
Book Review

Understanding Suicide Terrorism

Edited By – Updesh Kumar and Manas. K. Mandal

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The appearance of this book on a book shelf is in itself a testimony to changing times and the way violence has reached the doorstep. A book like this is seldom a reader's first choice but the title can elicit a second glance. The book is perhaps one of the most comprehensive and well researched pieces on suicide terrorism- its evolution, innovations and impact. It is a confluence of psychology, political science, sociology, criminology and anthropology. Hence, the topic is viewed from many lenses to give a well-rounded account of a problem that has challenged the security of the world. The book is a scientific manuscript with a heart and tears. Although a multi-author book, the editors have thoughtfully organised the topics to form a seamless narrative.

As rightly mentioned in the first chapter itself, any deliberation on this topic will raise more questions than can be answered. Each section ends with an exhaustive reference list. The journey through the pages begins with how suicide terrorism came into existence, the types and variations in suicide, its social construct and the important question of whether suicide terrorists are really suicidal. The methods of recruitment of the terrorists, their exploitation and the means of convincing the perpetrators are lucidly decoded. When fatalism occurs as an individual phenomenon, it can be labelled as deviant behaviour but as a collective feeling at a group level, it is akin to war. It echoes of Freud's opinion on religion, where he called it a universal obsessional neurosis, in this case is without any insight. The duplicity of this altruism-fatalism is unveiled with precision.

There are many surprises in the book, for example, the suicide attackers have not found to display signs of depression, psychoticism or sociopathy, suicide attacks attract more attention than any other method and that committing a suicide attack is an outcome of a rational decision with an underlying irrational belief and so on. The second section on the psychosocial aspects is fascinating especially for mental health professionals. It discusses the psychosocial characterization of suicide terrorism and its campaign into three levels: Organisational (a shift in the collective thinking in favour of this method), Individual (extreme radicalisation of the person prior to recruitment) and Social (a polarisation effect in the core of the terrorist's reference community, which gets enrolled to promote this practice). It also mentions in brief the interventions to avert this- avoid escalation of terrorist organisations, to prevent circumstances, influences, experiences and actions that promote suicide terrorism.

Why terrorism happened in human evolution is by now one of the big questions in life. Hamilton's Theory of Kin Selection answers this to a certain extent wherein although the traits in an organism though not beneficial to the organism itself is still selected because it may benefit others who are likely to carry on the same gene. This explains the phenomenon at the gene level more than the individual level. In unrelated individuals, as in a terrorist cell, it substitutes family and the members to form strong emotional bonds and sacrificial inclinations similar to a close knit family. Leaders manipulate these emotions to achieve political goals. This chapter also scratches the surface regarding the ultimate temptation for the " everlasting

paradise after death” which is another deep rooted belief in Abrahamic religions but is beyond the scope of the book.

The authors go a step further and explain the various types of target audiences, for example, the attacked group being one, the group that the victims represent, third being their allies and government representatives, media and rival terrorist organisations creating a huge social noise. The Mumbai attacks are vividly described and explored and given a status of its own in terms of the attack style. The clincher in this style is that the reckless attacks by the guerrillas are not designed with an exit strategy and neither are they wired like human bombs, instead they accept their fates at the hands of opposing security forces. These are otherwise called Fidayeen attacks. An observation is made that a Fidayee action is not suicide, it is not killing oneself. It is only a style of fighting and what differentiates it from a suicidal mind is that even in the most dangerous situation, a Fidayee would like to be killed by a non-believer.

The research of the authors finally conclude that suicide bombing is not suicide. What follows is a heart wrenching account of the process of entrance into the path of terrorism, martyrdom and the ephemeral psychological support given by the militant paternalists. With each passing section, the book gets even more interesting and the initial reluctance gives way to a rare education in human behaviour. What sets this book apart from other gory stories of war and crime is the analytical, scientific and solution oriented approach that gently prods the reader to think deeper, investigate further and rise above the drama, yet leaving a heaviness in the chest. Who knew that there was so much to terrorism! This is not a book that one will read without putting down, infact this is a book that will make you find a bookmark, stop at a page, put the book down, take off your glasses and stare out of the window thinking...

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