When Suicide Bombing Reaches the Tipping Point

by Sam GRIER

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When Suicide Bombing Reaches the Tipping Point.

Editor: Jean Dufourcq.
Publications Assistant: Laurence Ammour
p. cm. (NATO Defense College “NDC Occasional Papers Series”)

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E-mail: research@ndc.nato.int
Web site: http://www.ndc.nato.int

Printing: 600 copies

Printed and bound by
CSC GRAFICA s.r.l. – Via A. Meucci, 28 - 00012 Guidonia, Roma
Zona industriale S.Sinforosa
Tel 0774 353308 - 0774 354410 Fax 0774 578014
INTRODUCTION

While at the macroscopic level numerous analyses have been devoted to finding the root causes of terrorism in the interest of preventing and countering terrorism as comprehensively as possible, a whole range of complementary preventive measures could be taken at a more microscopic level. It is therefore important to identify the catalysts of the forces fuelling terrorism, so as to compose a holistic menu of small and coordinated preventive actions as part of a first line of defence.

In this pursuit, last year’s NDC Occasional Paper No 3 on Fighting Terrorism: Financial and Economic Aspects\(^1\), provided insights on the financing mechanisms of terrorist activities and made some policy recommendations for the fight against terrorist organisations.

Religion, fanaticism, desperation and hatred have often been suggested as root causes for terrorism in general, but the findings determine that there is no consensus or unanimous vision on what constitutes the motivation and origins of terrorism, nor what comprises the real rationale for a growing form of terrorism: suicide attackers.

Most analysts warn of the mistake of trying to explain suicide attacks through the prism of religion or through the deforming mirror of desperation, collective historical injustice and humiliation. Research also demonstrates that suicide attackers do not necessarily present a specific psychological dysfunction, and their education and economic status are equal to and in some cases exceed that of the rest of the population.

Why then are suicide bombings increasing so rapidly in frequency and numbers and what can be done about it?

In this Occasional Paper, the Dean of the NATO Defense College, Dr Sam Grier, provides us with the perspective of the “tipping

\(^1\) Issued in November 2004.
point”, which explains why “an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire”. The theory of the “tipping point” was popularised by Malcolm Gladwell’s book “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference”. It has become a common cliché applied to any process where beyond a certain point, the rate at which the process proceeds, increases dramatically.

By analyzing the agents of change and situational factors, Dr Grier’s essay advances our understanding of the “forces behind certain behaviours” and the point where they become “contagious social epidemics”. Beyond the morality aspect of suicide attacks and the unresolved debate of their root causes, this study provides a useful framework for comprehending and countering the forces fuelling the present suicide bombing epidemic.

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The physical and personal devastation caused by the London suicide bombers is well documented, but what motivated the young men who killed themselves and 52 others that early morning of 7 July 2005 remains a mystery.

The explanations that have been advanced for the actions of suicide bombers are many: religious fervor and radicalization, a promise of paradise, disenfranchisement and anger, coercion, payments to families, attraction to a greater cause, a quest for significance, religious or personal pride, and victimization. But these reasons are not what motivate suicide bombers. They are merely pretexts that extremists use to exploit potential recruits and promote suicide to a receptive market. The actual motivation of suicide bombers is quite different.

One study suggests that suicide attacks among Palestinian groups may have inspired a self-perpetuating subculture of martyrdom. [Cronin, 2003] A pundit labels suicide bombing a “grisly terrorist fashion.” [TimesOnLine, 31/7/05] Still another refers to “a cult aspect...that draws disaffected kids to self-destructive behavior.” [Ignatius, 2005] All these have some elements of truth, and they allude to the changing profile of suicide bombers.

The London bombers were educated. Two attended university. Two had children, one a pregnant wife. In the words of an unidentified intelligence official posted in Jammu and Kashmir, “[The suicide

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1 Dean, NATO Defense College, Rome, Italy.
bomber] is no longer ghettoized. *Madrasas* (Muslim religious schools) are not the favored sanctuary of these bombers any longer. The modern day suicide bomber is hi-tech, net-savvy, and educated. It is worrisome.” [Krishman, 2005]

There is a perspective that provides a clear picture of what is happening. It is the *Tipping Point*, that moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. [Gladwell, 2002] It explains why seemingly normal, educated young people like the London bombers can get caught up in a “suicide epidemic” that makes them vulnerable to a recruiter’s invitation to kill themselves in spectacular fashion.

Suicide bombing has become a plague unlikely to recede without aggressive, proactive intervention on the part of the West. Countering this disease will require changing the perspectives of potential suicide bombers who might otherwise “volunteer” to become another statistic in the on-going suicide epidemic. It will also require transforming attitudes in the communities from which these bombers come.

Using the ideas that support the Tipping Point, this essay examines the true motivation behind the London bombings by answering four questions:

- Who are these suicide attackers?
- Why has the number of suicide bombers increased?
- Why has the profile of suicide bombers evolved to encompass educated young people?
- How might this phenomenon be overcome?

None of the proposed questions deal with the morality of this issue. Similarly the root causes of terrorism, widely debated elsewhere, are not relevant to this inquiry.

However, it is important when answering these questions to admit that the Muslim religion has been instrumentalized as the primary framework for recruiting new terrorists. It is particularly significant in the
sense that it points to where much of the effort must be directed if suicide terrorism is to be countered effectively.

**A Need for Action**

There are many reasons for stemming the tide of suicide bombers, but at least three bear special mention.

The first reason is the London bombings. The existence of a suicide epidemic strongly suggests that in another Western city, would-be suicide bombers and their handlers are busily preparing for another attack.

The second is the recent call for an army of suicide bombers by the spiritual advisor to Iran’s president. “This holy organization of the Islamic Republic is aimed at those who are interested in suicide.” Three rallies involving up to 500 men and women have been held. One young man volunteered to join the organization, but fled Iran when a local Ayatollah condemned suicide bombings and advised him to have no part in such activities. [YNet News, 2005] While this is a worrying development, it also implies that the youths who “volunteered” can be persuaded to change their minds.

The third reason is the psychological impact suicide bombings are having on American soldiers and Iraqi civilians, as US troops fight an adversary that uses civilians as human bombs and kills anyone who presents a target of opportunity. *BBC News* reported on 12 July 2005 that a suicide bomber killed one US soldier and injured three others when he drove his car into a crowd of children as the soldiers gave them sweets. Twenty-six Iraqis, almost all children, died. On 1 September 2005, *This is London* reported that the rumor of a suicide bomber’s presence led to a panicked stampede on a Baghdad bridge, killing 953 Iraqi civilians and injuring another 815, mostly women and children.

The current situation in Iraq is reminiscent of that facing US and allied forces in the Pacific theater in World War II. According to some sources, the psychological impact the *kamikaze* had on Allied soldiers,
sailors and airmen was profound, and just the anticipation of the suicide attacks drove some sailors insane. [Psych Central]

While the situation among US troops in Iraq is not as grave as it appears to be among the civilian population, it is clear that random suicide bombings are psychologically debilitating.

**Approach**

It is useful as a first step to look at the broader category of suicide attackers, and what all members of this group have in common. This is followed by a discussion of how suicide bombers are distinct from suicide terrorists, and how today’s epidemic of suicide bombings is similar to attacks by the kamikaze during World War II.

General principles that suggest ways to discourage potential suicide attackers conclude the essay. These principles are most applicable to, and most easily implemented in, countries and areas that are under the control of Western governments. It must be conceded that putting these prescriptive principles into practice will be challenging, even in areas of Western dominance.

**Other Challenges and Limitations**

Political pressure or covert measures may be required to counter suicide attacks by citizens of Muslim countries, which while holding pro-Western views, fail to temper extremism within their borders for internal political purposes. Western governments may have to demand cooperation more firmly in light of recent events.

Outside the scope of this paper and excluded from its analysis is the need for moderate Muslims living in the West to cooperate more extensively with local police and authorities, particularly when they learn that members of their communities are becoming radicalized. Similarly, Western governments will have to become more proactive and less hesitant about addressing threats that originate from certain groups. As the Dutch after the November 2004 murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh
and the British in the wake of the July 2005 bombings are discovering, new attitudes are required from both sides.

1. **Who are these Suicide Attackers?**

   Westerners have great difficulty accepting that seemingly normal people may choose to blow themselves up along with as many innocent people as they can in order to make a political statement or to achieve a political objective. With each new attack involving an unexpected source, the list of possible candidates for the next attack grows longer. Despite attempts to understand who comprises this list, it is now so long as to offer little value in identifying the so-called pool of recruits.

   Virtually all suicide bombers attacking the West since the first suicide bombing attack against the United States in Lebanon in April 1983 have been Muslims. Aside from this, it seems that almost anyone fits into the category of “potential suicide bombers”. By focusing on “the who” rather than “the why”, we may be missing any chance for a proper analysis of the problem and in turn any chance to solve it.

   **Suicide Attackers**

   Suicide attackers are grouped into two categories: suicide terrorists, who act against a common target in concert with one another as members of a team; and suicide bombers, who (although they may coordinate their attacks) execute their acts of violence alone. The attacks conducted by both suicide terrorists and suicide bombers are well planned and are not random events. Suicide attackers have made a decision to die, and that decision could be carried out in the days, weeks, or even months ahead.

   **Suicide Terrorists**

   Suicide terrorists take hostages with the intent of gaining attention and prolonging the psychological impact of their actions.

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2 A recent tactic adopted by suicide bombers in Iraq is to drive a car laden with explosives through a city until the driver identifies a suitable target.
Threatening large numbers of people for an extended period of time is drama, and it promises to bring broad and in-depth coverage to the terrorists’ cause.

The Chechen terrorists who took over a theater in Moscow in October 2002 and a school in Beslan in September 2004 were suicide terrorists. In both cases, the terrorists’ actions were preplanned and coordinated. They acted as a team and had an acknowledged hierarchy. In the case of the Nord-Ost Theater in Moscow, the raid was led by Movsar Barayev, the nephew of a Chechen warlord who had been killed a year earlier. He was assisted by extremists with money from Al-Qaeda, confirming the reality of cooperation among various terrorist factions. [Galeotti, 2002] The day after the siege began, the Moscow Times reported Barayev’s claim that 40 Chechen widows were participating in the attack.

Authorities can react to a hostage crisis before the suicide terrorists kill themselves and their captives. In the Moscow case, 128 hostages died when Russian Special Forces stormed the theater. Over 500 survived.3

**Suicide Bombers**

The best known and by far the greatest number of cases of suicide bombings were executed by the kamikaze during World War II. Until most recently, the Tamil Tigers have been the leading protagonists, sometimes employing suicide bombings for political assassinations.

Suicide bombers are armed with explosives they detonate to kill themselves along with their victims. Suicide bombing attacks generally require little or no training and are easily executed. They are solo acts of extreme violence, and they are particularly difficult to understand without a proper framework. It will be argued that the motivations of all suicide bombers are similar, regardless of the actual apparatus they use.

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3 There are divergent accounts of what actually happened. http://en.wikipedia.org quotes a Moscow doctor who said that all but one hostage died from the unidentified gas pumped by government forces into the building before the theater was stormed. Interviews with hostages revealed that many fell unconscious. Terrorists wearing explosives when they lost consciousness were executed by Russian soldiers who claimed it was the safest way to deal with them.
The recruiting tactics used to solicit the group of London suicide bombers are worth looking at more closely. Aside from the psychological impact simultaneous multiple explosions may have on the target population, recruiting groups of suicide bombers who have already developed links with each other gives preparations a conspiratorial feel and hence strengthens the secrecy of and commitment to the group’s activities. It also fosters esprit and a sense of shared identity and loyalty. It thereby lessens the likelihood that a bomber will not execute his part of the mission because the group, with whom he has an established relationship, is depending on him.

One wonders whether the fourth bomber in the first attack who made frantic phone calls to his accomplices ten minutes after the “appointed time” and detonated his bomb nearly an hour after his cohorts, hesitated due to second thoughts followed by succumbing to group pressure after he learned that the others had carried out their roles.4 In the second London attack, the fifth bomber discarded his device in a nearby park “before he could detonate it” according to reports. It still has not been disclosed whether the fifth bomber decided at the last moment not to participate.

9/11 Suicide Attackers

The 9/11 attacks were a complex hybrid of suicide terrorism and suicide bombing. Four separate but coordinated teams acted as suicide terrorists, hijacking airliners filled with hostages they intended to murder. But in the end, most of the terrorists switched their roles to controlling passengers, while the four men flying the aircraft wielded their planes as if they were kamikaze pilots.

Although the tipping point would come after the Iraq war, the 9/11 suicide attacks were the genesis of the current suicide bombing epidemic.

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4 Twelve more bombs were found five days later in the trunk of the rental car used by the four attackers to drive to London. Originally there was speculation as to whether there might have been other groups planning follow-on attacks that were thwarted by the rapid response of the London Metropolitan Police. [ABC News, 28/7/05]
The Role of Recruiters

Recruiters like those in the following list actively solicit others to become suicide bombers.

- High-ranking officials, who appeal to a broad community such as the spiritual advisor to the Iranian president. [Ynet News, 2005]
- Extremists inspired by Al-Qaeda, who create a “galaxy of jihad” on the Internet designed to appeal to young, net-savvy Muslims. [Kepel, 2005]
- Members of terrorist organizations like the Tamil Tigers, who recruit bombers from within their own organization. [Wikipedia]
- Terrorist operatives (perhaps self-appointed), who target acquaintances they perceive as vulnerable for exploitation.
- Radicals, who coerce their victims by threatening them or their families. [Dviri, 2005]

The Role of Outside Handlers

Handlers organize and oversee the execution of an attack. They are a key component in the planning, and they provide the “map” with which the attackers operate. Control over events may be exercised by handlers on a continuing basis via cell phone, as reported by the survivors of the April 2002 Moscow terrorist attacks. [Speckhard, 2004] Or it may occur in the form of a brief association where the handler acts as recruiter and trainer, and provides the recruit with the explosives, the plan and the timing.  

Handlers may be present at the scene and flee before an attack occurs, or they may remain on the scene at a safe distance to avoid detection. In some cases, handlers may never be physically present at the scene of the attack.

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5 Jihad means to “to struggle” or “to strive”. [Wikipedia]
6 One source refers to “minders”, who sequester the suicide bomber in a safe house, isolated from all contact with the outside world (including family and friends), during final preparations for “martyrdom”. [Hoffman, 2003]
Some investigators of the London bombings contend the 7 and 21 July 2005 attacks were planned independent of any outside influence and were unrelated. This would liken them to the Columbine copycats who patterned their attacks after the original massacre, and it raises the troubling specter of other copycat cells.

However, there are reasons to be skeptical of their findings. At least two of the 7 July London bombers visited a training camp in Pakistan, and one member of the 21 July bombers trained in Saudi Arabia. It seems clear that all of them were radicalized and that some were trained to make bombs. They had access and financing to buy the necessary equipment such as detonators, and the 7 July attackers purchased a commercial refrigerator. The first attack occurred on 7/7, a date that is easily remembered and like the Madrid bombings of 3/11 conjures up memories of 9/11. Finally, not only did some of the attackers attend the same Finsbury Park mosque, [TimesOnLine, 1/8/05] but Finsbury Park was also the mosque attended by shoe bomber Richard Reid and 9/11 conspirator Zacharias Moussaoui. [WorldNetDaily, 2003]

Kamikaze Pilots

There are striking parallels between the recruitment of young university students by the Japanese during World War II to fly kamikaze aircraft, and the recruitment of contemporary suicide bombers. It seems that what started as the brainchild of a desperate Japanese admiral at the battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 quickly expanded in the wake of its early successes.

From its modest beginning involving 24 professional aviators, the kamikaze took on remarkable proportions, eventually growing into a national phenomenon in which over 4,000 pilots willingly flew to their deaths to defend their country and to die with honor. Thousands more

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7 The original Columbine attackers learned to make bombs from Internet sites, and they saved money they earned working to buy weapons and ammunition. They executed their plan on the 20th of April, Hitler’s birthday and one day after the date of the original Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. [Rosenberg]

8 On 1 September, Al-Qaeda officially claimed responsibility for the attacks in a videotape aired on Al Jazeera television.
would be recruited and prepared to die in the expected American invasion of Japan.

Glamorizing the kamikaze and holding elaborate ceremonies before the missions were flown created a potent formula for growth.

2. Why Has the Number of Suicide Bombers Increased?

The Los Angeles Times reported on 2 June 2005 that a staggering 90 suicide bombing attacks occurred in Iraq in May alone, killing 750 people. Five occurred in one six-hour span. This was after 69 reported suicide attacks in April. A US spokesman was quoted as saying, “…there is nothing to indicate that the availability of [suicide bombing] volunteers is on the decline.” In contrast, researchers report 47 Palestinian suicide bombings for all of 2002, the worst year on record. [Yom, 2004]

Robert Pape in a 14 July 2005 interview with Court TV stated that since 2002, Al-Qaeda has carried out over 15 suicide and other terrorist attacks, killing 700 people, more than all the years before 9/11 combined.

Theory of The Tipping Point

The Tipping Point asserts that ideas, products, messages and behaviors spread like viruses. They can be contagious, little changes can have big effects, and dramatic changes can happen in a hurry. Forces behind certain behaviors reach a point where they become contagious social epidemics, and where they appeal to people who in the past would never have been inclined to adopt those behaviors.

The three agents of change that trigger the Tipping Point are the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. Also important for social epidemics that are contagious for certain groups is the notion of Epidemics in Isolation. These ideas can advance understanding of why suicide bombings have increased in both frequency and number of late, and of why the profile of suicide bombers has evolved to encompass even British adolescents.
The Law of the Few

The Law of the Few claims that social epidemics are driven by the actions of a handful of people. Salesmen and Connectors are the two components of the Law of the Few that most apply to suicide bombing. Salesmen can persuade people who may not be easily convinced, and Connectors are described as “people with a special gift for bringing the world together.”

Salesmen convince others to join an ongoing phenomenon. In the case of suicide attackers, the salesmen are terrorist leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Zarqawi, and the Imams (leaders of Muslim congressional prayers) who deliver hate speeches and foster extremism in their mosques.

Bin Laden leads the “World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders,” which includes Al-Qaeda. His goals include the withdrawal of US troops from Saudi Arabia, the replacement of the Saudi regime with an anti-Western Islamic state, and the recovery of Jerusalem from Israel. He views hostility toward the US and the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction as religious duties. [Frontline] An uncompromising advocate of fanatical extremism and virulent hatred, he is the consummate salesman for the jihad against the West. US presidential candidate John Kerry was convinced of bin Laden’s effectiveness as a salesman; he judged that the speech by Osama bin Laden just before the 2004 election played a significant role in his loss to the President. Kerry said that his support was going up in the week before the November vote, but flat-lined after the new tape of bin Laden was released. [Political News, 2005]

The mastermind of the Madrid bombings, Abu Musabel Zarqawi, personally beheaded a young Jewish man and started a string of kidnappings and grisly murders in Iraq. His label is on numerous terrorist groups and attacks on four continents. [Leiken, 2004] In December 2004 bin Laden declared him his Iraqi “emir”. [Murphy, 2004] Zarqawi’s organization recruits terrorists and smuggles them into Iraq. [Leiken, 2005]
The effectiveness of clerics as salesmen is reflected in the beliefs of Palestinians. A March 2005 poll reveals that 69% would prefer that the Palestinian Authority follow Islamic religious law, 16% would prefer laws passed by their own Palestinian Legislature, and 11% want both. Just 18 days before 9/11, the highest-ranking Islamic figure in the Palestinian Authority prayed, “Oh, Allah, destroy America and its supporters and collaborators. Oh Allah, destroy Britain and its supporters and collaborators.” [Palestinian Media Watch, 2005] Despite Arafat’s condemnation of the attacks, Palestinians danced in the streets after the twin towers collapsed killing thousands of innocent Americans.

In the case of Muslim suicide bombers, the connectors are not people but rather the types of communication sites affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda websites since 9/11 have become the primary means for disseminating hate propaganda, and Al Jazeera television has been instrumentalized by bin Laden and his lieutenants to threaten the West and to galvanize support for their extremist beliefs. Mosques led by radical clerics openly support Islamic terrorism.

Devolution of terrorist groups into small cells makes detection difficult for Western intelligence sources, but it also means that the cells must find ways to share ideas and communicate with those outside their trusted circles. Websites have been used to create a new “planetary space” of extremism that circumvents government censorship. Displacing many traditional clerics as the authoritative exppositor of Islam and the requirements Muslims must meet, these “exciting and intoxicating” websites of radicalism explain why some educated young people have become infected with extremist ideas. [Kepel, 2005] Designed to inform and incite, one Pakistani website, for example, maintains a section entitled “How to Strike a European City.” Another tells how to develop and use biological weapons. [TimesOnLine, 31/7/05] Still others show the beheadings of the victims of unconscionable radicals. A new and proliferating Internet phenomenon is to memorialize terrorists, and in particular suicide bombers, as a means of “target marketing” aimed at recruiting new “martyrs”. [Glasser, 2005]
Al Jazeera rivals BBC in its worldwide audience with an estimated 50 million viewers. It allows itself to be used as a forum for terrorists to deliver their extremist messages, receiving, for example, payments of $20,000 per minute for the bin Laden tape shown during the conflict in Afghanistan. [Litvinovich, 2001] On 1 September, Al Jazeera aired a video showing Al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and one of the 7 July 2005 London bombers. The video was produced by the Al-Sahab Production Company, which also produced videotapes made by the 9/11 suicide attackers. [CNN, 2005]

Mosques, meanwhile, can serve as a meeting place where radicals converse and where attendees are exposed to an ideology of extremism. In Italy, sermons given in five mosques in different cities legitimized Islamic terrorism in various ways, exalted holy war and “martyrdom”, and verbally attacked the West and Israel. [Magister, 2005]

**The Stickiness Factor**

The Stickiness Factor refers to the quality of the message being delivered. Is it memorable? Is it so memorable that it can create change and spur people to action? What is the “message” that makes suicide bombers carry out their missions?

In an experiment university students were offered cost-free immunizations at the university’s clinic. One group was made to feel that getting the immunization was important, another was not. Neither group made the effort to get immunized. However, when students were provided a map to the clinic along with available appointment times, both groups, whether they felt the need for immunization was important or not, visited the clinic in significant numbers.

The Stickiness Factor for suicide bombers is the “message” provided by their handlers. Handlers provide their recruits the plan, the organization and the explosives, and give the execution order for their rendezvous with death – the equivalent of a map and appointment times.

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9 The two were never shown together. The tape was edited, switching from one speaker to the other.
The Power of Context

Context is the condition and circumstance of the times and places in which events occur. The most important characteristic of the Power of Context is that for certain kinds of environments, people are exquisitely sensitive to change. This is not meant to suggest that everyone responds to circumstances in an identical way, but that everyone is subject to their influence. Likewise, it does not mean that a response to context generates a change in beliefs, but it does reflect a change in behavior.

Social epidemics, such as the one that attracted kamikaze pilots in huge numbers, are sensitive to context. Cultural influences, such as the Japanese notion of honorable suicide, serve to strengthen them.

To be sure, once the context for certain behaviors is removed, the behavior changes as well. For example, when the war was over and the context that provided the rationale for recruiting kamikaze pilots disappeared, the *divine wind* was stilled.

The city of New York reduced its violent crime rate dramatically by realizing that seemingly insignificant quality-of-life crimes become tipping points for violent crime. Criminals do not necessarily act for fundamental, intrinsic reasons and live in their own world. Rather, they are influenced by their environment. They are alert to cues, and they are prompted to commit crimes based on their perception of the world around them.

New York City also discovered that it did not have to solve all its social problems to lower its violent crime rate – problems that might take years and even decades to correct such as social injustice, structural economic inequities, unemployment, racism, and institutional and social neglect.

Violent crime in New York was reduced by taking stricter measures against quality of life crimes on the street, stopping petty crime and “fare-beating” behavior in the subway system, and scrubbing graffiti, a symbol of social illness, from subway cars in real time. The lesson is that the importance of context should not be underestimated.
In suicide bombings, the Power of Context is the accelerating call for “martyrs” by terrorist leaders who see it as a tool for achieving political purposes. It is the approval of terrorism by respected Muslim leaders, who legitimize violence with their silence or worse with their praise. It is the encouragement found on Islamist websites to fight the infidels on behalf of Allah, presented in terms that glorify bloody acts and dehumanize the intended victims. It is the instrumentalization of the Muslim religion as the justification and motivation to commit those crimes. It is the success of bombings that cause democratic governments to succumb to the demands of terrorists. Finally, context is provided in the aftermath of a suicide bombing by its presentation to the world only moments after it occurs, and the detailed coverage of it for hours, days, weeks and even months afterward.

**Epidemics in Isolation**

The notion of Epidemics in Isolation is the key to understanding why the number and frequency of suicide bombings seem now to be increasing dramatically. It also explains why the profile of suicide bombers has changed. The Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context are all important when trying to understand the causes of suicide bombings, but another factor offers a different explanation of why people choose to die violently. This is the idea that suicide bombing has become a social epidemic.

What is a social epidemic? In 1975, a young man from a prominent family on the island of Ebeye in Micronesia was caught up in a love triangle. Unable to choose between his two lovers, he hanged himself in romantic despair, and thus began an epidemic of suicides on the island. Teens began committing suicide because they saw their girlfriends with another boy, or because their parents refused to give them beer money. One teen died because his parents did not buy him a graduation gown, another because his brother told him he was making too much noise. Teens who made failed attempts at killing themselves said they had begun dreaming about the previous victims. Twenty-five young people would kill themselves over the next two years, for apparently
trivial reasons, when there had been only a single suicide on Ebeye during the previous 12 years.

Research has shown that people who die in highly publicized suicides, whose deaths give “permission” for others to die, serve as tipping points in suicide epidemics. When stories about suicides appear in the mass media, the suicide rate jumps. News coverage in the late 1970s of a number of suicides by self-immolation in England prompted 82 more over the next year. The Columbine school massacre that took place in 1999 in Colorado led to a national school-shooting epidemic. In the 22 months that followed, there were 19 separate incidents of school violence across the United States patterned after Columbine.

Highly publicized suicides prompt other people, particularly those who are vulnerable to suggestion because of immaturity or mental illness, to engage in a deviant act as well.

The issue of mental instability among suicide attackers is debated. One source suggests that many suicide bombers show signs of psychological imbalance. [Wikipedia] Interviews with thirty Palestinian women in Israel jailed as would-be suicide bombers are summed up by their guard as follows: “Some of them did it to make amends for a relative who was a collaborator, others to escape becoming victims of honor killings, and for the psychologically frail or depressed [emphasis added] it was a good way to commit suicide and at the same time become ‘heroines’.” [Dviri, 2005]

Muslim extremists reject the suggestion that suicide bombers are psychologically or emotionally unstable. [al-Khabbaz, 2003] They believe that providing a purposeful rationale makes the actions of suicide bombers rational. Palestinians, for example, say that bombers are driven by a priceless thirst for revenge, religious zeal and dreams of glory. [CBS News, 2002] Al-Qaeda lionizes each suicide bomber as a shahid, or martyr. [Wikipedia]

The typical suicide bomber who joins an on-going suicide epidemic is vulnerable to recruitment because of immaturity, coercion, or
psychological dysfunction stemming from personal trauma, exposure to violence, depression or anxiety.

These epidemics in isolation, so-called because they affect a single group, have extraordinary contagious power. In Micronesia, teens were doing something entirely unique to their teenage culture. The same was true for the Columbine aftermath. Both incidents had grown into suicide epidemics.

The following passage from Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* is quoted for emphasis.

“The ‘permission’ given by an initial act of suicide...isn’t a general invitation to the vulnerable. It is really a highly detailed set of instructions, specific to certain people in certain situations who choose to die in certain ways. It’s not a gesture. It’s speech...The individual within the ‘attempted suicide subculture’ can perform an act which carries a preformed meaning; all he is required to do is invoke it. The process is essentially similar to that whereby a person uses a word in a spoken language.”

Techniques that exploit the vulnerable provide the potential suicide bomber with the context to join the suicide epidemic and thereby give his life meaning by conducting the attack. The vulnerable recruit, meanwhile, is unaware that he has been wheedled into the act of self-sacrifice, or if coerced resigns himself to his fate.

Suicide bombing has passed the tipping point. It has become a suicide epidemic, and it will continue until the forces that triggered the tipping point are overcome.

**Case Study: the Kamikaze**

Before more fully developing how the ideas discussed so far specifically apply to contemporary suicide bombing, it is useful to take a closer look at the case of kamikaze pilots during World War II.
A powerful context for self-sacrifice existed in Japan that had its origins in the samurai, who modeled the noblest essence of being Japanese. The Japanese armed forces purposely assimilated this “warrior spirit” into their soldiers. [von Urach, 1943] 10

When the first kamikaze pilots were recruited, they came from a group of 24 talented student pilots personally trained by Admiral Takijiro Onishi, “the father of the kamikaze.” These young men were well-trained combatants willing to sacrifice their lives in defense of Japan if it was necessary. They did not sign up to be kamikaze pilots. It was only when the context was created by their commanders that they agreed to fly their aircraft into US ships.

The highly publicized suicides of this special group of aviators gave permission for others to follow in their footsteps.

At the same time, the Japanese high command legitimized kamikaze missions in three ways. First, it gave the kamikaze a name with religious and historical connotations: divine wind.11

Second, it perverted the long honored ideal of self-sacrifice that originated with the samurai by using it as a marketing tool to convince university students that they too could become worthy of the tradition of the samurai if only they would join the kamikaze. The kamikaze pilot’s manual encouraged, “Transcend life and death. When you eliminate all thoughts about life and death, you will be able to totally disregard your earthly life. This will also enable you to concentrate your attention on eradicating the enemy with unwavering determination, meanwhile reinforcing your excellence in flight skills.” [U-S-history.com] Kamikaze pilots in general were poorly trained and easy targets for experienced Allied flyers. [Psych Central]

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10 The essential trait of the Japanese soldier was his ascetic character. Entry requirements for the military were extremely rigorous. Japan’s naval academy, for example, accepted only 200 of 8000 applicants. Directly subordinate to the Emperor, the Japanese military had the deciding word in international relations that related to military security of the nation. [von Urach, 1943]

11 In the year 1281, Japan was being invaded by Kublai Khan. Just as the invading Mongols were about to overwhelm the Japanese, a catastrophic typhoon swept through the land and eliminated the entire Mongol horde. The typhoon that saved Japan became known as the Kamikaze, or Divine Wind. [U-S-history.com]
Third, it ritualized the phenomenon, holding medal ceremonies immediately prior to kamikaze missions. Pilots carried prayers from their families and flew a special route that would take them over a specific region leading to the ocean. Some threw flowers from their aircraft.¹²

The kamikaze so electrified young Japanese men that some kamikaze aircraft took off with five and six “pilots” on board. [Johnson]

While the pool of potential kamikaze pilots in principle included all Japanese males of military age, the men who followed the example of the first kamikaze aviators were on average twenty-something university students, the majority in their late teens. They did not sign up simply to defend their country. Rather, they expressly made the decision to die for it.

Experienced pilots were refused in the kamikaze, or told to bail out before their planes hit their targets. Hence, the profile of kamikaze pilots mutated from the original group of skilled aviators to normal, everyday college students.

Case Study: the Muslim Suicide Bomber

Mohammad created a compelling context for Islamic self-sacrifice at the Battle of Badr in A.D. 624. Facing overwhelming odds, he exhorted his men by offering heaven to those who were slain: “…no man will be slain this day fighting against them with steadfast courage advancing not retreating but God will cause him to enter Paradise.” Life and death were both transcended. [Lambert, 2005]

Osama bin Laden claims to have been radicalized by Israel’s bombing of West Beirut in 1982, and it was shortly thereafter that the suicide bombing cult was imported into Lebanon from Iran. [TimesOnLine, 2/8/05] America became a victim in April 1983 and again

¹² Cockpits were strewn with cherry blossoms and schoolgirls would line the runway, as would wives and parents, some of whom had walked for days to see their children for the last time. [Johnson] According to legend, kamikaze pilots flew over Mount Kaimon to bid farewell to their country. Residents on Kikaijima island say that kamikaze pilots dropped flowers as they departed, and today there are still beds of cornflower that bloom in the hills in early May. [Psych Central]
in October 1983 when a truck bomb driven by a suicide bomber killed 241 Marines and injured a hundred more at a barracks in Lebanon. France was struck at the same time, suffering over 70 casualties. France and the United States withdrew their forces within six months without any major response to the attacks, teaching terrorists that democracies are vulnerable to the effects of suicide bombings. [Cronin, 2003] Hence a powerful context was created for employing suicide bombers to attack the West in order to achieve political aims.

Claiming to represent the *Umma* (a term first used to describe the original Islamic community) and to legitimize their communiqués and declarations, bin Laden and Al-Qaeda issued *fatwas* (a legal pronouncement issued on a specific issue)\(^{13}\) according to *Sharia* (Islamic law) and invoked the Koran to support their extremist positions. [Fishel, 2002]

At least 20,000 jihadists were trained in Afghan camps between 1996 and late 2001, and Al-Qaeda operatives or their protégés established a presence in over 60 countries. [Stevenson, 2004]

Prior to 9/11, attacks were launched against the World Trade Center, the Al Khobar barracks in Saudi Arabia, US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, and the *USS Cole*.

But it would be the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center that killed so many people in such a spectacular fashion that would inspire the vulnerable to also engage in indiscriminate acts of suicide bombing.

America’s retaliatory operations to eliminate the Taliban and bin Laden’s organization would make him the world’s best-known terrorist and its most influential salesman. Radical Islamic clerics picked up the siren call and made their mosques centers of extremism. Islamist websites sprang up to aid the cause of radicalization and extend its reach to a worldwide audience.

\(^{13}\) Contrary to what is believed by many non-Muslims, and even by the majority of Muslims, a fatwa is not binding on all persons professing the Muslim faith. The only ones obliged to obey any specific fatwa are the *mufti* (an Islamic scholar who interprets Shariah) who issued it and his followers. [Wikipedia]
Extremists followed the example of the Japanese in World War II. They perverted the spiritual significance of self-sacrifice introduced by Mohammad at the battle of Badr and used it to offer warrior-like status to virtually anyone willing to wrap himself in explosives and kill infidels.

Saddam Hussein raised the amount Iraq would pay to relatives of suicide bombers to $25,000 per family, “…making it easier for some potential bombers to make up their mind.” Charities from Saudi Arabia and Qatar paid money to families of Palestinian suicide bombers. [CBS News, 2002]

Palestinian teenagers proved susceptible to the suicide epidemic. Straight-A students with healthy lives and happy families “volunteered” to kill themselves. [al-Khabbaz, 2003]

The terrorist attack on Madrid in March 2004 and its impact on the elections, after which Spain withdrew its forces from Iraq, reinforced the context and the rationale for attacking democracies.

Convoys led by US and Coalition forces in Iraq began employing Electronic Counter Measures equipment, often referred to as “jammers”, and associated techniques to protect against the use of remotely detonated Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) by insurgents. This strategy led insurgents to rely more heavily on methods of attack in which IEDs are detonated directly, including suicide bombing.

Attempting to destabilize Iraq’s fledgling government, insurgents began a new wave of brutal suicide bombings aimed at the civilian population. [MSNBC News, 14/9/05]

It is noteworthy that the suicide bombers who followed the example of the 9/11 terrorists and killed 52 people in London on 7 July 2005 all grew up in the United Kingdom. One was thirty years old, another twenty-two. Two were teenagers. All appeared to be normal British citizens.

The average age of Palestinian suicide bombers has been twenty-two. In the Palestinian distribution of educational achievement, the
suicide bombers were well educated. They often experienced personal trauma related to force prior to their volunteering, such as the death or injury of a family member. [Yom, 2004]

Two hundred names associated with suicide bombings in Iraq were culled from extremist websites. They suggest that the vast majority were not Iraqis and that many were students or from wealthy families. They appear to have been novices in warfare and to have been attracted by the lure of quick martyrdom. A death announcement for one young suicide bomber referred to “those 19 heroes” of 9/11. [Glasser, 2005]

3. **Why has the profile of suicide bombers evolved to encompass educated young people?**

As in the case of the kamikaze in World War II, suicide bombing has passed the tipping point and become a suicide epidemic. Hence, suicide bombing attracts those most vulnerable to suggestion because of immaturity or emotional instability: young men and women searching for purpose in life, people traumatized by the effects of war or the loss of loved ones, and those who may suffer from some form of mental illness.

These “volunteers” may be “offering” to kill themselves for trivial reasons as teenagers did in Micronesia, for what appear to them to be honorable motives as did the Japanese kamikaze, or for no other reason than that they have fallen spell to the celebrated example of their predecessors.

Not addressed explicitly thus far is the apparently significant number of young Muslim women coerced into becoming suicide bombers by recruiters to make amends for a relative who was a collaborator or to escape becoming victims of honor killings. These cases make clear that recruiters in fact exploit their prey.

In all these instances, radical Muslims are now recruiting those of their faith in whom the suggestion of suicide has taken root as a result of the epidemic’s appeal.
The implications of this observation are enormous for Muslims. Radicals are exploiting the most vulnerable adherents to their faith. Instead of extending a helping hand, Islamists and radical clerics recruit them to blow themselves up.

4. **How might this phenomenon be overcome?**

The end of World War II brought an abrupt end to the kamikaze. There is no dramatic equivalent that will bring an abrupt end to suicide bombing. Withdrawing U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq would only make the Power of Context for this plague overwhelming. The right strategy is to counter each of the forces fueling the epidemic.

One of the most practical suggestions supported by the theory of the Tipping Point is that Band-Aid solutions are worthwhile, and may even be the best kind of solutions, because they often involve the least cost and effort. Many who want comprehensive solutions may never accept this idea, but if we accept the premise of the Tipping Point, Band-Aid solutions can be applied to the forces that triggered the growing suicide bombing epidemic.

If suicide bombings are an epidemic, little changes in the forces behind them can have big effects, and dramatic changes can happen in a hurry. The following principles are suggested as ways to overcome the forces that have pushed suicide bombing beyond the tipping point.

Although they are Band-Aid solutions, it is important to consider these principles *in toto* and to apply them as part of an aggressive, holistic strategy. It should be clear from the following discussion, for example, that disabling extremist websites as a matter of policy may be detrimental to a strategy that might exploit the sites as a means to reach potential suicide bombers in Muslim countries.

These measures are intended to discourage potential suicide bombers and to thwart recruiters, with the intent of preventing suicide bombings before they occur. They are not intended as ways to interdict suicide bombers.
Undoubtedly some of the principles will be redundant with respect to measures already in place. They have been listed for the sake of completeness. They are also intended to be narrowly focused. They do not, for example, address immigration policies or the financial aspects of fighting terror.¹⁴

**Law of the Few**

As general principles:¹⁵

- Salesmen of extremist ideas should be silenced, and moderate Muslims should be given wide access to fora that offer opportunities for them to condemn extremism.
- Connectors of extremist views should be compromised. Extremist websites should be disrupted, either electronically or physically, or marginalized. Any company in a Western nation that plays host to extremist websites should be heavily fined. Television stations that permit themselves to be instrumentalized by extremists should be penalized. Mosques where extremist views are preached should be closed. Groups that endorse or support extremism should be banned.

**Stickiness Factor**

As general principles:

- Recruiters and handlers should be treated as accessories to murder. An active campaign to detect recruiters and handlers should be established.
- Storage depots that are identified as sources of explosives used for suicide bombings should be destroyed. Commercial sources should alert authorities when large quantities of over-the-counter ingredients that could be used for making bombs are purchased.

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¹⁵ These are principles, not practices. For example, while the principle is that “Salesmen of extremist ideas should be silenced,” completely silencing all extremists may not be feasible in practice.
**Power of Context**

As general principles:

- Foreign policies and defense commitments should not appear to change in response to suicide bombings.
- Those who call for, defend, legitimize, or glorify terrorist acts should be condemned and stigmatized. Governments that permit radical clerics to spread extremism should be urged to stop them.
- Terrorist training camps should be rendered useless.
- Putting blame for terrorist attacks on extremists should be swift and shrill. The loss of life, particularly when it involves civilians, should be widely condemned.
- Media coverage of suicide bombings should be brief, and pictures of suspects should be broadcast only for the purposes of soliciting the public’s help to gain information.
- Damage from terrorist attacks should be cleaned up, repaired or rebuilt (if practicable) as soon as possible.
- The groups that recruit volunteers should be censured as illegitimate representatives of Islam who do not represent all Muslims.

**Epidemics in Isolation**

As general principles:

- Commentators should express pity and regret about the deaths of suicide bombers. The perversion of self-sacrifice and the marketing of suicide to the masses should be strongly condemned.
- Suicide attackers should be described in reports either as immature or emotionally unstable (or both), or as having been coerced.
- Potential suicide bombers should be described as being targeted by unconscionable terrorist recruiters.
5. **Final Thoughts**

The intent of this essay is to stimulate thinking and debate on how to address a deeply disturbing trend that threatens civilians throughout the world as well as US and coalition forces in Iraq. It offers a framework for understanding how irrational behavior can be exploited widely for political purposes.

The ideas expressed are based on three premises:

- The reasons cited by extremists as the motivation for suicide bombings, are pretexts used to recruit potential suicide bombers.
- The 9/11 suicide attacks were the genesis of the current suicide bombing epidemic.
- The typical suicide bomber is the victim of coercion, immaturity or psychological vulnerability.

In August 2004, a kamikaze pilot blessed with 59 years of perspective, whose plane was shot down before he could fly his fatal mission, summarized his view of the kamikaze for the *Manila Times*. “There was nothing beautiful or noble about the suicide squads. I am proud of our mission but it was a mistake.” [Manila Times, 2004]

No matter how hard extremists may try to justify them, suicide attacks will never be beautiful. They will never be noble. And they will always be a terrible and wasteful mistake.
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