

# Dying To Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism

Robert Pape

Reviewed by Tony LeRay-Meyer

Robert Pape teaches international politics at the University of Chicago, where he is also the Director of the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism. In *Dying to Win*, he attempts to consider terrorism as a broad issue through the narrow view of suicide tactics. This leads him to offer a distinctive interpretation from contemporary orthodoxy on the nature of modern terrorism, especially by arguing that there is no substantive connection between suicide terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism. Instead he posits that suicide terrorism is a general defensive response option against occupying military forces:

*From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Kashmir to Chechnya, the sponsors of every campaign have been terrorist groups trying to establish or maintain political self-determination by compelling a democratic power to withdraw from the territories they claim.*

The book draws upon the Chicago Project's comprehensive data, which claims to cover every suicide terrorist attack undertaken between 1980 and 2003 — some 462 incidents. Pape has utilised Arabic, Hebrew, Tamil, and Russian language sources, including primary documents from terrorist groups. Each chapter is supported by a series of graphs and supporting data. His focused analysis to develop structured demographic profiles of suicide bombers is very useful. In his case study of the 1982-86 campaign against the French and American forces in Lebanon, for example, Pape concludes that only 8 of the 41 suicide attackers employed were affiliated with Islamic fundamentalism. The use of such an empirical rather than a normative approach is a particular strength of the book, as is its structure and logical sequence. Pape's thesis on resistance to occupation being the sole cause of suicide terrorism is a consistent thread universally argued throughout.

There are two potential areas where Pape's empirical approach could be enhanced. First, his reliance on solely written sources limits the utility of his database. Such sources can be inaccurate, misleading or simply lack a nuanced understanding of a terrorist group's strategy. As shown by Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God*, primary research through interviews with captured or former militants, or even with counter-terrorist operations personnel, can provide excellent insights into a terrorist organisation's operational employment of suicide attacks. Wider sources of data would have allowed Pape's analysis to be measured against the detailed analyses of longstanding experts on suicide attacks, such as Boaz Ganor, especially as the Israeli-Palestine experience is central to both their analyses. The key contrasting interpretation offered by Ganor, is that the employment of suicide terrorism is determined more by its operational effectiveness as a tactic than it being a motive-driven response to military occupation. Ganor argues that the popularity of suicide terrorism is because it

is a tactic accessible to militants, it resonates beyond the victim and, more significantly, it is both unstoppable and intuitive. A suicide attacker is a guided and thinking weapon that can respond to unforeseen security measures with initiative.

The second empirical weakness in Pape's analysis is his reliance on selective historical examples. He strangely includes

Japanese Kamikaze operations in World War II but inexplicably omits the use of suicide attacks in the 1954-62 Algerian insurgency, wrongly claiming that 'suicide attacks temporarily disappeared' in the 1945-1980 period.

Pape's central thesis throughout the book is that there is a causal relationship between suicide terrorism as a tactic and the motive for its employment being foreign occupation. While this contention appears to fit the campaign data he chooses to include, he does not seriously try to consider any alternative rationale for the employment of suicide attacks.

Applying his thesis to the current Al Qa'eda campaign, Pape argues that the objective is limited to compelling a withdrawal of the American military presence from the 'Muslim heartland' of the Arabian Peninsula. He ignores that the suicide attacks in Iraq by members of the deposed Sunni ascendancy class are mainly aimed at Shiite-majority rule not the foreign occupiers. Pape also ignores the argument by many other analysts that the use of suicide attacks by the wider 'Islamist Internationale' movement, inspired and influenced by Al Qa'eda, is driven more by operational considerations rather than motive. Proponents of this view argue that the suicide tactics used in attacks such as Bali 2002, Madrid 2004, London 2005, and Sharm al Sheikh (Egypt) in 2005 were selected for their operational value. Furthermore, the secessionist insurgencies by Islamic minorities in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines have not seen the use of suicide tactics against the supposed occupying powers.

*Dying To Win* is a distinctive and insightful contribution to the study of terrorism and offers one valid interpretation of some insurgency campaigns, particularly Chechnya, Kashmir and perhaps Palestine. The applicability of his thesis to other theatres and situations is arguable and this undermines the policy responses he recommends in the final chapter. Reliance on his theory's narrow conclusion that suicide terrorism occurs solely as a response to 'military occupation' is, however, likely to lead to ineffective counter-terrorism responses in most situations. The use of suicide terrorism is more often an operational decision, and one choice among many across a range of factors not confined to motive or ideology. ♦

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