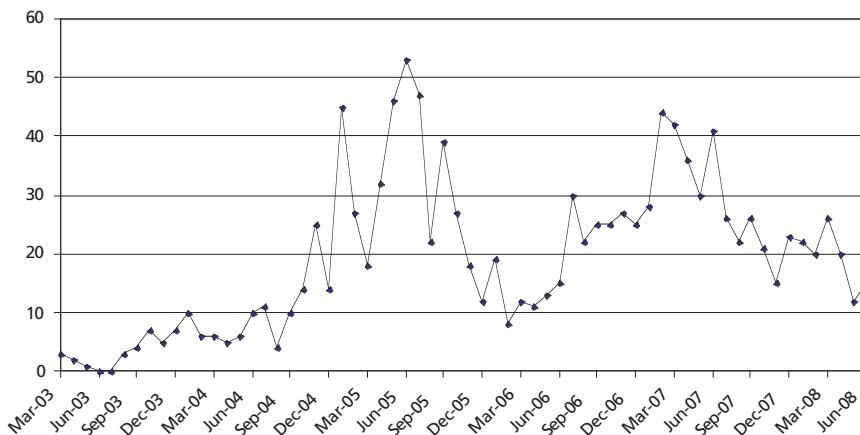


Figure 3 Suicide attacks in Iraq (March 2003–June 2008)

Sources: See Figure 1.

between May and July 2004 were in reaction to the US handover of authority to the interim government in June 2004; (3) the further escalation between September 2004 and January 2005 was associated with the election of the assembly to be tasked with drafting the new constitution; (4) the high intensity of attacks between April and August/September 2005 can be linked to the appointment of Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as President and the Shiite Ibrahim Jaafari as Prime Minister in April 2005, as well as to the subsequent endorsement of the draft constitution by the new government; (5) the escalation of attacks in the second half of 2006 can be seen as a response to the assassination (June 2006) of AQI's leader, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, and to the subsequent security plan of the new Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki (which included an amnesty for insurgents); (6) the final increase in suicide attacks between January and September 2007 was in reaction to the announcement, arrival and initial phase of deployment of additional US troops (the so-called 'Surge') planned by the Bush administration.

However, the previous analysis alone is not able to clarify why, for example, some Iraqi Sunni organizations, such as AQI and ASG, have focused mainly on SAs instead of other tactics. Here we have to pay attention to *action formation mechanisms*, namely the decision-making of the organization's leadership. Among those circumstances leading to the use of terrorism and SAs, some underline the occurrence of an imbalance in the amount of power, that is, an asymmetry in terms of resources and combatants between organizations and their enemy (Boyns and Ballard, 2004; Pape, 2006). Organization leaders, therefore, resort to the higher degree of efficiency of SAs in comparison to other tactics. For example, in an interview of April 2006, the former Palestinian foreign minister, Mahmoud Al-Zahar, declared:

This [suicide operation] is a despicable term used by the Israelis, knowing that suicide is forbidden in Islam. . . . These are martyrdom-seeking operations, approved by all the authorities of the Islamic nation, who consider them to be the highest level of martyrdom. It is a form of resistance, and resistance against the occupation is legitimate. When we have F-16 airplanes, Apache helicopters, espionage planes, helicopters, and tanks like theirs, we will use them – one army against the other. But as long as there is a nuclear arsenal facing an unarmed people, I believe this people has a right to defend itself with the means at its disposal. (Al-Zahar, 2006)

A rational calculation underlying SAs can also be recognized via certain ‘technical’ considerations (Ayers, 2008; Berman and Laitin, forthcoming; Hafez, 2007; Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman and McCormick, 2004). At least five advantages can be identified: (1) the feasibility of entering locations (thanks to disguise) which are highly defended and thus difficult to destroy by ‘conventional’ attacks; (2) the capacity to modify the direction of the attacker depending on the target’s position (in this sense, bombers are truly intelligent weapons); (3) the impossibility, for the enemy, of obtaining information from attackers about organizations, except when the attackers decide to abandon their missions and are captured; (4) the minimization of the costs of attacker training, once it is noted that, in some cases, a few hours will suffice to provide the necessary instructions to execute the mission; (5) the advantage of inflicting great damage on the enemy using the least number of combatants, compared with the risk of higher casualties resulting from ‘traditional’ guerrilla warfare. Of course, an important incentive to exploit these advantages of SAs is the relative low cost of bombers, as was evident in the case of Sunni extremists’ campaign in Iraq thanks to a plentiful supply of volunteers coming from several Muslim countries, especially North Africa and the Middle East (Cordesman, 2008; Gambetta, 2006a; Hafez, 2007) – an issue discussed in more detail in Section 4.

‘Technical’ advantages are crucial if one intends to attack (by using truck, car or belt bombs) certain military or *hard* targets – except, of course, those which are highly defended. Most of these advantages seem to some extent secondary once *soft* targets are selected. In Iraq since 2003, for instance, a high percentage of targets attacked by suicide bombers have included the new Iraqi security forces and unarmed civilians, in particular Shiites (Hafez, 2007, estimates 44% and 23%, respectively, compared with 15% made up of coalition forces). Data from *Worldwide Incidents Tracking System* (<http://wits.nctc.gov>) show that, between January 2004 and June 2008, civilians (*stricto sensu*) were about 75 percent of those killed (10,987) by SAs in Iraq – think, for example, of the attacks of 5 January 2006 on a crowded market in Karbala (between 53 and 100 deaths) and of 7 April of the same year on a Shiite mosque in Baghdad (about 90). To some extent, such attacks have been certainly contingent on an attempt to compensate for the asymmetry of power between insurgents and the US-led coalition – which is more likely insofar as attacks (including SAs) against coalition forces have become more difficult because of their increased defense, espe-

cially since 2004. Violence against civilians can therefore be used as an alternative means (instead of military confrontation) to coerce the occupier. At the same time, one has to take into account that the American and British military campaign of 2003 onwards is intolerable not only *per se*, because of the occupation of a Muslim land, that is, for purely *nationalist* reasons, but also for *sectarian* reasons. The occupation is deeply unacceptable because it has humiliated the Sunni community *while* empowering the Kurds and Shiites – both of whom, in turn (with the exception of some Shiite militias), have endorsed the occupiers. Attacks against the new Iraqi police (made up mainly of Shiite recruits) and civilian Shiites have, therefore, become a common tactic. A plurality of instrumental assessments are at work here. Targeting the Shiite population can be seen as a tool for: (1) staging a nightmare scenario of terror and insecurity aimed at delegitimizing both American authority and that of the new government, causing both to fail; (2) deterring Shiites to withdraw from any collaboration with the incumbent; (3) provoking Shiite sectarian reprisals against the Sunnis that could trigger off a civil war, in which the latter would support the insurgency as a defense against the former (for a comparison with other cases of civil war see Kalyvas, 1999, 2004, 2006).

This strategy is consistent with statements attributed to Al-Zarqawi, as in the case of the following excerpt from a letter of February 2004:

These [the Shiites] in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies . . . and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans. . . . Most of the Sunnis are aware of the danger of these people . . . and fear the consequences of empowering them. . . . This matter, with the anticipated awaking of the slumberer and rousing of the sleeper, also includes neutralizing these [Shiite] people and pulling out their teeth before the inevitable battle, along with the anticipated incitement of the wrath of the people against the Americans, who brought destruction and were the reason for this miasma. . . . The solution that we see, and God the Exalted knows better, is for us to drag the Shiites into the battle because this is the only way to prolong the fighting between us and the infidels. (Al-Zarqawi, 2004; see also Kepel and Milelli, 2008).

Here, in this letter, is the rationale for a series of SAs, the most deadly being (apart from those mentioned above): a series of bombers on 23 November 2006, targeting two markets and other shopping precincts in Sadr City (about 200 deaths); a truck bomb on 3 February 2007 in a crowded market in the Shiite district of Sadriyah in Baghdad (about 135); a suicide attacker on 27 March aimed at Shiite civilians in Tall Afar (about 150); and a car bomb on 28 April 2007 targeted at the Imam Abbas mausoleum in Karbala (about 70). Why, then, have insurgents adopted SAs (*instead of*

other tactics) against *soft* targets like these? A reason can be found in their *psychological effect*. As suggested by Anthony H. Cordesman:

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: 652)

Indeed, apart from the immediate targets, generally terrorist acts like these also aim to create a state of terror so as to influence specific audiences (Schmid and Jongman, 1988). As Jenkins points out, ‘terrorism is theatre’ (1976: 4). The dispatching of individuals able to disguise themselves among crowds and willing to give up their lives can work as a tool to *signal* to the victims’ community the insurgents’ unpredictability of attack, as well as their determination and commitment to escalation (Hafez, 2007; Hoffman and McCormick, 2004). This effect is certainly amplified by the greater efficacy of SAs, compared with other tactics, in creating spectacular attacks. Indeed, data on SAs in Iraq discussed by Nick Ayers (2008: 872) show that ‘if a spectacular incident occurs, it is more likely a result of a suicide attack than a conventional one’. As a result, SAs aim to generate among the victims the perception of the perpetrators’ evident dangerousness, prompting the victims to launch reprisals. This has been, to some extent, the case with the Shiite militias’ retaliation against the Sunni population in Iraq (Cordesman, 2008; Hashim, 2006).

In analyzing the communicative aspects of SAs (i.e. their ‘propaganda by deed’), one has to pay attention also to at least two other audiences, namely, the community whose interests organizations want to represent and the potential recruits (Cook and Allison, 2007). Usually, SAs purport not only to radicalize the organizations’ constituency by setting off a vicious circle of enemy retaliation and a consequent desire for revenge; they also aim to signal, to the constituency itself, the determination, preparedness for self-sacrifice, and the identification of the organizations’ cadres with the constituency’s cause, interests, and needs. At the same time, by devising alongside SAs a complex array of cultural symbols that celebrate suicide as martyrdom and metamorphose assassination into heroism, organizations succeed to some extent in normalizing violence and horror, as well as in channeling into political violence certain individuals’ suicidal attitudes. In sum, in addition to the ‘technical’ advantages of SAs in terms of coercing the political incumbent and to their *psychological* effects on the enemy’s constituency, political actors may *instrumentally* resort to this tactic because of its *symbolic* capacity, which can strengthen support from their constituencies and enable the recruitment of new militants – both actions often in competition with other organizations (Bloom, 2005).

### **3. Beyond Instrumental Rationality: The Normalization of Violence in the Community**

Armed organizations are dependent on the support of a community whose interests they want to represent. This is paramount in terms of gaining access to several resources, the most important being information (especially about collaborationists or spies), hideouts, a territory for military training, new recruits, and other practical and intellectual assistance. Support and collaboration are contingent on specific situational mechanisms affecting the community's stand. Political processes which involve discrimination and deprivation can certainly make more likely a community's embrace of armed struggle. In Iraq, for example, the CPA's Orders No. 1 and No. 2 of May 2003, through which many Sunnis experienced a traumatic exclusion from the new regime, together with the coalition's interference in the tribal organization of the Sunni areas, were all fatal steps in disempowering Sunnis and depriving them of the privileges and prestige which they had enjoyed under Saddam Hussein. At the same time, the US-led coalition gave unprecedented power to the Shiites and the Kurds, thus engendering an additional sense of humiliation amongst the Sunnis and making them fearful of possible vengeful acts by the former (for other situations of exclusion and repression in insurgencies and terrorist campaigns, see Goodwin, 2001; Hafez, 2003). Collaboration can therefore be instrumentally calculated by community members for at least two reasons: (1) the presumed efficacy of the armed struggle (propagandized as such by the organizations) in defending a variety of interests and achieving economic and political goals; (2) the services provided by some organizations (e.g. Hezbollah and Hamas) during their military campaigns, including economic aid to the militants' families (Levitt, 2006). Adopting the Parsonian theory of *symbolic media of interchange*, what is at work here, in order to promote collaboration, is a medium made up of several political and material benefits – which can be conceptualized as being *functionally equivalent to the medium of money* in incentivizing an individual's behavior via the improvement of his or her situation (Parsons, 1975; see also Gould, 2001; Luhmann, 1976, 1998; Tosini, 2006).

Material benefits are not the only means to reach a community's consensus. Symbolic rewards are also usually offered. Thus, if a community and its families have to pay the price of losing members engaged in SAs, armed organizations not only provide them with several kinds of benefits, but also show them and their loved ones esteem and regard. For example, in an interview of November 2004, the mother of a Hezbollah attacker was asked: 'Do you feel that as a martyr's mother you have a special status that is different from that of mothers who don't have martyred sons?' Her answer was: 'Definitely, definitely . . . If I'm in the company of others, I can sense the respect and the pride. They say, "She's a martyr's mother". What does this name mean? For me, it's very meaningful. I walk about with my head high' (MEMRI, 2004). Another medium is circulating in this case: that of *interpersonal influence*. This means that certain kinds of action (e.g. a

personal sacrifice) are incentivized by exchanging them for social consideration, prestige and solidarity (La Valle, 2001; Parsons, 1963; Tosini, 2007a; cf. Wintrobe, 2006) and by compensating for them with an increase in a person's stock of social capital (Lin, 2001).

It is nonetheless difficult to argue that the expectation of higher status conferred by organizations on the martyrs' families can alone explain the commitment to SAs. We have also to hypothesize the role of specific beliefs and values which are held unconditionally. The rationality underlying human action is not only *instrumental* in the form of the *consequentialist* version of RCT ( $P_1+P_2+P_3+P_4+P_5/P'_5+P_6/P'_6$ ). In some cases, actions are driven by *non-instrumental* motivations, thereby narrowing our postulates to  $P_1$  (individualism),  $P_2$  (understanding) and  $P_3$  (rationality). We term this kind of action formation mechanism *axiological rationality* (Boudon, 1998, 2003, 2007; Cherkaoui, 2007), which corresponds to the Weberian concept of *Wertrationalität* (Weber, 1966). Those who experience an extreme sacrifice often refer to 'reasons' based on principles which are superior in comparison with any other options. Here, decisions are made regardless of the consequences of the actions. The criterion to be taken into account is the *commitment to certain values*. Although value-commitment could be incentivized either by several kinds of material and symbolic rewards or by fear of social disapproval and other sanctions in the case of deviance (Parsons, 1968, 1975), its specificity depends on firm adhesion to specific beliefs which are assumed to have a binding and absolute validity (Habermas, 1985; Weber, 1966). For example, in an interview of December 2005, a Palestinian woman explained the reasons which had led her to support the suicide missions of three sons:

Believe me, when it comes to my sons, I am one of the most compassionate mothers. But this [martyrdom] is a sacred duty, which no emotion whatsoever can supersede. . . . We cannot stop sacrificing just because we feel pain. What is the meaning of sacrifice? One sacrifices what is precious, not what is of little value. My children are the most precious thing in my life. That is why I sacrificed them for a greater cause – for Allah, who is more precious than them. My son is not more precious than his God, he is not more precious than the places holy to Islam, and he is not more precious than his homeland or his Islam. Not at all. . . . But he is not throwing himself to death or to perdition. This is not death. This is not called death. It is called martyrdom. (MEMRI, 2005)

As with any other society, the members of communities who support suicide terrorism share a common cultural heritage, which Habermas has conceptualized as *world life* (Habermas, 1985). In relation to our topic, a crucial role is played by that part of world life consisting of ideas and symbolic representations – which correspond to the notion of frames in social movement theory (Snow and Byrd, 2007; Snow et al., 1986) – that justify engaging in an armed struggle and recognize the high value of sacrifice (Hafez, 2006, 2007; Moghadam, 2006b; Oliver and Steinberg,

2005; Pedahzur, 2005). We call this component of world life the *culture of martyrdom*. As documented in the cases of the Viet Cong, the LTTE, and the PKK, for example, not all organizations adopt religious beliefs (Pape, 2006; Weinberg, 2006). It is nevertheless interesting that some religious interpretations, in particular those of many Islamist extremists calling for (a violent version of) jihad, are highly suitable for inspiring a culture of martyrdom (Cook, 2002, 2004, 2005; Cook and Allison, 2007; Freamon, 2003; Reuter, 2004).

The Islamist version of the culture of martyrdom, which has justified numerous organizations in the last 25 years, e.g. Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, and Al-Qaeda and its associates, derives from two main ideological developments within Islamic thought. Accounts of recent SA escalation among Islamists usually underline the role played by the Sunnis' violent conception of jihad by tracing its origin to several Muslim thinkers, the most important being Taqi Al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (d. 1791), and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), who has inspired many Islamists, including the current deputy of Al-Qaeda, Ayman Al-Zawahiri. However, more comprehensive analyses have identified a second development, which involves the Shiite tradition moving away from centuries of quietism in the Shiite martyrology inaugurated by Imam Husayn's sacrifice during the battle of Karbala (680 AD). Freamon (2003), in particular, has documented the fact that, in the 1960s, several clerics – in particular, Rudollah Khomeyni (d. 1989), Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr (d. 1980) and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (b. 1935) – began to argue for a new, active engagement of Muslims in armed struggle, including suicide missions (see also Moghadam, 2007). This move was crucial in justifying not only the wave of young Iranian 'martyrs' during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s (Reuter, 2004), but also the SA campaign by Hezbollah since 1982 (Kramer, 1998). This development also had a decisive impact on Sunni extremism. Indeed, it was only after intense relationships between Hezbollah and Hamas during the early 1990s that the latter adopted SAs in its struggle against Israel and then found validation in subsequent *fatawa* issued by Sunni clerics such as Sheik Yousef Al-Qaradhawi (Cook, 2004, 2005). Despite historical differences between the Shiite and Sunni views of jihad, one can therefore observe, at least in recent decades, a convergence of certain interpretations which frame 'resistance' and SAs against enemies such as occupiers as being legitimate acts, or even *a religious duty in the service of God*. Among many recent statements in favor of SAs, an example comes from an interview of August 2004 with Sheik Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, who said: 'I determined a general rule which is based on religious law and that applies to everybody. Anyone who blows himself up amongst enemies who want to destroy his home and attack his land is a Shahid, Shahid, Shahid' (Tantawi, 2004). Since the First Gulf War (1991), Iraq, too, has experienced a revival of Islamic fundamentalism. In the last decade of his rule, Saddam Hussein allowed religion to regain influence over Sunni identities, thus creating a context from which post-2003 insurgents could

draw the ideological resources they needed to obtain support from the Sunni community (Jackson, 2006).

However, whereas the Shiite doctrine of jihad and martyrdom has been primarily led by *ulama*, Sunni interpretations have often been developed by non-clerics like Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, thus introducing an increasing *dissemination, decentralization* and, more recently, a '*pluralistic mediationization*' of religious authority (Mandeville, 2007) reinforced by new media, especially the internet (see also Knorr-Cetina, 2005; Sageman, 2008; *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2007; Turner, 2007). In addition, there has been a proliferation of *fatawa* calling for extreme forms of jihad where specific restraints and instrumental calculations established by some of the Shiite clerics – e.g. Fadlallah's arguments that SAs should not be used against civilian targets and should be chosen only when no other alternatives are possible and only if they accomplish significant military objectives (Freamon, 2003) – have become secondary. This is evident in certain excerpts from statements by Al-Qaeda's leaders, for example, where *eschatological and symbolic aspects* have become dominant: martyrdom is made contingent on the believer's absolute commitment to his or her God and is primarily viewed as the best witness of one's faith and religious identity (Cook, 2002, 2004). This is exemplified in the following treatise attributed to Al-Zawahiri (probably produced prior to the 2001 attacks):

The best of people, then, are those who are prepared for jihad in the path of Allah Most High, requiring martyrdom at any time or place. Whenever he hears the call to jihad he flies to it until Allah's authority is established. By way of Abu Hurreira, the Prophet said: 'In order that the people have a livelihood, it is best that they have a man who holds on to the reins of his horse, battling in the way of Allah. He flies upon [his horse's] back every time he hears the call or alarm, wishing for death or expecting to be slain.' Thus, whoever sacrifices himself on behalf of Allah Most High, submitting himself to the path of Allah, is the best of persons, by witness of the truest of all creation [Muhammad]. (cited in Ibrahim, 2007: 145–6)

Beliefs like these have important implications for the recruitment of individuals as attackers, which will be discussed in the next section.

Two other factors act as a catalyst for all the elements mentioned above. The first is the development of a rhetoric of *de-humanization/de-personalization* of the enemy which, by focusing on cultural differences, particularly religious difference, helps organizations to promote a perception of the targets as being categorically hostile to the community (Pape, 2006). This is evident in certain statements of Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri (Lawrence, 2005), which point out the brutality of Western civilization towards Muslims; and it is also true of those documents of Al-Zarqawi in which the Shiites are viewed as being an absolute threat (Nasr, 2006). The second factor is a political discourse concerning the exclusion from innocence of all individuals belonging to the targeted society. In an interview of March 2006, Sheik Al-Qaradhwai, for example, stated: 'At times, a woman

or child may be hurt. First of all, in Israeli society, even women are recruited into the army. Israeli society is militaristic to the core. Men and women are recruited, either into the regular army or as reservists. If children are hurt, they are hurt unintentionally. These are necessities of war' (Al-Qaradhwai, 2006). Both de-humanization and exclusion from innocence are two examples of *moral disengagement*, by which all militants and supporters can emotionally distance themselves from the pain of their victims (Bandura, 1998).

*Political power* is another medium (Parsons, 1969) that can be adopted when incentives and value-commitment either are not (or cannot be) used, or when they fail (or are insufficient) to achieve the support of a broad community. In civil wars, for instance, selective violence against civilians is often carried out both to punish collaborationists and, at the same time, to obtain compliance via deterrence of further defections (i.e. collaboration with the enemy) (Kalyvas, 2004, 2006). This is apparent, for example, in Iraq. Alongside attacks against the Shiite population, AQI, in particular, have targeted even Sunnis, and especially those who, since 2006, have formed an alliance named Al-Sahawa (or Awakening Council) and have been fighting on the side of the Americans, because of the sectarianism and fanaticism of AQI experienced by their community (Cordesman, 2008). Many AQI attacks on Al-Sahawa's members have aimed to counter these defections, adding more brutality towards the Sunni community – such as the SA of 25 June 2007 in Baghdad (12 deaths, including several Sunni tribal leaders of the Al-Sahawa movement) and the bomb attack of 13 September 2007, killing Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, one of the key US allies and leader of the Anbar Awakening, as well as a series of other similar attacks in recent months (Paley, 2008). However, because of the American military superiority and the economic aid provided to the Sunni community by the US-led coalition, the AQI's escalation of violence on Sunnis has become counterproductive, making irrelevant any appeal to nationalism, jihad and martyrdom. As a result, AQI is failing to prevent further defections and is losing the Sunni support that it needs to secure strongholds and organize new military operations. This explains the decrease in the frequency of SAs and other high-profile attacks since June 2007 (see Figure 2) – a tendency confirmed by recent data (Cordesman, 2008).

#### **4. Combining Instrumental Rationality, Axiological Rationality and Social Networks: The Attackers' Motivations**

Clearly, the crucial resource for all organizations using SAs is the availability of attackers. Their recruitment presupposes a process of socialization that involves all the important circles of society: the family, educational institutions, peer groups, the religious community, and the mass media. To explain recruitment, it is no longer possible to rely on the high predictive capacity recognized in the past in terms of socio-demographic variables, such as male gender, the fact of being a member of a poor social stratum

and of having a low level of education (Pape, 2006). Moreover, the persistent conclusion of numerous attempts to profile suicide attackers is that they rarely suffer from psychopathologies (Horgan, 2005; Post, 2007; Sageman, 2008). Other motivations and additional factors linked to the participation in SAs need to be addressed, namely the interactions between potential attackers, on the one hand, and their community or informal groups and organizations, on the other.

This should not lead us to overlook the importance of psychodynamic processes such as those identified by research into the authoritarian personality associated with religious fundamentalism (Lester et al., 2004). Moreover, emotional distress and moral outrage associated with experiences of humiliation and assassination, not only of intimates but also of one's ethnic or religious (localized or broad) community members, are frequent factors. In this case, individual behavior is 'affectually determined' (Weber, 1966) because of emotional tensions such as revenge, as documented by the Chechen female attackers known as the 'Black Widows', the wives of rebels who had been killed by Russian military forces (cf. Groskop, 2004). Militants joining Sunni extremists in Iraq, too, often refer to similar sentiments. For example, in a TV interview of January 2005, Saleh Jamil Kassar, a captured Saudi fighter, said:

Allah is my witness that I came purely to support our Iraqi brothers. Allah is my witness, and I will face Allah on Judgment Day.... We saw the Americans massacring the Iraqis. We saw the siege of Najaf. We saw that Imam Al-Sistani issued a *fatwa* calling for Jihad.... We saw the pictures of the Abu Ghraib violations, a naked woman violated by an American soldier. We saw our brothers, the prisoners naked.... I saw them on Al-Jazeera TV, on the internet, occasionally pictures appeared on the internet. This was what motivated me. (Kassar, 2005)

Nevertheless, in some cases it is also possible to approach the attackers' motivation in terms of instrumental rationality. The decision to take part in SAs may be prompted by a status crisis, that is, either a real loss of status or the fear of losing it. Two examples come from Palestinian attackers: Ayat Al-Akhras, a female student who blew herself up on 29 March 2002 and who, witnesses said, may have experienced the shameful condition of being pregnant but not married (Pedahzur, 2005); and Faiza Amal Jumaa, an unmarried woman whose attempt to carry out an SA has been linked to the impossibility of her finding any acceptance of her trans-sexuality (Tzoreff, 2006). Dying in SAs can thus be a choice based on *egoistic* interest. Death is, of course, a high cost but, under certain circumstances, it may be considered a better option than suffering the loss of reputation. At the same time, the prestige associated with being martyred purifies a person from all past wrongdoings, identified as such by certain social norms – even though *fatalistic* motivations should not be excluded when norms are perceived as being too oppressive, thereby making SAs a way to escape from their inflexible

enforcement (see Durkheim, 2006; cf. Pedahzur et al., 2003). Moreover, the fact of obtaining solidarity (Wintrobe, 2006), gaining prestige and glory, achieving a sense of belonging in the search for companionship (Sageman, 2008) and finding a way to overcome the promiscuity, confused state of affairs and absence of norms (*anomie*) of Western culture (Khosrokhavar, 2005; see also Durkheim, 2006) are all possible benefits that, in the utility function of the attackers, can compensate for costs such as loyalty to their new comrades and the sacrifice of autonomy, or even of life, as related to the process of joining terrorist organizations or terrorist cells such as those of Madrid 2004 or London 2005.

In other cases, instrumental rationality has to do not with self-interest but rather with *altruistic* motivations in terms of benefits for the attacker's intimates or community – which means that only in this, and the following cases, can one properly apply the theory of altruistic suicide (Durkheim, 2006). Some attackers may be thinking of the opportunity to guarantee economic support (provided by armed organizations) for their family, as in the case of many Palestinian bombers who were motivated by the aid distributed by Hamas (Levitt, 2006). The sense of solidarity of attackers can also take the form of a sacrifice for the community's political goals. Along with the organization's leaders, some attackers, too, are driven by instrumental calculations in the belief that SAs are an efficient tactic. Certain would-be suicide bombers confirm this profile, as revealed in the story of Teoria Hamori, a Palestinian woman captured during the Second Intifada:

Unfortunately I did not succeed in committing the attack. . . . I wanted to be a 'Shahida'. I wanted to sacrifice myself for Palestine, for our land, and to kill many Jews. You use Apache helicopters, F-15 aircraft, and tanks against us and you have all the weapons. For us, the only weapon available is people like me, who take explosives and commit suicide. Since I was a baby, all I have seen is war, dead people, hatred, and blood. From the beginning of the Intifada I have followed what is happening and I have seen only blood and killing and Palestinian children who are being killed. I told myself that, just as you pay taxes to your country, my tax will be my body. I will give my body for the Palestinian cause. (cited in Kimhi and Even, 2004: 828)

It is interesting to note that such political commitment is not necessarily limited to a person's inner circle. In some cases, solidarity involves a broad (sometimes symbolic) community, such as the concept of *ummah* often invoked in Islamists' statements (Khosrokhavar, 2005; Nesser, 2006). In a videotape of July 2006, Shenzaz Tanweer, a *British-born* suicide bomber involved in the 2005 London attacks, expressed the following commitment, which clearly refers to an extremely wide religious community:

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. (Al-Qaeda, 2006)

Such a reference to a broad community can also be found in the Iraqi SA campaign. Information collected during the last four years shows that the majority of suicide attackers recruited by AQI and its allies consists of foreign fighters, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa (Cordesman, 2008). In a captured dataset known as the Sinjar Records (that was maintained by AQI) of nearly 700 foreign nationals who entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007, Saudi Arabia was by far the most common nationality of the fighters, whereas Libya contributed more fighters per capita (CTC, 2007). Of the 389 fighters who designated their ‘work’ on entry, 56 percent were to be suicide bombers. The sample supports the conclusion that the majority of suicide bombers entering Iraq were Saudis, yet Libyan and Moroccan fighters who listed their ‘work’ were more likely to register as ‘suicide bombers’. Political motivations are also likely to play a crucial role in these recruits, since joining the Iraqi insurgency is contingent on a form of pan-Islamic nationalism which continues to find support among citizens of these Muslim countries, leading some of them to embrace Al-Qaeda’s transnational cause of compelling the US and its allies to withdraw from Muslim territories (Hegghammer, 2006, 2007; Pape, 2006).

However, these motivations are usually intertwined with other reasons. Blowing oneself up often depends on an absolute commitment to certain beliefs – which we have distinguished as the concept of axiological rationality. This is true also of secular organizations such as the LTTE, where giving up one’s life for the nation or land is seen as the noblest value. The Islamist culture of martyrdom, previously examined, creates beliefs and symbols which pervade the socialization of the attackers through many contexts such as incitements delivered by clerics at local mosques or aired on TV programs, internet propaganda on Islamist websites and forums, statements by leaders like Bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri or Al-Zarqawi, as well as experiences gained in private gatherings and religious groups (Sageman, 2004, 2008). Indeed, deeply held religious beliefs and a desire for martyrdom seem to be the recurrent motivation of foreign bombers in Iraq, as documented through biographical analysis and in-depth interviews with the attackers’ family members and friends in Saudi Arabia (Hegghammer, 2007), Libya (Peraino, 2008) and Jordan (Mekhennet, 2007). Among the messages and wills left by the attackers, the document of the terrorists of 11 September 2001 – conventionally called ‘The Last Night’ – remains probably the most paradigmatic expression of the crucial role played by religious motivations. It comprises an impressive set of (rational) orientation to absolute values (Weber), culminating in the peroration:

Do not be afraid to ask God that He would grant you [the rank of] martyr, as you advance without retreating, patient and hoping for God's reward. . . . When God requires one of you to slaughter, go to it as if [the order] came from their father and mother for it is necessary for you. Do not dispute, but listen and obey. . . . Do not take vengeance for your self, but strike every blow for God Most High. . . . 'All of this was my religion in the hands of God, seeking to do well to myself before God, so that this action would be for the sake of God alone.' (cited in Cook, 2002: 33–4)

Each case examined above focuses on a specific motivational factor which distinguishes an ideal-type of individual attacker. But the complexity of empirical cases inevitably implies that such factors often co-exist in a single bomber. Probably, the experience of Mohammad Sadique Khan, the ringleader of the 2005 London attacks, provides one of the most eloquent examples, since moral outrage, vengeful sentiments, solidarity, political calculation and religious commitment are all intertwined in the following statement aired in September 2005:

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. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation. I myself, I make du'ah to Allah, to raise me amongst those whom I love, like the Prophets, the Messengers, and the martyrs, and today's heroes, like our beloved Sheik Osama bin Laden, Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, and all the other brothers and sisters that are fighting in Allah's cause. With this I leave you to make up your own minds, and ask you to make du'ah to Allah Almighty to accept the work from me and my brothers and enter us into the gardens of Paradise. (Sadique Khan, 2005)

To avoid a misunderstanding of recruitment in terms of purely cognitive theory, we have also to pay attention to other elements. Indeed, the motivations previously examined are all crucial and necessary factors, but they are not sufficient to account for the decision to become an attacker. Transformational mechanisms consisting of social interactions with community members and organizations have to be analyzed. Recruitment as a bomber involves a complex chain of social exchanges between different actors, which generate binding effects on the potential attacker's decisions. Engagement is usually mediated by networks made up of friendship and/or kinship social bonds (Della Porta, 1995; Hafez, 2007; Sageman, 2004, 2008). Radicalization is always a collective phenomenon with different

interactional phases in which any future single attacker is gradually and irreversibly channeled towards his or her role. This can begin with low-risk participation in a search for companionship, such as membership of a student association, a sports team or a religious center – all contexts which can forge social bonds which may then become more intense. If this participation intersects with places attended by extremist preachers – such as the Finsbury Park mosque in London – then radicalization may be accelerated by combining extremist messages and ‘out-group hate’, on the one hand, and mutual reinforcement based on loyalty to the new comrades and ‘in-group love’, on the other (Sageman, 2004, 2008).

To varying degrees, these kinds of group dynamic can be found in a number of different cases, such as the attackers who took part in the terrorist cells of the 2000 Canada-based Los Angeles airport ‘millennium’ plot and the 2001 New York and Washington DC attacks, as well as those involved in the 2005 London bombings and in several plots such as those of August 2006 in London and of July 2007 in Glasgow. This is also true of the recent wave of expatriate bombers who have entered Iraq – as documented, for example, by the Sinjar Records cited above, in which many fighters signed up in groups to travel to Iraq, thereby suggesting that they may have been recruited simultaneously, rather than individually (CTC, 2007; see also Hegghammer, 2007). At the same time, in recent years radicalization has become increasingly influenced by the internet instead of, or in conjunction with, face-to-face interactions. In particular, interactivity through chat rooms and jihadist forums is creating a new form of militancy which compensates for the difficulty of establishing direct contact with the Al-Qaeda core organization or distant training camps such as those attended by some of the 9/11 attackers. Apart from its core organization, Al-Qaeda is therefore metamorphosing into a new social movement, to be viewed as a decentralized, scattered social network, a global system of microstructures consisting of unstable, loosely connected cells (Knorr-Cetina, 2005) or, to use other formulations, as a leaderless jihad (Sageman, 2008). In this context, reference to the Al-Qaeda leadership continues to be relevant, but it is most inspirational when mediated by involvement in online debates and exchange of jihadist materials, which make more likely the emergence of homegrown terrorist cells, endogenous to the host, Western countries (Vidino, 2006).

Whatever the form of radicalization (offline or online), and regardless of the attackers’ motivations, any community or informal group based upon a culture of martyrdom perceives individual engagement and suicide missions as being highly valued behaviors, in that they show a high level of subordination and loyalty to the group’s values. From a symbolic standpoint, the attackers’ personal gain consists of an elevation of their status in the community (which, as a consequence, will have a positive effect on their family as well), thereby operating as an efficient catalyst in the process of gradually melding the potential attacker’s identity and beliefs with those of the group. As far as the organization or terrorist cell is concerned, a similar

process can be observed. While the attitude of individuals towards the elite takes on the form of recognizing charismatic legitimacy (Weber), the elite gives the attackers a reward in terms of enhanced prestige. In this interaction, a special place is occupied by a variety of symbols concerning membership and martyrdom, which are strategically used by organizations to gradually bind an individual to his or her role as an attacker. This is evident in preparation of videotapes before attacks. Originally adopted by Hezbollah, they enable the attackers to express their 'reasons' and resolve, but at the same time compel them irreversibly to assume a new identity. In certain organizations, such as Hamas, it is frequent for people to address those who have volunteered for the mission and to record their own videotape, describing the attackers as 'living martyrs' (*al-shahid al-hayy*). In others, such as the LTTE, potential attackers are invited to have a 'last supper' with their charismatic leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, in which they receive the highest honors, whilst their images are placed near those of previous attackers (Pedahzur, 2005). The effect of such indoctrination and rituals is to exert psychological pressure on the subject in order to overcome any doubt concerning his or her intentions. At a certain stage of his or her assumption of the role of martyr, an attacker reaches a point of no return, which is determined by the fact that further hesitations or uncertainties would involve shame or the loss of reputation. In this sense, it is also true that all attackers experience some degree of exploitation by the organization and by the community of his or her emotional distress, vengeful sentiments, political commitment or religious beliefs (cf. Kimhi and Even, 2004).

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

In this article, some developments in the use of SAs since the 1980s have been presented. Our data confirm an increasing resort to this extreme form of violence as a tactic of political struggle. Special attention has been paid to Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi suicide campaign, because of the high number of attacks and victims, and because of their capacity to integrate a variety of armed organizations into a new transnational movement opposed to the influence on, and the occupation of, Muslim countries by the Western states. In discussing the explanation of SAs, we have suggested a multi-causal model which combines different kinds of social mechanisms and rationality, not only instrumental, but also axiological, as summarized in Figure 4.

According to our analysis, three components have to be distinguished. The first is the organizations. The reasons leading to the use of suicide missions are mainly instrumental, due to the calculation that, under certain conditions, this tactic is more efficient and convenient than others in attaining specific objectives. The second is support from the community. To obtain this, organizations rely on different tools: they can propagandize economic and political benefits associated with the armed struggle; they can provide a society with economic aid; and, for the families involved in suicide missions, they confer special rewards in terms of elevation of status. In

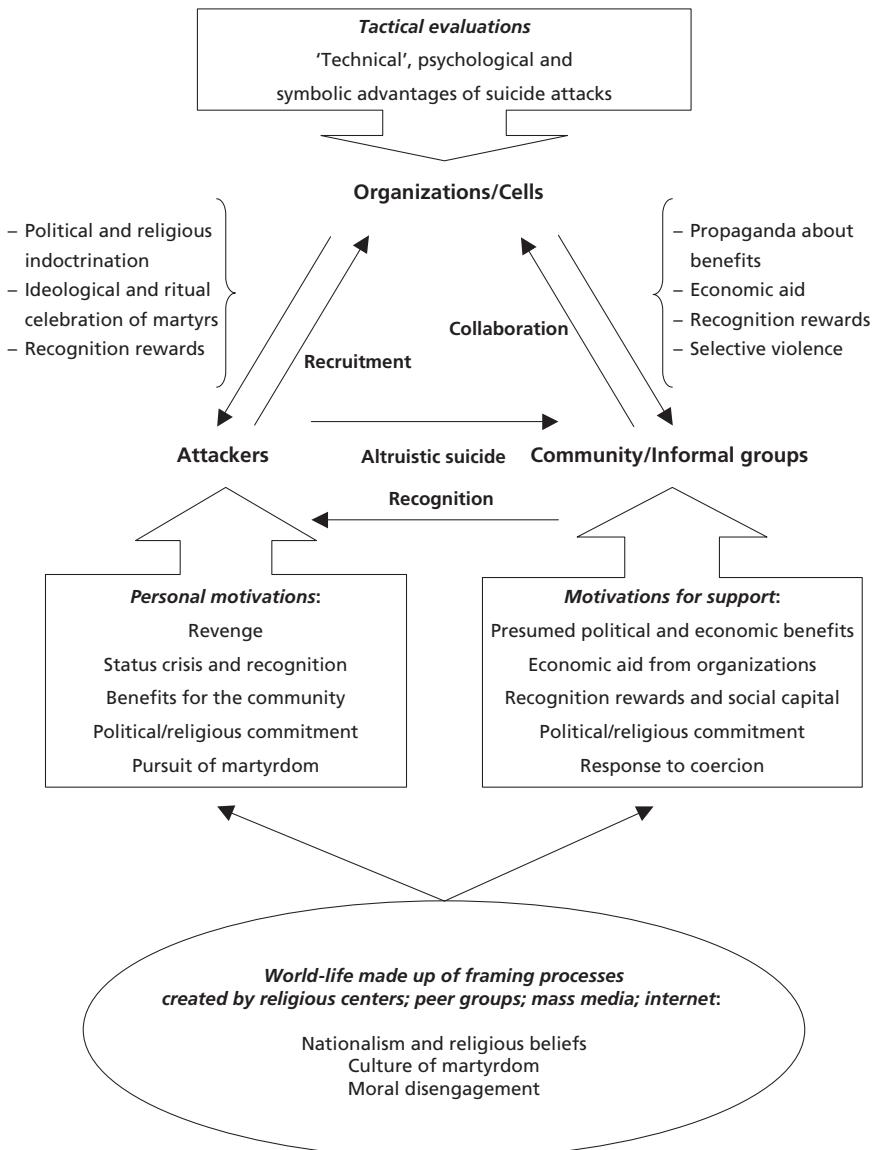


Figure 4 An ideal-typical model of suicide attacks.

addition, there are usually two other factors which promote the support of a society: adhesion to certain beliefs that dignify (altruistic) suicide (to be conceived of as martyrdom); and mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as the de-humanization of the enemy and exclusion from innocence of all members of its community. The third component is the attacker. Amongst the most relevant motivations are revenge, status crisis, the opportunity to

help one's own family through economic aid from the organization, political commitment and the high value accorded to martyrdom. In the process of recruitment, the evidence also shows the crucial role played by group dynamics and social networks.

#### *Note*

1. Data consist of the entire population of those attacks which have been executed by at least one attacker killing herself or himself between November 1982 and the end of June 2008. Data were first of all collected from various academic projects, which were extensively based on well known databases such as *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base* (<http://www.tkb.org>), *The Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (<http://www.ict.org.il>), *Lexis Nexis* (<http://www.lexisnexis.com>), and on various news media. We include all single episodes (provided with sufficient description) mentioned in the following sources: (1) *Gambetta – Tzvetkova Suicide Attacks Dataset*, Nuffield College, Oxford ([http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/datalibrary/holdings\\_datasets.aspx](http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/datalibrary/holdings_datasets.aspx)), which covers all suicide attacks (except those of Chechen separatists) occurring between April 1983 and January 2006 (see Gambetta, 2006a); 2) Pape (2006), which includes all suicide attacks from December 1981 to December 2003, and up to December 2005 for Iraq only; (3) an updated version (accessed in January 2006) of the dataset maintained by the University of Haifa (formerly published in Pedahzur, 2005), which covers all suicide attacks perpetrated between December 1981 and June 2005 – the author thanks Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger for access to this dataset. All these data were subsequently integrated by including all single suicide attacks identified by further databases (accessed in September 2008): (4) the *Global Terrorism Database* (GTD2) (<http://209.232.239.37/gtd2>), which collects data on all terrorist incidents since January 1998 (currently updated through December 2004); (5) the *Worldwide Incidents Tracking System* (WITS) at the National Counterterrorism Center (<http://wits.ntc.gov>), which covers all terrorist incidents occurring since January 2004 (currently updated through June 2008). The new version of GTD2 (which is merging with MIPT), to be released in Spring 2009, as well as the continuing update of WITS, will certainly help improve data on suicide attacks worldwide, especially for such complex scenarios as Iraq and Afghanistan.

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