

Religion, Politics, and Suicide Bombing:
An Interpretive Essay

ROBERT J. BRYM

In memory of Baruch Kimmerling (1939–2007)

*Lord Clifford: The smallest worm will turn being trodden on,
And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood...*

*King Henry VI: Full well hath Clifford play'd the orator,
Inferring arguments of mighty force.
But, Clifford, tell me, didst thou never hear
That things ill-got had ever bad success?*

— *William Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 3*

RELIGION VS. POLITICS

One of the most difficult questions for students of fundamentalist Islam is whether willingness to support practices such as suicide bombing is motivated mainly by religious or political principles. Given that Islamic law does not distinguish between matters of state and religion — jurists are also theologians — the easy answer is that it is motivated by both. But that is not an answer which many analysts have favoured, partly because it glosses over important strategic issues that are closely bound up with whether one gives greater weight to religion or politics as the prime mover.

Consider the clash of civilizations thesis. Samuel Huntington (1996) argues that religious differences define the major conflicts of our era. Not all of these conflicts are so deeply rooted as to be intractable, but some of them are sufficiently obdurate that their resolution may require force. Characteristically, five years after the American invasion of Afghanistan and three years after the second American invasion of Iraq, Bernard Lewis, who coined the term “clash of civilizations” before Huntington

popularized it, lamented that “we seem to be in the mode of Chamberlain and Munich rather than of Churchill” (Lewis 2006).¹ In contrast, critics of the clash of civilizations thesis argue that, irrespective of their religious trappings, differences between Islamic and Western civilizations are largely political, and therefore subject to rational discourse, cost-benefit analysis, negotiation, and compromise (Hunter 1998). One’s view of what predominates — religion or politics — is thus correlated with one’s sense of what must be done to resolve the so-called clash of civilizations.

Why is force presumably more likely to be needed to control intensely religious opponents? Because religion is based more on faith than on reason, and extremist religious beliefs are therefore relatively impervious to the kind of rational discourse and considered compromise that politics often affords (Toft 2007:100–1, 106–7).

An important debate that has recently been initiated about the nature of suicide bombing illustrates the point. Robert Pape and others hold that suicide bombing is a rational political tactic because it is typically employed with considerable success to reach a realistic goal that other methods have failed to achieve: the liberation of occupied national territory (Pape 2005; 2007). It follows that if the problem of foreign occupation is adequately addressed, suicide bombings will become less frequent.

Assaf Moghaddam, among others, contests Pape’s view. Moghaddam holds that the suicide attacks typical of Muslim fundamentalist organizations, especially since 2001, are motivated mainly by religious impulses that have little in common with the desire to liberate occupied territory and much to do with the religious ambition to establish a caliphate. In his words,

by adopting a narrow ... view of al Qaeda as an entity engaged primarily in a struggle to end “foreign occupation,” Pape fails to take account of the fundamentally religious long-term mission of the group — to wage a cosmic struggle against an unholy alliance of Christians and Jews, which prevents the entity from establishing an Islamic caliphate over as large a territory as possible. (Moghaddam 2006:716)

1. Huntington is less sanguinary than Lewis. He opposed the US invasion of Iraq, for example. Moreover, as one might expect given his less belligerent position, Huntington recognizes that “in large part, these difficulties [between the West and the Muslim world] are the result of the extent to which a good portion of the Muslim world was subject to Western colonialism” (Huntington 2006). In contrast, Lewis dismisses the significance of Western colonialism (Lewis 2002:153).

In Moghaddam's view, Islamic fundamentalists are religious fanatics — and, by implication, the West therefore enjoys relatively little room for political manoeuvre and must instead resort to coercive force to eliminate the threat.

TWO TESTS

Moghaddam, like others who assert the primacy of religion over politics, bases his claim largely on the public statements of Islamic fundamentalist leaders. And it is true that Osama bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists demarcate friends from enemies using religious criteria; repeatedly declare their desire to establish states based on an orthodox interpretation of Islamic law; incessantly refer to holy scriptures as justification for their ambitions and actions; and adopt millenarian language in proclaiming the inevitable, God-ordained nature of their goals.

Such public utterances, do not, however, comprise a convincing body of evidence in support of the primacy-of-religion thesis. In any given case, two tests may be suggested for determining whether religion trumps politics or vice-versa:

- *The motivational test.* Max Weber showed that 16th and 17th century Protestants believed that their religious doubts could be reduced and a state of grace assured if they worked diligently and lived modestly (Weber 1958 [1904–5]). He argued that these principles had unintended effects insofar as people who adhered to the Protestant ethic saved and invested their money, thereby encouraging robust capitalist growth. Their actions had economic consequences, but they were religiously inspired. Analogously, we may infer that Islamic fundamentalism is the principal motivation for suicide bombing to the degree that its supporters are inspired by other-worldly principles. To the degree that they are motivated by a desire for a redress of political grievances, however, we are obliged to infer that political considerations trump religious inspiration. The motivational test is thus an exercise in imputing motives using Weber's method of *Verstehen*, the empathic understanding of motives in social context.
- *The circumstantial test.* Shabtai Tzvi, a self-proclaimed Jewish Messiah, converted to Islam in Istanbul in 1666, and his successor, Ya'akov Frank, converted to Christianity in Lviv in 1759. Their apostasy demonstrates that even a religious fanatic may change his or her mind under certain circumstances. It follows that a second test for whether religion trumps politics or vice-versa involves an

assessment of how, if at all, religious beliefs co-vary with the political contexts in which they are expressed. If religion is more important than politics in motivating suicide bombers, then willingness to engage in suicide bombing should be relatively invariant across political contexts. If politics trumps religion, it should be possible to identify political contexts that account for much of the variation in willingness to engage in suicide bombing. The circumstantial test is an exercise in socio-historical method, which seeks to discover the degree to which social action varies with historically specific social circumstances.

Motivational and circumstantial tests frame the following analysis. I first review pertinent research on the appeal of militant Islamic fundamentalism to offer an interpretation of why some Muslims support suicide attacks. I then summarize what we know about patterns of suicide bombing in Iraq and Israel and its occupied territories, two of the regions that have most frequently been subjected to this form of attack in the 21st century. On the basis of these analyses, I conclude that the appeal of violent fundamentalist Islam is grounded in political realities, as are the circumstances that account for variation over time in the frequency of suicide attacks. Islamic fundamentalism provides a convenient vehicle for framing political extremism, enhancing its appeal, legitimizing it, and providing a foundation for the solidarity of political groups (Sherkat and Ellison 1999:370). But the wellspring of suicide bombing is less religious than political, a fact that has profound policy implications which I discuss in the conclusion.

THE APPEAL OF MILITANT ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

Apparently, the only cross-national, cross-time public opinion data on support for militant Islamic fundamentalism comes from the Pew Research Centre. Between 2002 and 2006, Pew surveys asked national probability samples of adult respondents about their level of (1) support for “suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets” in defence of Islam; and (2) confidence in Osama bin Laden doing “the right thing regarding world affairs.”

Between 2002 and 2006, support for violence against civilians in defence of Islam fell in five of seven countries on which cross-time data are available (Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Pakistan, but not Nigeria and Turkey). Meanwhile, confidence in bin Laden fell in six of those seven countries (Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, and Turkey, but not Nigeria). Still, in 2005–06, roughly one in four Arabs

and one in five non-Arab Muslims in Asia and Africa expressed sympathy for violence against civilians in defence of Islam. Confidence in bin Laden varied widely between countries, but roughly one in four Arabs and one in three non-Arab Muslims in Africa and Asia were confident that bin Laden would do the right thing regarding world affairs (calculated from Pew Research Center 2005:38, 46; 2006:57, 60–1; Central Intelligence Agency 2007).²

Multivariate analyses of the Pew surveys are restricted to the 2002 pooled data set (Fair and Shepherd 2006; Bueno de Mesquita 2007). They reveal that, net of controls, the strongest predictors of support for violence against civilians in defence of Islam are (1) the perception that Islam is threatened, particularly by the United States, and the belief that Islam (2) does and (3) should play a large role in the politics of the country in which the respondent resides (cf. Esposito and Mogahed 2006).

The perceived threat to Islam has been dismissed by some observers as just that — a perception, and not a very accurate one at that. After all, Western incursions into the Muslim world were arguably more brutal in the 19th than in the 20th and 21st centuries. Recent history has witnessed nothing comparable to the French conquest of Algeria, which led to a decline in the Arab and Berber population of some 875,000 — nearly 30 percent of the total — between 1830 and 1872 (Ricoux 1880:260). Moreover, 80 percent of Muslims today live in countries that became independent after World War II. Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan gained freedom from communist rule in the mid-1990s. Oil revenue earned by predominantly Muslim countries has increased many times over since the early 1970s. Using political and economic indicators such as these, a case can thus be made that the threat to predominantly Muslim countries has declined since 1900 (Lewis 2002; Rodenbeck 2006).

The trouble is that the case would be largely politically irrelevant. In the first place, even by objective standards, the division of the Middle

2. The Nigerian results reported here are based on a sample of self-identified Muslims. The other results are based on samples drawn from the general populations of the respective countries. I report population-weighted means for Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Indonesia, Nigeria (Muslims only), Pakistan, and Turkey — countries containing about half the world's Muslims. The Pew figures may be underestimates. Respondents who are asked sensitive survey questions are likely to under-report socially unacceptable sympathies and behaviours unless special precautions are taken to ensure privacy and anonymity. For example, respondents may be asked to answer sensitive questions privately in paper-and-pencil format, seal their answer sheet in an unmarked envelope, and place the envelope in a briefcase containing other identical envelopes from previous respondents. No such precautions were taken in the Pew surveys.

East into British and French spheres of influence following World War I, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the concurrent creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, the American- and British-backed overthrow of the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953 and the installation of the Shah's dictatorship, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Serbian invasion of Bosnia in 1992, the Russian wars with Chechnya in 1994–96 and 1999–2000, and the invasion of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 amount to enormous threats to the independence and integrity of territories in which Muslims predominate. And in any case, as is often said, in politics, perception is reality. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Muslim world is in a better position than it was in the 19th century to regard such incursions and conquests as threatening and unjust, and to resist them. Muslims are better educated, they enjoy access to international travel and communication that make it easier for them to identify and develop solidarity with coreligionists a continent away, and they live in an era when the ideology of decolonization, national rights, and self-determination is taken for granted.

A second interpretative problem with the survey finding that perceived threat to Islam is associated with approval of violence against civilians is that it does not allow us to assign causal priority to variables. The Pew surveys were cross-sectional. They drew different samples at different time points. One cannot ascertain from such data what occurs first in the minds of respondents — the perception of a threat to Islam or support for violence against civilian targets. In principle, people who support violence against civilian targets may rationalize their attitude by claiming a threat to Islam. Alternatively, their perception of a threat to Islam may increase their support for violence against civilian targets. Inferences about causal priority require a survey with a panel design, which traces the attitudes of a single sample of respondents over time. Unfortunately, no such survey on militant Islamic fundamentalism has been conducted to date. We must therefore resort to investigating individual biographies to determine causal priority. And what better exemplar than the life of Osama bin Laden?

OSAMA BIN LADEN

Deeply religious even as a child, bin Laden was raised in the puritanical, intolerant, and xenophobic tradition of Islam that dominates Saudi Arabia (Schwartz 2003). His father was pious and intensely anti-Israel and anti-Jewish. In the 1960s, however, bin Laden attended an elite secondary school that was fairly Westernized by the standards of his time and

place. His English teacher remembers him as an extraordinarily courteous, shy, and unassuming student who “did not start as a monster.” His English biographer remarks that even as late as the months before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, when bin Laden was 22, “there was little to suggest that he was anything more than a hard-working scion of the bin Laden family whose only quirk was his intense religiosity” (Bergen 2006:8, 23).

Bin Laden’s turn to political radicalism can be dated quite precisely to regional events in 1973, 1979, and 1982, and encounters with influential mentors in the early and late 1980s.

- In 1973, Israel’s defeat of Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War, thanks in part to an American airlift of crucial weaponry, enraged bin Laden, who was then 17 years old. He dates his own political awakening and his first contact with militant Islamic fundamentalist groups to these events (Lawrence 2005:xii; bin Laden 2005:32).
- In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, profoundly shocking bin Laden and soon drawing him, along with thousands of other devout Muslims, to the Afghan jihad. Guiding him along this path was Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian cleric who was introduced to bin Laden by his father and who became bin Laden’s mentor in the early 1980s. Azzam was the main ideological and organizational force behind the recruitment of Arab volunteers to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. He popularized the idea that the expulsion of infidels from Muslim lands — Afghanistan and Palestine above all — is the duty of all Muslims.
- In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with the aim of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headquartered in Beirut (Brym 1983). The American-backed invasion involved repeated shelling of high-rise apartment blocks in West Beirut. Bin Laden later recalled:

The events that made a direct impression on me were during and after 1982, when America allowed the Israelis to invade Lebanon. . . . I still remember those distressing scenes: blood, torn limbs, women and children massacred. . . . As I looked at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the oppressor in kind by destroying towers in America. (bin Laden 2005:239)

- Egyptian militants led by Ayman al-Zawahiri were the leading contingent among Arab jihadists in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, Zawahiri preached the need to use violence to replace “apostate” governments throughout the Muslim world with Islamic fundamentalist regimes. Abdullah Azzam opposed interfering in internal Muslim politics,

but al-Zawahiri influenced bin Laden to break with Azzam's more traditional views. United under the banner of ultrajihadism, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri formed al-Qaeda in 1988.

Bin Laden has always justified his support for suicide attacks and other forms of violence against civilians in religious terms. But his ideas are a radical *departure* from mainstream Islam. The notion that an elective affinity exists between Islam and suicide bombing is contradicted by the fact that, in the words of one Islamicist, "much of the so-called Islamic behaviour that the West terms terrorism is outside the norms that Islam holds for political violence" (Silverman 2002:91). Nor did bin Laden's readiness to engage in suicide attacks against civilians precede his perception of threat. His motivation was born largely of real political violence visited upon the Muslim world. Of course, the case of a single individual, no matter how influential, adds only minor weight to the central argument of this paper. But combined with the evidence presented below on the collective response of Iraqis and Palestinians to the perception of outside threat, I see little reason to suppose that bin Laden's experience was fundamentally different from that of the many millions of other Muslims represented in the Pew surveys who support violence against civilians in defence of Islam.³

IRAQ

Having assessed the primacy-of-religion thesis by interpreting the motivation to support suicide attacks against civilians, I now engage in a brief socio-historical exercise that offers a second test: determining whether willingness to engage in suicide attacks is relatively invariant across political contexts or, alternatively, variation in political context is associated

3. Modern militant Islamic fundamentalism was politically motivated even at its origins. Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca, led the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans in World War I, in exchange for which the British promised him an Arab empire encompassing almost the entire territory from Egypt to Persia. But Hussein's ambitions were thwarted by the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, in which Britain and France secretly agreed to divide the Middle East between them after the war. Hussein's Pan-Arab nationalism thus failed, and when the Triple Entente dismembered the Ottoman Empire after the war, the last caliphate officially came to an end. In response, Hassan al-Banna, an Egyptian, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. One of its chief aims was to reinstitute the caliphate. Its first venture into political activism came with the 1936–9 revolt of the Palestinians against the British mandate and Jewish settlers in what is now Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood is the prototype and the inspiration for radical political Islamic organizations today (Horani 1991:315–49).

with change over time in the frequency of suicide attacks. Only the former circumstance can offer support for the primacy-of-religion thesis.

Let us first consider the Iraqi case and then turn to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. The first suicide attack in Iraq took place on 22 March 2003. The next 15 months witnessed 68 such attacks — about 4.5 per month — directed mainly against the invading American military and its allies. In the run-up to the January and December 2005 elections, and in their aftermath, the character of suicide missions changed. In the 20 months between July 2004 and February 2006, 376 suicide attacks took place — nearly 19 per month. They were undertaken by Sunnis, who had dominated the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein, and were usually directed against the new Shi'a-controlled government and the Shi'a population (Hafez 2006:601). As a result, in recent years, journalistic and scholarly analyses have taken to labelling suicide bombing in Iraq an expression of sectarian conflict.

The credibility of the label derives from a particular interpretation of the historical record and contemporary events. The Sunni-Shi'a schism originated in a dispute some 1,400 years ago over how Muhammad's successor should be chosen, and since then it has grown to include various doctrinal and ritual differences as well as intermittent clashes between the two religious "denominations" (Nasr 2006).⁴ The long history of sectarian differences punctuated by violence makes it seem as if suicide bombings in Iraq today are the latest chapter in a primordial, religiously motivated conflict originating in matters of succession, doctrine, and ritual.

While it is true that Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime discriminated against the Shi'a and often treated them brutally, it is also the case that the rate of Sunni-Shi'a intermarriage was high prior to 2003, especially in urban areas, and that numerous tribes had both Sunni and Shi'a branches. In fact, not so long ago, many intermarried Iraqis used to speak fondly and amusingly of themselves and their offspring as "SuShi" (Ajami 2006). Given such inter-group cohesion, sectarian conflict had to be carefully engineered — group boundaries had to be sharpened, and group antagonism stoked — by political operatives who stood to benefit from the discord. A great deal of such work must be done to ignite all "primordial" conflicts (Tilly 2003:75–80), and in Iraq it was done

4. The quotation marks are required because while, say, Protestant denominations recognize the legitimacy of other Protestant denominations, a substantial number of Sunnis — including the Taliban in Afghanistan, some Wahabbis in Saudi Arabia, Baluchistanis in southeastern Iran, and supporters of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clergy) party in Pakistan — consider the Shi'a heretics.

especially effectively by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In early 2004, al-Zarqawi wrote a letter to bin Laden in which he proposed to stir up animosity between the two groups:

The Shi'a . . . 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 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 (quoted in Bergen 2006:363).

Suicide bombings were the main tactic used by al-Qaeda in Iraq to foment what by any reasonable historical standard soon became a civil war (Fearon 2007).

Al-Qaeda was responsible for 71 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq between 22 March 2003 and 20 February 2006 for which responsible parties can be identified. Most of the remaining attacks were undertaken by other Sunni jihadi organizations (Hafez 2006:609). These groups are pursuing a system collapse strategy. They want Iraq to be a country without effective central authority, a replacement for Afghanistan that can be used as a base for organizing the overthrow of regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other countries in the region. To date, their plan is showing more signs of success than of setback (Riedel 2007).

In Iraq, suicide attacks spike in response to two sets of circumstances. First, some suicide bombing campaigns are motivated mainly by the desire for retaliation. They tend to follow big counterinsurgency offensives. They punish the government and its supporters and show them that the jihadis will not be deterred. At the same time, they exploit the jihadi image of victim and martyr to recruit new cadres eager to seek revenge. Second, other suicide bombing campaigns are based on more strategic considerations. They tend to follow developments suggesting that Iraq has reached a turning point on the road to political stability. Such campaigns took place at the time of the January 2005 election for a constitutional assembly, when the new constitution was endorsed in August 2005, and at the time of the December 2005 parliamentary election. Suicide bombing campaigns that respond to such political developments are intended to show the Iraqi people and the world that the jihadis are in control, and political stability in Iraq is precisely what they oppose (Hafez 2006:604–5).

Today, religion certainly plays an important role in the recruitment of suicide bombers and in framing the rationale for their actions, but the foregoing analysis demonstrates that suicide bombing in Iraq follows a social and political logic. The tactic was first used to attack an invading

army and its allies. Latent religious antipathies were then deliberately inflamed so as to transform suicide bombing into an offensive against a government and its supporters. Major suicide bombing campaigns are vengeful responses to large counterinsurgency offensives or strategic responses to signs of growing political stability. Religious inspiration cannot explain such variation over time.

ISRAEL, THE WEST BANK AND GAZA

At first glance, the case of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza seems to contradict the view that religious inspiration plays a secondary role in explaining variation in the frequency of suicide bombing. The first wave of 20 suicide attacks (1993–97) was initiated by two fundamentalist organizations, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. The second wave of 138 attacks (2000–05) was launched by the same groups. Together, these organizations account for 70 percent of the suicide attacks that took place in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza (Brym and Araj 2006; Araj 2008). Before they attacked, bombers typically recorded videos explaining their motives and goals. Even many of the suicide bombers who supported secular organizations such as Fatah dressed their rhetoric in religious terms.

However, two main facts confute the primacy-of-religion thesis in the case of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. First, until the late 1980s, Palestinians were arguably the world's most secularized Arabs. The growing popularity of Islamic fundamentalist organizations and support for suicide bombing as a tactic were associated with particular political circumstances, namely the failure of secular ideologies to come up with a viable plan for regaining territory (Brym 2007). Second, even after Islamic fundamentalism gained a foothold, it took considerable Israeli repression to popularize suicide bombing, not just among deeply religious Palestinians but also among secularists (Araj 2008; Brym and Araj 2008). Politics, not religion, was instrumental in the rise of suicide bombing in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

The story of the failure of secularism began in 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser took office in Egypt. Many Palestinians endorsed his Pan-Arabism as a solution to their problems. They believed that the armies of the surrounding Arab countries would force Israel to cede territory. After the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, however, most Palestinians abandoned Pan-Arabism. They turned to nationalism or Marxism, which placed responsibility for regaining lost territory on the Palestinians themselves or, more specifically, on Palestinian wage-workers (and,

in the case of Maoist-inspired organizations, on peasants). Plane hijackings brought the Palestinian cause to world attention, and guerrilla attacks proved a persistent and sometimes tragic problem for Israel, but an apparent breakthrough occurred only in 1993, when the Palestinians entered into negotiations with Israel to create a sovereign Palestinian homeland.

The Oslo peace process raised expectations among Israelis and Palestinians that a two-state solution to the conflict could be achieved. But it failed as miserably as Pan-Arabism had. It did *not* fail because intransigent Islamic fundamentalists torpedoed it. True, by 1993, Islamic fundamentalism was growing in popularity among the Palestinians. Its adherents sought an Islamic state with sovereignty over the entire territory of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Undeniably, the wave of suicide attacks that the fundamentalists launched against Israel in 1993 was strategically aimed at sabotaging peace talks (Kydd and Walter 2002). But to the credit of both the Palestinian Authority and the Israelis, the suicide attacks of the 90s did not derail the peace process.

What did put an end to the peace talks was the unwillingness or inability of all parties to live up to the principles of Oslo (Schiff 2000). Between 1993 and 2000, the Palestinian Authority failed to collect illegal weapons, armed the Tanzim militia, smuggled large quantities of weapons and ammunition into the West Bank and Gaza, and increased the size of the Palestinian security forces well beyond the levels permitted by Oslo. Israel continued to expand its settlements in the occupied territories, expropriate Palestinian land, isolate Palestinians in noncontiguous enclaves, and drag its feet regarding the implementation of the timetable on troop redeployment. The United States exerted no meaningful pressure on either side.

Palestinians and Israelis got ready for a confrontation as soon as talks broke down in July 2000. Two months later, a provocative visit by Ariel Sharon to the esplanade of al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site of Islam, caused shattered hopes to erupt into the rioting that marked the onset of the second *intifada* or uprising of Palestinians against the Israeli state. Pan-Arabism, nationalism, and Marxism having failed, it was now the turn of Islamic fundamentalism to promote its notions of “martyrdom” and “holy war.”

Three turning points in the second *intifada* illustrate the essentially political nature of the suicide bombing campaign that ensued: the onset of the campaign in December 2000; the first suicide bombing by a secular organization in August 2001; and the first suicide bombing by Fatah, the secular party that controlled the Palestinian Authority, in January 2002 (Araj 2008; Brym and Araj 2008). Each of these turning points was

preceded by an escalation in Israeli repression and was motivated mainly by the Palestinian desire for revenge and retaliation:

- *The first suicide bombing of the second intifada.* Israel's reaction to the rioting that broke out in September 2000 was highly aggressive by the admission of its own officials (Drucker and Shelah 2005:28ff.; Ricolfi 2005:94). Security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing seven people. The rioting spread quickly, and by the end of the year, Israeli security forces had killed 319 Palestinians. In the same period, Israeli victims totalled 43, including 22 civilians (Jamal 2005:257; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2005; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). In the face of such repression, PIJ launched the first suicide attack of the second *intifada*. In a press release, it clearly implied that the operation was a reaction to the killing of Palestinians during the first days of the *intifada*; it named the cell responsible for the operation the "al-Aqsa martyrs cell" (*al-Quds* 2000).
- *The first suicide bombing by a secular organization.* On 27 August 2001, Israeli forces assassinated the Secretary-General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Abu Ali Mustafa (Mustafa Zubari), in a missile strike on his office in Ramallah. This was the first Israeli assassination involving the head of a militant organization. A few hours later, Palestinian gunmen shot and killed a Jewish settler. A caller to Reuters said the shooting was only the first act of revenge by the PFLP. There followed the spectacular assassination of the far-right Israeli Minister of Tourism, Rehavam Ze'evi, in a Jerusalem hotel on 17 October and, on the same day, the first suicide bombing by a secular, nationalist organization. The military wing of the PFLP declared in a press release that the assassination of Ze'evi and the suicide bombing were responses to the assassination of Abu Ali Mustafa (*al-Quds* 2001; Bennett 2000; 2001).
- *The first suicide bombing by Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.* On 14 January 2002, Israeli forces assassinated Raed al-Karmi, a Palestinian folk hero and militia leader, by detonating a high-powered bomb beside his house. Within hours, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade issued a press release entitled "Revenge is Coming" and ambushed some Israeli soldiers east of Tulkarem, killing one and injuring another (*al-Quds al-'Arabi* 2002). It was the first of a series of increasingly violent attacks over the next two weeks, culminating in the first Fatah-sponsored suicide mission on 27 January.

We thus see that neither in its origins nor in its subsequent evolution was suicide bombing in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza driven princi-

pally by the forces of Islamic fundamentalism. Originating in the failure of secular ideologies to come up with a solution to the Palestinian problem, aimed first at disrupting peace talks, and later intended mainly to retaliate for repressive acts on the part of Israeli forces, suicide bombing was above all a response to political conditions.⁵

POLICY IMPLICATION

In his address to Congress nine days after 9/11, President George W. Bush claimed that al-Qaeda's goal is not to achieve a redress of political grievances but to "[impose] its radical beliefs on people everywhere. The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism. . . . The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children" (Bush 2001). The President's emphasis on the primacy of religious fanaticism as the driving force behind political Islam implied the need for tough and immediate military action. It formed the basis for American policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel. The President and his policy advisors refused to accord any legitimacy to the demands of America's and Israel's adversaries and failed to see that military action alone would heighten their popularity and strengthen their hand. So today in Afghanistan, the Taliban is resurgent and suicide attacks occur on average two or three times a week (Senlis Afghanistan 2007). In Iraq, suicide attacks are even more frequent, and al-Qaeda has found an ideal training ground for jihadis who are now infiltrating Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Gaza, and beyond. The country is in the midst of a civil war that may shift the regional balance of power in favour of Iran once US troops leave (Riedel 2007; Schweitzer 2007). In Gaza, Hamas is in power. In Israel, there are no suicide bombings, at least for the time being, but hope of progress toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the

5. Although the point cannot be developed here, the relationship between particular forms of anti-state violence and state repression appears to be curvilinear and dependent on the level of social solidarity of anti-state groups and the availability of alternative means of anti-state violence. Thus, while moderate levels of state repression are likely to increase the frequency of a particular form of anti-state action among highly solidary anti-state groups, high levels of state repression are likely to decrease the frequency of that form of anti-state action and increase the frequency of other forms. In Israel, for example, the construction of the barrier separating Israel from the West Bank, the widespread assassination of Palestinian militants, and repeated incursions into the occupied territories have led to a decline in suicide attacks and a rapid increase in the use of Qassam rockets against Israelis (Brym 2007; Brym and Araj 2008).

Palestinians in Gaza has been occluded in a cloud of Qassam rockets and retaliatory strikes (Agha and Malley 2007).

It is instructive that the United States' one great success in its war on terror is Libya. In the 1980s, the United States routinely vilified Libya for its support of international terrorism, and tit-for-tat violence marked the relationship between the two countries: Libya was accused of masterminding the bombing of a Berlin discothèque frequented by US army personnel in 1985. The US responded by attacking Libya by air and sea in 1986. Two years later, Libyan agents allegedly help to down Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 people. The cycle of violence was broken only in the 1990s and the first years of the new century, when Libya was basically bribed and co-opted into renouncing the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and leaving the terror business entirely (Cowan 2007).

Rather than learning from this success, the Bush administration has invited the ghost of Munich to haunt discussions of Middle East policy options.⁶ Churchill's example grips the White House, which labels Muslim fundamentalism "Islamofascism" and seeks to halt frank discussion of realistic alternatives to militarism by repeating the shibboleth that appeasement emboldens one's adversaries.⁷ Yet the important lesson of the past six years — and the policy implication of this essay — is that the problem of Islamic fundamentalism's reliance on suicide bombing and other forms of violence can be solved only politically, by engaging in public diplomacy with one's sworn enemies and taking their grievances deeply seriously. In the best of all possible worlds, leaders in the White House (and the Knesset) would draw historical lessons not from Munich but from Versailles — or, if they have failed to anticipate the terrible

6. Historical precedents were also long forgotten. Early US counterinsurgency strategy was more about using dollars and enforcing the rule of law than deploying massive firepower, but the lessons learned in, say, the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines (1946–54) were set aside by the time the US got heavily involved in Vietnam (see Gorriti (2007)).

7. In January 2007, Pulitzer Prize winning *New Yorker* journalist Seymour Hersh, who speaks often with White House insiders, said that "Churchill's a big man for [Bush]... In private ... [Bush and Cheney] view the Shi'a and others as brownshirts now and ... [act as if it's] 1938 and the Germans have taken Sudetenland and they want Czechoslovakia... In the White House this is some of the language... And the crisis in the White House is Iran" (Hersch 2007).

costs of punitive action and have already acted rashly, from the Marshall Plan.⁸

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8. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, forced Germany to cede 10 percent of its national territory to France, Poland, and Denmark, including 12.5 percent of its population and half its iron and steel industry. It also imposed reparations payments of around 11 billion pounds sterling. Hitler's rise to power was fuelled in part by the punitive terms of Versailles; his appeal was based partly on his claim that the German people had been stabbed in the back and needed to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain visited Hitler in Munich and sought to appease him by ceding the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia (Sudetenland) to Germany. In the eyes of Churchill and others, Chamberlain's action merely convinced Hitler that Britain lacked resolve, and encouraged further German territorial expansion. The lesson of Versailles was not, however, lost on the United States, which offered up to \$20 billion to Europe for reconstruction after World War II (\$182 billion in 2006 dollars). This was the Marshall Plan. Germany was its second biggest beneficiary, after the UK. On the relationship between lack of social welfare and support for militant Islamic fundamentalism, see Burgoon (2006).

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Robert J. Brym is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He is former Editor of the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropol-*

ogy, *Current Sociology*, and *East European Jewish Affairs*. His recent publications include "Six Lessons of Suicide Bombers," *Contexts* (6, 4: 2007) pp. 40–5; "Palestinian Suicide Bombing Revisited: A Critique of the Outbidding Thesis," *Political Science Quarterly* (123, 3: forthcoming, 2008), with Bader Araj; *Sociology as a Life or Death Issue* (Toronto: Nelson, 2008); and *Sociology: The Points of the Compass*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2008), with John Lie.
rbrym@chass.utoronto.ca