On Rationality of Suicide Bombing

The Success of Suicide Bombing As a Tactic Employed by a Terrorist Organisation Can Be Attributed to Creating an Ostracised Profile of the Bomber by Society That Effectively Contradicts All Our Rational Predispositions. Since We Find It Difficult to Comprehend the Irrational, We Create False Terrorist Identities Which Then Affect Our Own Behaviour, State Politics and Market Operations. This Process However Is Inefficient Since It Essentially Targets the Wrong Group. Instead of Effective Counter-Terrorist Actions, More Groups Become Involved and Aggravated Creating Further Tensions in the International Environment. This Paper Will Argue That by Eliminating Discrepancies and False Notions of Terrorists, The Society Can Benefit by Developing an Understanding of Their Motivations. This However Will Not Be Done Through Presentation of Extensive Findings On Terrorist Profiles, But Instead Through an Examination of Our Own Behaviours and Motivations. It May Turn Out That Our Own Perception of Ourselves As Rational, Self-Interested Utility-Maximisers As Proscribed by Classical Economics, Is Not so Close to Reality.

To Begin, It Is Important to Consider the Stereotypical Profile of a Suicide Bomber As Presented to Us Through the Media and Political Channels. From a Twenty-First Century Western Perspective, Justifying Death for a Political or Religious Cause Is Simply Absurd. Our Society Had Passed the Period of Intense Political Association; Therefore It Looks for Alternative Motivations to Fit the ‘irrational’ Bomber Stereotype. Naturally, Themes Such As Youth Impulsivity, Crime and Suicide Came Up and Were Significantly Integrated Into Our Understanding. Further Each Theme Was Explored and Evidence Such As a “strong Link Between Erratic or Harsh Discipline, Lack of Adequate Supervision, Rejection by Mother…” (10, P. 334); “increased Inequality Generates Frustration Among Lower Class Youth” (10, P. 336), Contributed to Societal Perceptions. However As More Research Was Conducted in Terrorism Itself, It Was Concluded That There Was No Necessary Connection Between Crime and Terrorism (1, P. 121), While Seeing Teens As “pathological Risk-Takers Who Are Not Responsive to Economic Incentives” Was Strongly Rejected by Empirical Evidence (15, P. 23). This Means That There Is a Need to Concentrate On Terrorist Attacks As Individual Context-Specific Occurrences by the Means of Expanding Our Own Constraints of Rationality.

This Paper Will First Look at Strictly Economic Elements of Behaviour by Integrating It with More Recent Developments of Traditional Concepts Such As Rationality, Preferences and Time Discounting. Afterwards, Delving Into Concepts Beyond Economics, Emotions, Identity and Motivations Will Be Considered. The Concluding Part Will Concentrate On Typical Socio-Economic Characteristics Associated with Terrorism. At All Times the Key Focus Will Be On Drawing Links Between Generally-Accepted “normal” Behaviour and Characteristics with Those of a Suicide Bomber.

We View Our Decisions, At Least Important Decisions, Such As Whether or Not to Go to College, What to Study, What Career to Pursue, Who to Marry, As a Series of Well-Thought Out Analysis of Benefits and Costs. We Also See Ourselves As the Main Contributors to Such Decisions, For the Major Parts Isolated From the Influences of Outside Parties. Obvious Exceptions Here Would Be Living Subsistence and Financial Constraints Provided by Our Parents or Guardians at a Young Age. We See Ourselves As Utility Maximisers Most of the Time, Whereby We Attempt to Attain the Biggest Benefits From Life Subject to Constraints. Classical Economics Sees Us As Rational Self-Interested Agents, An Idea That Steers Most of the Libertarian Thinking in Public Policy and Economics, Effectively Entrusting the Structures in Place to Self-Regulate with the Help of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible Hand’. In His Article Elster Attributes Rationality to Anyone Who Acts Through the Best Means of Realising Own Desires, Which in Turn Have Been Optimally Acquired Within an Optimal Information Pool with Optimal Resources (12, P. 1391). Recent Studies, However Demonstrate That Such Optimality Is Not Always Possible and Almost Impossible to Achieve and People’s Daily Decision-Making Is Often Simplified and Subject to Numerous Constraints. This Sees the Assumption of Rationality Challenged On Several Levels.

Preferences Are One of the Key Characteristics of an Economic Agent’s Utility- Maximisation Process. Classical Economics Assumes That They Remain Stable Throughout an Individual’s Life, An Assumption That has Been Subjected to Numerous Attacks Recently. In Their Article Beshears, Choi, Laibson and Madrian Widen the Gap Between Normative and Revealed Preferences Suggesting That Our Economic Behaviour Is Not As Autonomous and Self-Regulated As We Think. Particular Disparities Include the Notion of Passive Choice and the Extent of Our Exposure to Defaults (5, P. 4). It Is Inefficient for Individuals to Process All Information Out There Before Making a Decision, Thus Most of Our Daily Actions Are Performed Almost Automatically. As a Result Optimality Is Sacrificed but Time Is Considerable Preserved. Default Behaviour Is Often a Product of Certain Norms Established Within a Family or a Society, Therefore in His Decision to Join a Terrorist Organisation, The Potential Bomber, May Simply Be Following the Family Tradition or Affiliation, Without Deeply Considering the Circumstances. Another Strong Implication for Preferences Is Limited Personal Experience and the Consequential Inability to Assess the Situation Adequately (5, P. 7). Learning From Others Is Not Always Effective and We Often Prefer to Judge for Ourselves Before Making Any Resolute Commitments. However This Is Often Done Blindly. Thus, For Example, Very Few People Defer From Ever Trying Alcohol Based On Family or Friend Experiences. Similarly Entering a Terrorist Organisation Is Often Done Without Full Understanding of It's Workings. Motivations Certainly Play a Part but to a Large Extent the Secrecy Makes It Impossible to Track One’s ‘career Path’. This Is Reinforced by Another Element; Third-Party Marketing That Enables the Organisation to Only Display It's Best Characteristics, Such As a Medium for Fulfilling One’s Ideological Goals (5, P. 7). Here the Choices Are Consciously Manufactured Much Like in Advertising and Electoral Campaigns That We Witness in Our Lives. The Stability of Preferences Is Further Compromised by Temporal Considerations, Often We Find It Difficult to Project Our Future Preferences As Will Be Discussed Below.

The Concept of Intertemporal Choice Implies “decisions Involving Tradeoffs Among Costs and Benefits Occurring at Different Points in Time.” (9, P. 2) The Discounted Utility Model That Was Introduced by Samuelson, Whereby the Rate at Which We Discount the Future Is Assumed to Be Constant, Never Found Any Significant Support in Empirical Findings (9, P. 3&56). Instead, The Concept of Hyperbolic Discounting As a More Realistic Evaluation Method of Time Discounting Should Be Used (9, P. 14). It Proposes That Economic Agents Behave in Time-Inconsistent Manner, Whereby They Value Present Rewards Over Future Rewards. This May Lead Them to Deviate From Utility Maximisation. It has Been Proven As Well That the Time Temporal Specification of When the Choice Is Made Is Also Extremely Important. Therefore We Are Able to Constrain Ourselves to Attain a Bigger Satisfaction Later. This Can Be Evidenced in Dieting, Environmental Behaviour and Study Techniques (9, P. 15). A Terrorist Is Often Promised Significant Rewards in His Future Life That Appeals to His Preferences and More Susceptible Visceral Factors, Such As Posthumous Fame and an Abundant Supply of Women in His Future Life. Terrorist Organisations Manipulate This Anticipatory Utility Thus “by Increasing Attractiveness of Certain Goods or Activities, They Can Give Rise to Behaviours That Look Extremely Impatient or Even Impulsive” (9, P. 31). However Here, The Group Must Also Be Conscious of Uncertainly and Risk-Taking That Can Dramatically Affect the Recruits’ Discount Rate, Therefore Future Promises Need to Be Supported by Present Rewards As Well (9, P. 42). Here Financial Support to Family and Certain Status Progression Associated with Engagement in a Terrorist Group Become Valued.

The Second Section Will Examine Some Factors Traditionally Associated with Psychological Influences On Behaviour Rather Than Pure Economical. Emotion Is the First Such Factor That Most People Underestimate When Evaluating Their Decision-Making Instead Attributing It to Deliberate Thought-Out Process.

“economics Deters From Studying Emotions Because People Do Not Seem to Manage Them Rationally.” (12, P. 1387)

Indeed Due to the Large Spectrum of Emotions, It Would Be Almost Impossible to Establish Direct Consequences of Each; However It Is Undeniable That They Influence Our Behaviour Significantly, Often in a Way That Contradicts Our Self-Interest (4, P. 427-428). Many of Life’s Important Decision Are Said to Be Made Under Visceral Factors (4, P. 429). This Is a Crucial Factor in the Performance of a Suicidal Attack. The Organisers Must Ensure That If in Their Opinion the Bomber’s Cognitive Foundations Are Unreliable, The Effect of Visceral Factors Is Crucial. Thus Everything Will Be Aimed to Arousing, Angering and Inspiring All Sorts of Negative Retaliatory Ideas Prior to the Act to Ensure Completion (4, P. 430). Such Actions Rely On the Assumptions That Altruistic Motivations Fail the Bomber in the Last Minute and a Safety Valve in the Form of Promised Rewards Will Kick In, As Intense Visceral Factors Tend to Narrow One’s Focus Inwardly, To Undermine Altruism and Make the Person Selfish (3, P. 275), While Proximate “desirability Increases Automatically When Rewards Become Imminently Available” (3, P. 279). A Very Effective Tool for Generation an Emotional Response From Humans Is Vividness. Loewenstein Argues That Well-Publicised Terrorist Attacks Diminished Travel Abroad by Americans Due to “immediate Emotions Arising From Future Events...Inevitably Linked to Some Mental Image or Representation of Those Events” (3, P. 280). It Is Believed That the Human Brain Is Incapable of Storing Pain but Can Easily Recreate Visual, Verbal and Semantic Information (3, P. 284). This Is of Course Invaluable to Anyone Who Wishes to Manipulate Behaviour. A Terrorist Group May Wish to Conduct Training Using a Series of Powerful Images Portraying the Suffering of Innocent People and How the Perpetrators Deserve Retaliation. At the Same Time in Our Context We See Politicians Framing Events in Such a Way As to Present a Point of View That Allows the Most Emotion-Evoking Response From the Audience. When We See Reports of Terrorist Suicide Attacks On the Television, We Are Often Presented with a Vivid Description of Casualties and Other Particulars, Immediately Followed by Various Suggestions of Who May Have Been Responsible. Thus Our Emotional Response Becomes Immediately Associated with Specified Organisations. The Connection has Not Been Made by Us and More Than Likely Only a Small Percentage Will Bother to Question It's True Nature.

The Second Aspect That Influences Our Behaviour Is Identity Properties. Akerlof and Kranton Argue That Identity Is a Function of Social Categories That We Are Placed in (2, P. 720). These Include Gender, Class, Income Levels, Religion, Nationality Etc and They Each Impose Certain Constraints On Our Behaviour. As Humans We Become Accustomed to Each Group and Tend to React Aggressively to Outsiders As They Compromise Our Special Status. They Give an Example of Women Employed in a Traditionally Male Workplace. As the Woman Reaches the Same Level of Competence As Her Male Colleagues, She Becomes Victimised and Repressed and the Men See It As an Attack On Masculinity (2, P. 723). Further, Apparently It Is Within the Notion of Masculinity to Retaliate, The Implications of Which Are Evident in Terrorism in General. Identity Is Crucial to Human Beings, Making It's Loss or Disassociation Particularly Painful. It Is a Particular Problem in the Modern Society That Praises Globalisation, Yet Suffers From It at the Same Time. Economic Migration has Led to Rejection and Alienation of Millions of People Who Were Forced to Move for Economic Reasons and Lost Ties with Their Home Identities. Faced with Oppressive Nationalistic Policies That Seem to Be Rising in Response to Globalisation, Many Turn to Ways in Which They Can Regain That Sense of Identity and Help the People They Left Behind. This Is One of the Reasons Second-Generation Migrants Turn to Violent Means of Achieving Their Objectives.

“on One Side Lies Employment and Self-Hatred, On the Other, The Equally Dubious Honor of Unemployment with Integrity” (2, P. 739)

The Consideration of Socio-Economic Elements Will Begin with Education. It Is Often Assumed That Suicide Bombers and Terrorists in General Will Have None or Very Minimal Level of Educational Attainment. This Is a Precedent for the Irrationality Which Is Attributed to the Act. However Research has Demonstrated Stark Contradictions to This Notion. Nassra Hassan’s (2001) Informal Observations About Palestinian Suicide Bombers:

“none of Them Were Uneducated, Desperately Poor, Simple-Minded or Depressed. Many Were Middle Class And, Unless They Were Fugitives, Held Paying Jobs. More Than Half of Them Were Refugees From What Is Now Israel. Two Were the Sons of Millionaires.” (1, P. 135-136)

Thus Again We See a Significant Departure From the Expected Rationale. Further:

“…well-Educated Individuals May Participate Disproportionately in Terrorist Groups If They Think That They Will Assume Leadership Positions If They Succeed; Or If They Identify More Strongly with the Goals of the Terrorist Organization Than Less Educated Individuals; Or If They Live in a Society Where the Relative Pay Advantage of Well-Educated Individuals Is Greater for Participation in Terrorist Organizations Than in the Legal Sector.”(1, P. 122)

Once We Strip the Lack of Education From the Profile, We Are Forced to View the Actions of the Bomber to Be in His Best Interests. Understandably This Is Not Something People Can Readily Adjust To. As Previously Mentioned, Considerations of Ideology Are Difficult to Comprehend for a Westerner, Whose Political ‘struggle’ Is Often Limited to a Last-Minute Half-Hearted Vote at the Local Primary School.

Similarly, Welfare Conditions Associated with Terrorism, Specifically Poverty, Have Been Discredited As Having Any Correlation or Causation Effects (1, P. 135). This Connection Is Made As Economic Grievances Are Expected to Be the Biggest Motivators in Joining a Terrorist Group. The Stereotypical Terrorist Will Join As an Act of Desperation in an Attempt to Improve the Financial Situation of His Family. The Lack of Any Empirical Data Supporting This Claim and Evidence From Nassra Hassan Quoted Above Demonstrates yet Again How Western Value and Ideals Prevent Us From Understanding Other Cultures, Therefore Forcing Us to Make Assumptions Based On Our Values.

The Impact of the Group Is Arguably One of the Most Powerful Influences in a Terrorist Organisation. A Shared Ideology Supported by a Brotherly Bond Is Constantly Reinforced in Order to Create a Collective Identity That Precedes Individualism. The Potential Bomber Establishes a Circle of Colleagues and Friends, All of Whom Go Through the Same Training Process and Develop Ties Such As Loyalty and Trust. Making Individual Contributions Publicly Observable Also Raises Contributions to Public Good Substantially (14, P. 22), Therefore Group Members Add to the Collective Identity, Sometimes Through Elements of Competition and Favouritism. These in Turn Progress Into Social Obligations, Whereby Failing to Go Through with the Performance Would Mean Betraying the Group’s Ideology and Members. We Can Identify Numerous Parallels in Our Own Environment. Sacerdote Compiled a Study of Peer Effects in a College Dorm Where Roommates Developed Bonds Strong Enough That Later Influenced Their Selection of Fraternities/sororities (11, P. 681). Such Tendencies Make It Vital for the Terrorist Group Leaders to Limit Outside Influences On the Group, Therefore Creating a Homogenous Brotherhood of Like-Minded Individuals. At the Same Time No Social Structure Can Function Without Obedience, Making Authority a Central Element in the Functioning of the Group. Not Only Does It Guide the Overall Aims and Beliefs of the Organisation, It Controls Recruitment and the Day-To-Day Duties Associated with Maintaining Control of the Members. As Milgram’s Experiment Established:” Individual Who Is Commanded by a Legitimate Authority Ordinarily Obeys” (13, P. 371). The Power of the Group Is Especially Interesting in the Workings of a Firm; We See That Familiar Structures Sometimes Have Very Particular Motivations in Mind:

“if It Is True That Some People Are More Self-Interested Than Others Then Choosing the “right” People Is One Way of Affecting the Preferences of a Firm’s Workforce. For This Reason Employers Have a Strong Interest in Recruiting Employees Who Have Favourable Preferences and Whose Preferences Can Be Affected in Favourable Ways. There Is Circumstantial Evidence for This Because the Testing and Screening of Employees Is Often As Much About the Employee’s Willingness to Become a Loyal Firm Member As It Is About the Employee’s Technical Abilities.” (14, P. 8)

The Concept of Reciprocity Is Another Binding Factor to the Firm. “there Is a Close Relation Between the Notion of Reciprocity and the Idea That Employers Often Deliberately Attempt to Change the Preferences of Their Employees in Ways That Help to Achieve the Firm’s Goals, Prefer Loyal Employees Who Take Goals of Organization Into Account.” (14, P.7) This Is Very Representative of a Terrorist Group As Well. While Admission Into the Group Requires a Lot of Personal Motivation and Commitment, It Will Not Be Sufficient to Rely On Individual Contribution. The Leaders Have to Consistently Work On Solidifying Those Loyalties and Consequently Advancing the Group’s Cause.

This Paper Outlined the Traditional Framework Associated with the Profile of a Terrorist Suicide Bomber. The Tools at Our Disposal Were the Classical Characteristics of a Utility-Maximising Agent. With the Help of Recent Discoveries in the Field of Behavioural Economics, Some of the Stereotypical Perceptions Were Challenged in an Attempt to Gain Some Understanding of the Processes by Which a Terrorist Decides to Join a Group and Motivate Himself to Accomplish His Goals. The Purpose of This Approach Was to Bring the Terrorist Identity Into the Boundaries of Rationality and Thus Diminish the Dramatic Impact Suicide Bombing has On Society. Since One of the Main Aims of Terrorism Is to Make a Statement to the World, Purely to Attract Attention and Not Kill Civilians, Perhaps by Engaging with This Subject We Can Decrease It's Effectiveness, Which Would Save Lives and Maybe Eventually Encourage Them to Look for More Peaceful Alternative to Promote Their Cause.

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