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Five arguments on the rationality of suicide terrorists

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ABSTRACT

This is a critical review of five arguments against the scholarly consensus that individual suicide terrorists are rational actors. The first three arguments are analytic, meaning that they hold that suicide terrorism is inherently irrational, based on assumptions regarding the nature of the perpetrators' interests as individuals. The fourth argument is empirical, based on alleged evidence of suicide terrorist psychopathology. And the fifth argument is pragmatic, based on the strategic implications of 'conceding' the status of rationality to enemies. This article highlights weaknesses in these arguments and considers assessing the rationality of suicide terrorists by measuring their act to cultural or community goals subject to a division of labor principle.

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1. Introduction

The prevailing public impression seems to be that suicide terrorists are just crazy (Merari, 2010). For example, the news commentator Fareed Zakaria seemed to express this view recently when he suggested that the Iranian regime might not deserve being characterized as 'crazy' in part because 'over the past decade, there have been thousands of suicide bombings by Saudis, Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Pakistanis, but not been a single suicide attack by an Iranian' (Zakaria, 2012). By 'crazy' he really meant 'irrational'—in an apparent echo of his program's guest, General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who expressed the 'opinion that the Iranian regime is a rational actor' (Dempsey, 2012). However, while Zakaria's claim about Iran's involvement in suicide attacks in the past decade might be a little bit misleading (though accurate),[1] it is his implicit assumption that suicide terrorists must be 'crazy' that is especially interesting, because, contrary to this popular view, the explicit scholarly consensus is that suicide terrorists are rational actors—not just that the organizations and communities that produce them are rational in using them (whether for their own survival or for their status), but also that the suicide terrorists themselves, those individuals who sacrifice their lives, are rational, too.

This scholarly consensus is based on at least three grounds. The first is that suicide terrorists obviously display a level of tactical intelligence

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[1] While Zakaria's claim is strictly true, the current Iranian regime did, in fact, play a major role at the origin of the modern wave of suicide terrorism about 30 years ago: Iran served as both a direct mentor and a distant model to foreign suicide terrorist organizations—starting with the method's modern pioneer, the Shi'ite Lebanese group and Iranian implant, Hizballah (Reuter, 2004).

sufficient to carry out their missions: for example, they routinely display some capacity for target adaptation. However, this narrow ability to carry out suicide attacks is not sufficient to establish the rationality of their act in the larger strategic—or even emotional[2]—context. To establish this second ground, most researchers have focused on detailed descriptions of the strategic contexts in which suicide terrorism has been used—especially in the last 30 years. And, according to their most influential accounts, the method of suicide terrorism has been primarily characteristic of certain occupied nations and ideological communities. Nonetheless, those accounts are far from definitive, and other researchers have limited their implications to questions of organizational rationality only—thus keeping questions of individual rationality distinct so as to allow that, contrary to the current consensus, suicide terrorists might still be the always-irrational agents or tools of sometimes-rational terrorist organizations (Lewis, 2012).

Overall, a review of the literature reveals at least five analytic, empirical, and pragmatic arguments in support of this counter-consensus view. The analytic arguments question the rationality of individual suicide terrorists based on assumptions about the nature of their interests—whether these are deemed primarily personal or social, secular or religious. However, it emerges that the argument for judging suicide terrorists irrational on the assumption that their interests are personal and secular tends to rely on too narrow a definition of those interests—essentially by discounting the role of pleasure (albeit controversial). Meanwhile, it seems that the more fundamental assumption that suicide terrorists value personal rewards above all could be inconsistent (to some extent) with relevant theories emerging from the natural sciences—natural selection theories suggesting that the quest for survival that might guide human behavior is primarily a quest for the survival of genes, and perhaps even that of memes, but *not* that of individuals.

At the same time, even assuming that rational individuals prioritize such extra-personal rewards, any rationality assumption would have to exclude certain classes of interest claims. This relates to a second analytic argument against the rationality assumption for suicide terrorists, considering the potential influence of religion on their behavior. One prominent variant of this argument states that suicide terrorists cannot be rational if their goal is to obtain a purely religious reward—such as to obtain the benefit of an afterlife promised by God—because contractual exchanges with God are not enforceable. However, this version of the argument seems weak because it should suffice to slightly adjust the definition of 'God' to overcome it. Nonetheless, more pragmatic versions of this argument could be compelling.

Meanwhile, if, instead, the extra-personal interests of suicide terrorists are defined by social or political goals, such as defending or promoting or transforming communities as a consequence of their act, then a third argument often emerges that the terrorists' suicide would be precluded by free-rider dilemmas if they were rational. However, on the one hand, Wintrobe's 'solidarity multiplier' might show how rational 'selfish' individuals with some preexisting desire for the experience of social cohesion might avoid or evade these dilemmas by internalizing social or political goals as norms (by basically turning the observance of those norms into a personal reward). And, on the other hand, a larger concept of rational 'altruism' could provide an even broader 'solution' in cases where the dispositions of terrorist group members to reach group goals are suitably differentiated by a division of labor principle.

In summary, it emerges from this review that the analytic objections so far raised against the individual suicide terrorist rationality assumption are weak for the most part.

In the alternative, other critics have also raised objections against this assumption on more empirical and pragmatic grounds. Notably, one scholar has multiplied recent attacks against the third ground of scholarly consensus that suicide terrorists are rational, which consists in the empirical observation that most terrorist suicides do not seem to display the profile of ordinary 'egoistic' suicides—typically classified in the mental disorder category and therefore conveniently presumed irrational.[3] However, it emerges that that scholar exaggerates the significance of the new evidence he cites, while also making a number of inconsistent claims. In addition, he and others warn that conceding the status of rationality to terrorist enemies could encourage them in some way—and thus be irrational (strategically-speaking) for *us*, their potential targets. However, this pragmatic objection seems to be, at the very least, too simplistic in failing to also take into account the potential costs of the alternative.

In conclusion, the empirical and pragmatic objections against the rationality assumption for individual suicide terrorists also seem weak.

Hence, the consensus that suicide terrorists are rational actors should remain. And, although broader questions might also remain as to the meaning or usefulness of the rationality assumption in general, those questions have no special bearing on the matter of suicide terrorism.

2. Rationality defined

First, a general definition of rationality is in order. For purposes of this article, a rational actor is, at the very least, a decision-maker whose decisions are logically consistent with his or her interests. Simply put, the minimal rationality assumption is that 'people have goals and attempt to realize those goals through their actions' (Morrow, 1994, p. 34). More precisely, rational actors have stable, coherently ordered interests, which they seek to satisfy by logically ordering their choices accordingly whenever possible given their environments.

When actor interests or goals are well-defined, then a more robust rationality assumption emerges: it is a prediction that, although all actors may fail to behave in ways that are consistent with those interests sometimes, most actors will so behave most of the time—or on average and over the long run (Dixit & Skeath, 1999), perhaps in accordance with some principle of natural selection, one could add. Critics of this robust assumption charge that the psychological and organizational capabilities of even sophisticated political actors are too limited, given not only their lack of information but also the complexity and ambiguity of their environments (Rathbun, 2007). (This makes intuitive sense: the more complicated the world is, the more likely it becomes that actors will make mistakes.) Accordingly, psychologists such as Kahneman (2011) observe, actors tend to guide themselves through cognitive shortcuts (biases or heuristics) instead of well-thought-out strategies (Rathbun, 2007). However, for one thing, most proponents of the rationality assumption (that is, rationalists) already concede that rationality entails an evaluation of only 'the consistency of choices and not of the thought process,' and does not exclude the possibility of errors (Morrow, 1994); indeed, their robust assumption predicts only that errors tend to decrease over time. Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent even Kahneman can interpret the reliance of actors on heuristics as evidence that they 'systematically violate the strict behavioral expectations of rationality' (Berejikian, 2002, p. 165) when he himself seems to concede this robust assumption: 'most of our judgments and actions are appropriate most of the time' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 4). Instead, heuristics might just provide a 'rational solution to the complex task that [actors] face' (Rathbun, 2007, p. 547), based on past experience or adaptation, one could add.

Regardless—and more interestingly for purposes of this article—besides questions of 'cognitive' capabilities, the matter of defining actor interests might also create a threshold controversy among

[2] Merari (2010) distinguishes between the emotional motivations that may attach to political grievances and the strategic or consequential prospects that may attach to the same grievances.

[3] To be clear: whereas an analytic question might be whether suicide terrorism is *inherently* insane, an empirical question could be, for instance, whether the method has historically attracted the mentally ill more than any other group.