The Return of Grand Theory

Terrorism and the End of Postmodernism

Dr. Abdy Javadzadeh*

Before analyzing how suicide bombing negates postmodernism—which, to many observers, sounds disconnected—one must understand grand theory, postmodernism, and suicide terrorism, as well as their connections to each other. In its attempt to explain both social and political life, grand theory interprets the world in terms of grand and totalizing narratives, taking into account historical data related to class, political power, and cultural movements.

Postmodernism or postmodernist theory explains social life in fragmented narratives. There is nothing totalizing about postmodernism, which emphasizes the ambiguity of what is right and what is wrong—or the idea that nothing is right or wrong due to fragmented interpretation. One characteristic of postmodernism, decentering, does not necessarily negate the central theme but accounts for multicentrism as the emergence of many centers and gives each center equal credence. Therefore, many centers of right and wrong refute and replace the central right and wrong of grand theory.

Suicide bombing or suicide terrorism is related to symbolic acts of violence by individuals organized to cause harm to the perceived enemy or affiliates of that enemy for the purpose of furthering political objectives.[1] Such acts are planned and carried out by organizations and groups that are small in number but strong in ideology. The argument here is that one can

*The author received his master's degree in sociology from Florida Atlantic University and a PhD in sociology from Florida International University. He has taught many courses in sociology, such as Sociology of Terrorism, Sociological Theory, Political Sociology, and Social Conflict at Florida International University, St. Thomas University, and the University of Miami. The author of the book *Iranian Irony: Marxists Becoming Muslim* (RoseDog Books, 2011), he has done research on Middle Eastern politics, religion, and political theory, in addition to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Currently he is conducting research on militarism and religion in the Middle East, specifically in Iran.

look upon suicide bombing, or terrorism in general, as totalizing (grand) theory in terms of political ideology and culture.

In the 1960s, a certain type of skepticism arose among moral and political theorists that gathered widespread support. Among such theorists were Daniel Bell and his concept of the "end of ideology."[2] Due to these new theories, grand theory came to be treated as little better than a confused and outdated mode of interpretation. The effect of all this, according to Quentin Skinner, was that two millennia of philosophizing about the social world had suddenly come to an end.[3] This implies that it must be a mistake to suppose that the true concern of moral, social, and political philosophy can ever be to provide us with reasoned defenses of particular ideas or practices.

Grand theories address the problems of modernism. Modernists often search for the origin of social developments while postmodernists work to describe and analyze social issues at different points in time and space. For grand theorists, finding the origin equates to finding the answer. Postmodernists, however, reject the idea of finding an answer. More interested in raising questions, they thrive on discourse, preferring to keep intellectual conversation alive rather than search for answers. Furthermore, modernists emphasize coherence and continuity, whereas postmodernists deal with inconsistencies and discontinuity. These differences are pertinent not only in areas of political or sociological theory but also in realms of morality and ethics. George Ritzer delineates these perspectives as follows:

1. People are neither good nor bad but morally ambivalent, and it is impossible to find a logically ethical code that could accommodate such moral ambivalence.
2. Moral phenomena are not regular and repetitive. Therefore, no ethical code can possibly deal with moral phenomena in an exhaustive fashion.
3. Morality is inherently laden with contradictions that cannot be overcome, with conflicts that cannot be resolved.
4. There is no such thing as a universal morality.
5. From a rational point of view, morality is, and will remain, irrational.[4]

Although postmodernists have adopted the above system of moral belief, suicide bombers and terrorists would find such a system objectionable since it would mean only chaos and an anomic society.

Perpetrator as Victim: The Sociopolitical Logic of Suicide Terrorism

The act of modern suicide bombing has questioned a few commonly held beliefs in the realm of criminal justice. On the international level, criminal justice systems assume that (1) severe consequences will deter someone from perpetrating a criminal act and (2) clear marks of delineation exist between perpetrator and victim. As fundamental nonadherents to these rules, suicide terrorists—through the eyes of their own culture as well as on a broader scale—have established themselves as victims of certain policies rather than perpetrators and therefore as legitimate fighters. Studies of suicide bombings and bombers have consistently shown the existence of sweeping grand theories within both the individual and the organization. According to Robert Pape, suicide terrorists receive social, cultural, and political support.[5] This would give the suicide terrorist ample reason to believe in the grand narrative that encourages and justifies such acts. According to Pape, the idea of terrorism stems not from religion, maleness, extremism, poverty, or lack of education but from an occupying enemy and those who conspire with that enemy. This underlying reason accounts for almost all suicide bombings and links all modern and, possibly, ancient suicide missions.[6]

The idea of fighting to death against the enemy goes further back than the American revolutionary Patrick Henry, who on 23 March 1775 famously proclaimed, "Give me liberty, or give me death." It antedates Jesus, perhaps the most cherished martyr in history. It is embedded in the Old Testament with the story of Samson, who kills not only himself but also thousands of Philistines.

Historically, there have been a few organizations whose belief system and religious acts have qualified them as terroristic in the eyes of their enemies. For example, the Zealots-Sicarii carried out assassinations against non-Jewish enemies during the first century CE. India experienced the Hindu Thugs, who assassinated non-Hindus, doing so for almost 400 years, from the seventh to the eleventh century. For almost 200 years, the Muslim Assassins in northern parts of modern Iran fought against their enemies, stabbing them in public and making sure that they (the assassins) were caught during the act.

Terrorism has been around as long as we have observed ourselves in human history. Entire cultures agreed not only on the existence of the enemy but also on the method by which he must be eliminated.

Academic Definitions of Terrorism

Scholars who wish to understand the socioeconomic, cultural, and political causes of terrorism tend to use the constructionist approach in defining the term. Compared to state-related definitions, those from academe take a more objective approach to terrorism and suicide terrorism. Unless they have some sort of direct relationship with the state, academics try not to take sides—a stance that allows them to generate a broader definition.

A dichotomy exists even among academic definitions, however. Some address terrorism from the perspective of those with power and those without, the latter struggling to improve their lot through acts of terror. This group of academics includes prominent scholars such as Bruce Hoffman, Walter Laqueur, Brian Jenkins, Ken Livingstone, Jessica Stern, Alex Schmid, and Martha Crenshaw.[7] Another group of scholars defines terrorism in terms of violence or the threat of violence to attain a political objective, conducted by either state (legitimate) or nonstate (illegitimate) organizations. A third group consists of more critical scholars, such as Edward Herman, who considers terrorism "government repression" or Iqbal Ahmed, who holds both state and nonstate actors accountable by defining terrorism as "the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government."[8]

Postmodernists and Terrorism

Among postmodernist writers who have done extensive research on terrorism and suicide terrorism are Walter Laqueur and Francis Fukuyama, both of whom have argued that terrorism is the symbolic fragmentation of a post–Cold War political world. In this new world order, overarching ideologies pit political sides against each other. As Laqueur observes, in this fragmented universe all opposition is dispersed opposition:

> In the past, terrorism was almost always the province of groups of militants that had the backing of political forces like the Irish and Russian social revolutionary movements of 1900. In the future, terrorists will be individuals or like-minded people working in very small groups, on the pattern of the technology-hating Unabomber, who apparently worked alone sending out parcel bombs over two decades, or the perpetrators of the 1995 bombing

> of the federal building in Oklahoma City. An individual may possess the technical competence to steal, buy, or manufacture the weapons he or she needs for a terrorist purpose; he or she may or may not require help from one or two others in delivering these weapons to the designated target. The ideologies such individuals and mini-groups espouse are likely to be even more aberrant than those of larger groups. And terrorists working alone or in very small groups will be more difficult to detect unless they make a major mistake or are discovered by accident.[9]

Aberrant ideologies are a possibility, as Laqueur states. However, most terrorist attacks—and more specifically, suicide missions, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, or Russia—are well organized. Terror organizations work under the auspices of political grand theory. To say that technology allows a lone-wolf terrorist to act unaided is to merely analyze the mechanics rather than an ideological necessity or justification. The number of such attacks is very low; indeed, they have hardly occurred at all in the past few years—not because an individual terrorist cannot obtain the necessary explosives or equipment but because he or she can always find an organization that will sanction the act. Lone-wolf terrorism exists in settings where the actor finds his or her ideology in social-political isolation.

Freedom Fighter or Terrorist?

The difference between a revolutionary group and a terrorist organization is entirely subjective. Unlike what experts have come to define as terrorism vis-à-vis revolutionary groups, the two still exhibit similarities. Let us look at those as well as some differences and determine whether we can delineate an objective difference.

There is a separation between cause and method. Why do such individuals want to change political conditions and through what method? What will they have to do to reach this objective? For both revolutionaries and terrorists, the method of fighting may be the same—violence that targets the perceived enemy.[10] However, their cause differs: terrorists attack the general population, usually indiscriminately, whereas revolutionaries attack people they identify as enemies. Yet terrorist organizations would not agree with the above statement since for them, "civilians" are actually co-conspirators, somehow supporting the enemy, and therefore not innocent at all. They target both combatants and those whom they view as accomplices to combatants. For terrorists the end justifies the means. If their goal is to

destroy a certain building, the presence of civilians in the structure is irrelevant as long as they fulfill their objective.

For revolutionaries, all means are not justified. They seem concerned with who gets killed and whether they are civilians and noncombatants. Terrorists attack innocent people to make a political statement, intentionally targeting them to cause fear and havoc. Revolutionaries, however, consider the innocent "illegitimate" targets.

Suicide Terrorists and Misconceptions

For postmodernists, terrorism—more specifically, suicide bombing—is a tactic that does not seem to follow a particular ideology. This misconception has to do with misinterpretation of a suicide bomber's contextual belief system, which has more to do with social and cultural support than with isolation. According to postmodernists, before the advent of modern terrorism, guerilla groups followed a grand theory of class warfare and often fought to take over state power by strategically defeating the state and the military. Usually either Marxist or nationalist or a combination of the two, these groups had ideologies on a grand scale. Their political agenda called for (1) destruction of the state and (2) conquest of political power. Destroying the state—either the representative of a dilapidated capitalist system or the lackey of an imperialist nation, probably the United States—resolved most other political issues and cleared the way for constructing a new state.

Much of the political belief system of these groups belonged to the Cold War dichotomy of world capitalism versus socialism. Today, according to postmodernists, terrorists and Islamic radicals do not hold such grand theories as their guiding viewpoint. According to Fukuyama, a movement that wishes to be taken seriously on the historical world stage must "ultimately . . . offer people something attractive, and this thing [radical Islam] seems to be attractive only to highly alienated people in very unsuccessful countries."[11]

Fukuyama and Laqueur do not consider the ultimate, underlying reason why acts of terrorism have increased so much and so fast. The fact that terrorist organizations operate under the guiding principle of fighting an occupying enemy earns them the support of their community. The postmodernist misconception arises from treating terrorism as a cause and not a symptom. Most researchers make the following assumptions about suicide bombers: they live in poverty; they are not educated; they are brainwashed;

they are unemployed; they are sexually deprived; they are Muslim fundamentalists; they are religious; they are male; and they are from Arab countries. According to Pape, however, none of those characteristics has a high correlation with suicide bombing—and even less with terrorism.[12]

Advantages of Suicide Attacks

For several reasons, suicide attacks have continued despite relentless efforts to seek out groups that organize them: the attackers' willingness to die makes the act more destructive because they can conceal the weapon (usually strapped around the waist or located in a truck or an automobile); the perpetrators can easily infiltrate the place of attack without suspicion because they are invariably part of the community; and there is no need for an escape plan. Pape notes that from 1980 to 2003 only 3 percent of all terrorist attacks were suicide acts but accounted for 48 percent of lost lives.[13] Suicide attacks signify that more will come since those responsible have no fear of retaliation. The more such strikes are based on ideology, the more legitimate the attacker's martyrdom—not necessarily in the religious sense but as the ultimate sacrifice. The perpetrators have no qualms about breaching any targeting taboo.

Pape argues that a high degree of correlation exists between national liberation and suicide terrorism.[14] Indeed, the latter is primarily an extreme national-liberation military tactic carried out by organizations against the presence of foreign forces and directed toward a strategic objective (the withdrawal of enemy forces), as is the case, for example, in the following countries (followed by the name of the country, in parentheses, whose forces are present in or occupy that nation): Lebanon (Israel), West Bank/Gaza (Israel), Sri Lanka (Sri Lankan military), Punjab (Indian government), Kurdistan (Turkey, Iran, and Iraq), Chechnya (Russia), Kashmir (India), Saudi Arabia (United States), Iraq (US and allied forces), and Afghanistan (NATO forces).

In all of the above cases, suicide attacks have caused occupying forces to retreat tactically and, at times, strategically.[15] This is precisely why the number of attacks has increased, from 10 per year in the 1980s to 50 per year before the Iraq war and to 157 per year since 2003.

One can find concrete evidence of the relationship between suicide terrorism and grand ideology in the writings and speeches of some of the

leaders of these groups. For them, a direct connection exists between political power and ideology. According to Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam in Sri Lanka, "Our martyrs were extraordinary human beings. They chose the noble cause of liberating our people. Having lived and struggled for such a cause they finally sacrificed their precious lives for that higher ideal. . . . Let us continue to struggle to expel the enemy forces who have occupied our sacred land."[16] Additionally, in 2003 Chechen leader Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi addressed the oppression of women and their reaction to their humiliation: "As you have seen and noticed, most of the suicide attacks were carried out by women. . . . Their honour and everything are being threatened. They do not accept being humiliated and living under occupation."[17]

Essentially, a suicide attacker's belief system includes three principal criteria: political, social, and psychological. Politically, is suicide terrorism a rational political-military strategy? Socially, does a community support and encourage such acts? Psychologically, what type of person willingly sacrifices his or her life to commit the act?

One often thinks of the political rationalization argument in terms of nationalism. It is rooted in belief in a community whose members share a distinct set of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and historical characteristics and who are entitled to govern their nation without interference from foreigners. Given the above, the chances of suicide attacks increase if a foreign power occupies the nation militarily, if that power differs religiously and ethnically, and if it controls resources (e.g., water, energy, etc.).

The social support of their community is essential for suicide attackers, who are well integrated into the populace and share its collective goals. They believe in the culture of martyrdom as a means of pursuing their political objective. Such support allows them to avoid detection, utilize walk-in volunteers, replenish membership, and establish contact in schools, universities, and other social groups.[18]

Scholars usually cite individual or psychological motivation as the main cause of acts of suicide. According to Rex Hudson, a suicide attacker is detached from his society: "A demented loner is caught in the throes of a depressive nightmare, possibly besieged by demonic illusions, which makes escape through self-killing a desirable end in itself, especially if it is possible to take out some imaginary tormentors at the same time."[19]

On the other hand, suicide attacks qualify as altruistic suicide, committed by an individual who is too much integrated into his or her society.[20] Such acts, which are culturally sanctioned and approved, enhance rather than diminish social order, reflecting a high level of social integration and respect for community values: "[Suicide bombers] are rarely brainwashed into accepting such missions through the heavy indoctrination associated with the recent mass suicides by religious cults, but accept the task much like a soldier who accepts a 'suicide mission' in an ordinary war."[21]

Conclusion

Suicide terrorism is a military tactic used to reach a political objective. In most cases, the perpetrators seek national liberation from relatively long-term foreign military occupation. Given the current military presence in a number of countries (e.g., the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan; Israel in Palestine and at times in Lebanon; Russia in Chechnya; and the Sri Lankan military in Sri Lanka), the number of suicide attacks will increase, especially as opposition groups become militarily weaker and less sophisticated, as guerilla tactics fail, and as the enemy becomes stronger. New definitions of terrorism, which cast a wider net to include revolutionary groups, reflect such an increase.

It has been a while since Daniel Bell argued "the end of ideology"—the withering away of all values and ideas in favor of pragmatic benefits. This view runs contrary to the core of the ideology of a suicide terrorist. Rather, terrorists—previously known as guerilla fighters, liberation armies, or revolutionaries—are organized in the realm of totalizing ideas. Terrorism—more specifically, suicide terrorism—indicates weaknesses in military tactics and logistics but not in totalizing ideologies. This, in a sense, is a large, unifying worldview understandable in the context of an ideology not restricted to any fragment of a secular or religious understanding of the world but including religion, culture, and political alternatives that prevail in any society.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, I use the terms *suicide bombing* and *suicide terrorism* interchangeably.
2. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, [1960]).

3. Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11.

4. George Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 43.

5. Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

6. Ibid.

7. Hoffman: terrorism related to politics and power, the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power, and the use of power to effect political change. See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). Laqueur: the use of covert violence by a group for political ends. See Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Jenkins: illegitimate force used against innocents for political purposes. See Brian Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006). Livingstone: warfare on the cheap. See David Livingstone, *Terrorism and the Illuminati: A Three Thousand Year History* (Charleston, SC: Booksurge LLC, 2007). Stern: an act or threat of violence against noncombatants with the objective of exacting revenge and intimidating or otherwise influencing an audience. See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2003). Schmid: combat against symbolic targets. See Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005). Crenshaw: politically illegitimate attacks on innocent targets. See Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

8. Jonathan R. White, *Terrorism: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2002), 10, 11.

9. Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism: New Rules for an Old Game," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (September/October 1996): 34.

10. Some groups that make no distinction between combatants and noncombatants would qualify as terrorist organizations by definition.

11. Herb Keinon, "Fukuyama on Terrorism and Nation Building," *Jerusalem Post*, 18 March 2004, http://www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?5236-Fukuyama-on-terrorism-and-nation-building.

12. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 23.

13. Ibid., 27.

14. Ibid., 29.

15. Pres. Ronald Reagan's decision to pull American troops out of Lebanon, for example, was a direct result of the suicide attack on the Marine barracks in that country in 1983.

16. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 31.

17. Ibid., 31–32.

18. Ibid.

19. Rex A. Hudson, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?* (New York: Globe Pequot Press, 2002), 33.

20. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge Classics, 2002).

21. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 173.