

Understanding Suicide Terrorism : Psychosocial Dynamics

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Book : Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Psychosocial Dynamics (Updesh Kumar & Manas K Mandal); SAGE publications, 2014. (Total 283 pages)

ISBN: 978-93-515-0034-6 (HB)

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is a big political and social challenge which the world is facing in modern times. A major variant of modern day terrorism is suicidal terrorism in which, the perpetrators create a threat by killing themselves and inducing mass damage. This creates mass hysteria and a threat to normalcy. Terrorism stripped to the basics is an atypical human behaviour. Terrorism is one of the most potent weapons of psychological warfare that incapacitates the target by precluding predictability. Suicidal terrorism or the act of giving up one's life in order to damage or terrorize the target has never been understood in its totality. The novelty of this method was entirely in the mental aspect, the willingness of the suicides to cause their own death, the willingness of the organizations to sacrifice them and the support of the social milieu for such forms of terrorism. Suicide attacks are an extreme form of terrorism. The number of such attacks was small in the 1980s and 1990s. The number of scholarly publications grew after the dramatic attacks of 9/11 (2001), and continued to grow in the following years. Only a small minority of the growing body of works on suicidal terrorism have specifically focussed on the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. Psychology and Sociology have been greatly underrepresented in the academic literature on suicide terrorism. Thus, this book is an important addition to our body of knowledge.

THE PRESENT BOOK

This book attempts to take up the challenge of uncovering the psychosocial dynamics of suicide terrorism. The book has 12 chapters written by prominent scholars and researchers in the field across the globe. To group common view points, the book has been divided into two sections. Section one deals with suicide terrorism as a phenomenon and the second section deals with suicide terrorism as a process. These sections have six chapters each

SECTION ONE

This section deals with suicide terrorism as a phenomenon. Here, the concept of suicide terrorism has been explained in the form of 6 lucid chapters. The book opens up with a chapter titled '**Suicide Terrorism: Delineating the construct.**' This chapter touches upon the difficulties in defining suicide terrorism. It emphasizes on suicide terrorism as a multifaceted phenomenon.

The next chapter deals with explaining **Suicide Terrorism in the Psychosocial Approach**. It puts forth various hypotheses regarding the nature and causes of suicide terrorism. The chapter insightfully discusses the factors related to the strategic shift towards suicide terrorism and radical strategies that sustain suicide campaigns as a viable strategy.

The third chapter, **Evolutionary Psychological Science of Suicide Terrorism**, views suicide terrorism from the evolutionary perspective. It reviews key concepts and misconceptions related to evolutionary psychology and religious beliefs. The phenomenon of suicide terrorism is then examined in this light.

Taking the section forward, the fourth chapter explains **Suicide Terrorism as a social noise**, from the perspective of communication. The author describes the noisy, graphic and provocative acts of suicide terrorism as having an attention grabbing property. This chapter also puts forth a model of the concept as a specific form of communication in the context of martyrdom in Islamic terrorism. The author puts forth his point by providing specific case study.

The concept is further **explored in the 'Mumbai Style'**, in the fifth chapter. This chapter discusses 'Mumbai Style' or fidayeen terrorist attacks as a specific category of suicide attacks. It gives an engaging account of the Mumbai attacks and utilizes the instance as a case study to analyse suicide attacks in a broader perspective. It describes how in terms of conviction, choice of weapons, coordination & communication, the Mumbai attacks were unique.

The section ends with a scholarly article on '**Suicide Bombings: Homicidal killings or weapons of war?**' The author critically examines the distinction between war and terrorism and argues that both of these kill civilians and disturb the social rhythm. The author supports his argument with case studies discussing the situation in Palestine and Sri Lanka. The author concludes that suicide bombings, because of their principle of *substitutability* could be regarded as weapons of war.

SECTION TWO

This section deals with suicide terrorism as a process. This section very well focussed on its theme also includes six chapters written by prominent scholars in the field. The seventh chapter of this book is aptly titled '**The Psychology of Suicide Terrorism**'. In this chapter, the authors give a comprehensive review about the current understanding of suicide terrorism from the mental health perspective. The chapter describes various individual and group level models to explain the processes involved in development of suicide terrorism.

The next chapter, '**Militant jihadi ideology of martyrdom as short lived psychological first aid for trauma and loss**', conceptualizes jihadi

ideology as providing short term psychological first aid during conflict. The chapter discusses the consequences of exposure to violent conflict such as posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic dissociation and the development of jihadi ideology for the redressal of these traumas.

The process underlying the phenomenon of suicide terrorism raises an essential question, **'Are suicide terrorists really suicidal?'** The authors answer this question in the ninth chapter. They analyse suicide from various perspectives such as the act itself, motivational background of suicide bombers, the organizational component and the psychological profile of the suicides.

The tenth chapter, attempts to specify **the role of Military psychologists and Psychiatrists in understanding suicide terrorism**. The chapter addresses a crucial need in comprehending suicide terrorism by Military psychologists and Psychiatrists, with their knowledge of training and recruiting processes and deployment of suicide terrorists. The authors also compare & contrast the deployment of special task force personnel with that of suicide terrorists.

The next chapter deals with the sensitive issue of the **'Use and abuse of children/ youth in terrorism and suicide bombings'**. It provides a comprehensive review of the ways children are used and abused in war and terrorism. The reasons for recruitment of children and benefits of using them over adults have been discussed with regards to the Palestinian and Israel conflict. The authors also elaborate upon the adverse effects such conflicts have on children.

The final chapter of the book sums up the entire discourse and finally touches upon the most essential aspect of **'Deterring Suicide Terrorism'**. The author discusses workable counterterrorism strategies against suicide terrorism. He proposes that a specific deterrence strategy developed using cumulative deterrence appears to work best against suicide terror. Finally, the author puts forth specific points of intervention at various levels that might be effective in deterring suicide attacks.

CERTAIN OTHER CRITICAL COMMENTS

The editor of the book, **Updesh Kumar**, Ph.D. is the head of the mental health division at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, R&D Organization, ministry of Defence, India. He specializes in the area of suicidal behavior, personality assessment and personel selection. Along with numerous publications and awards to his credit, he has also been conferred upon with the prestigious DRDO's Scientist of the Year Award in year 2013. **Manas K Mandal**, Ph.D. is currently the Director General (Life Sciences), Defence R&D Organization (DRDO), Ministry of Defence, India. He has been associated with multiple foreign universities as a visiting professor. He has a multitude of research papers and chapters to his credit.

Understanding Suicide Terrorism delves upon the enigmatic issue of suicide terrorism. The book is an interdisciplinary multi-faceted venture that brings together scholarly work from across the world, across cultures and societies on the issue of suicide terror. The common thread weaving through all the articles is the notion of suicide terror as a complex phenomenon that defies easy explanation, prediction or controllability. Informed by theoretical stances of not only psychological sciences, but other social sciences like political science, criminology, military and sociology the book is an insightful reading.

WHO SHOULD READ IT

This book is considered as essential not only for psychiatry residents but also for clinical psychiatrist, psychologists, allied mental health professionals and researchers in this field. Anyone wanting to understand the psychological nuances of suicide terrorism must read the book. This book may also be of use to sociology students and professionals working in this arena. It also serves as essential reading for military personnel who encounter suicide terrorists on a regular basis.

BOOK RATING

I will rate the book 4 out of 5