

MAKING SENSE OF BOKO HARAM AND SUICIDE MISSIONS IN NIGERIA

Ogaga Ayemo Obaro, PhD

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.

Abstract

This article attempts to highlight various motivating factors which contribute to increased incidence of suicide missions in Nigeria and worldwide. Boko Haram, the Islamic religious sect, whose name means "Western education is sacrilege" in the Hausa language of Nigeria's north, has been waging an increasingly bloody fight against the nation's Federal government and some Northern States governments. Boko Haram has targeted Nigeria's police, rival clerics, politicians, and public institutions with increasing violence since 2009. Some experts say the group should primarily be seen as leading an armed revolt against the government's entrenched corruption, abusive security forces, strife between the disaffected Muslim north and Christian south, and widening regional economic disparity in an already impoverished country. The heart-wrenching and horrible daily accounts of suicide bombings rarely reveal the underlying causes or the bombers' motivations. But without understanding these motivations and addressing them, it would appear that governments or organizations that seek to end suicide bombings are likely to be disappointed. However, in order to understand this complex phenomenon it is important to consider the contextual factors. Boko Haram's suspected bombing of a United Nation's building in Abuja in August 2011 and its ties to regional terror groups may signal a new trajectory and spark a stronger international response that makes it harder to address the north's alienation.

Keywords: Boko haram, Suicide Missions, Bomber's Motivations, Nigeria

Introduction

Suicide terrorism is a problematic term to define. There is an ongoing debate on definitions of terrorism itself. Kofi Annan, as Secretary General of the UN, defined terrorism in March 2005 in the General Assembly as any action "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants" for the purpose of intimidation (United Nations, 2007). This

definition would distinguish suicide terrorism from suicide bombing in that suicide bombing does not necessarily target non-combatants, and is not widely accepted. With awareness of that debate in mind, suicide terrorism itself has been defined by Pedahzur as a diversity of violent actions perpetrated by people who are aware that the odds they will return alive are close to zero (Pedahzur, 2004). This captures suicide bombing, and the range of suicide tactics. A suicide attack, therefore, is an attack upon a target, in which an attacker intends to kill others and/or cause great damage, knowing that he or she will either certainly or most likely die in the process. The means of suicide attack usually include vehicles filled with explosives, passenger planes carrying large amounts of fuel, and individuals wearing vests filled with explosives due to the amount of devastation these methods can cause within the short period of time the attacker is alive and in control. Synonyms include suicide attack, suicide-homicide bombing, martyrdom operation, and predatory martyrdom (Hassan, 2009).

More than 800 people have died in drive-by killings and bombings blamed on Boko Haram between 2010 and 2013 (Wikipedia, 2013). The sect has demanded, among others, that strict Shariah law be implemented across the entire country. The sect has used suicide car bombs against their targets. Nigeria's military claimed it killed the sect's spokesman and a commander outside the city of Kano, potentially shaking up a sect that has continued attacks despite a tighter military presence in northern cities. The killing of members of the sect's senior leadership comes as the group changed some of its tactics and attacked several mobile phone towers throughout northern Nigeria, disrupting communications in a nation reliant on cellular phones.

Suicide bombing attacks have become a weapon of choice among terrorist groups because of their lethality and ability to cause mayhem and fear. Though depressing, the almost daily news reports of deaths caused by suicide attacks rarely explain what motivates the attackers. Between 1981 and 2006, 1200 suicide attacks constituted 4 percent of all terrorist attacks in the world and killed 14,599 people or 32 percent of all terrorism related deaths (Hassan, 2009; Pedahzur, 2004). The question is why?

Motivations of Suicide Missions

The sect treats anything western as completely un-Islamic. It considers western influence on Islamic society as the basis of the religion's weakness. Hence the sect's declaration that conventional banking, taxation, jurisprudence, western institutions and particularly western education are infidel and as such must be avoided by Muslims. Its ideological mission is to overthrow the secular Nigerian state and impose strict Islamic Sharia law in the country. Its members are motivated by the conviction that the Nigerian state is a cesspit of social vices, thus 'the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to "migrate" from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place

and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation’ ((Straziuso, 2012; Onuoha, 2011).

However, suicide bombing is a very complex phenomenon. It is difficult if not impossible to examine the issue of Suicide Bombing in an impassionate manner. The topic is shrouded in speculations and assumptions. With the deceased no longer there, examination of motives becomes difficult. It has been a focus of research in recent times (Hassan, 2009). However inherent biases of researchers also distort or muddle the picture: researchers from western countries focus the issue around political liberty and notion of democracy, while those from Islamic countries tend to take the afterlife-reward notion as an incentive for suicide bombing (Takeda, 2010; Mir, 2011).

Although the use of suicide attacks has occurred throughout recent history, its main notoriety as a specific kind of attack began in the 1980s and involved explosives deliberately carried to the target either on the person or in a civilian vehicle and delivered by surprise. Following the success of a 1983 truck bombing of two barracks buildings in Beirut that helped drive American and French Multinational Force troops from Lebanon, the tactic spread to insurgent groups like the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, and Islamist groups such as Hamas (Hassan, 2010).

Observers believe suicide attacks have become popular because of their lethal effectiveness, but attackers' motivation is disputed. One scholar attributes over 90% of attacks prior to the Iraq Civil War to a goal of withdrawal of occupying forces (Pape, 2005); while another, Scott Atran argues that since 2004 the overwhelming majority of bombers have been motivated by the ideology of Islamist martyrdom, and that these attacks have been much more numerous. In just two years, 2004-2005, there were more suicide attacks, roughly 600 than in Pape's entire sample (Atran, 2006).

Typically, most suicide bombers are psychologically normal and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities. Randomly attached labels such as “mad” denote one’s inability to fathom the deeper reasons but don’t advance our understanding of the causes of the phenomenon of suicide bombing. Rather, they impede us from discovering its real nature, purpose and causes (Pedahzur, 2004).

At last, now we have some concrete data to begin addressing the question. The Suicide Terrorism Database in Flinders University in Australia, the most comprehensive in the world, holds information on suicide bombings in Iraq, Palestine-Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which together accounted for 90 per cent of all suicide attacks between 1981 and 2006. Analysis of the information contained therein yields some interesting clues: It is politics more than religious fanaticism that has led terrorists to blow themselves up (Hassan, 2009).

Motivations of Suicide Bombers

John Campbell notes that the context of Boko Haram is easier to talk about than Boko Haram itself." Injustice and poverty, as well as the belief that the West is a corrupting influence in governance, are root causes of both the desire to implement sharia and Boko Haram's pursuit of an Islamic state, say experts. The emergence of Boko Haram signifies the maturation of long festering extremist impulses that run deep in the social reality of northern Nigeria. But the group itself is an effect and not a cause; it is a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos. The reintroduction of sharia criminal courts was originally proposed by the governor of the state of Zamfara in 1999, but the proposal quickly became a grassroots movement that led to its adoption in twelve states. Experts say there was widespread "disillusionment" with the way sharia was implemented, and that Boko Haram has tapped into this dissatisfaction, promoting the idea that an Islamic state would eliminate the inconsistencies. Injustice and poverty, as well as the belief that the West is a corrupting influence in governance, are root causes of both the desire to implement sharia and Boko Haram's pursuit of an Islamic state (Johnson, 2011).

The doctrine of asymmetric warfare views suicide attacks as a result of an imbalance of power, in which groups with little significant power resort to suicide bombing as a convenient tactic to demoralize the targeted civilians or government leadership of their enemies. Suicide bombing may also take place as a perceived response to actions or policies of a group with greater power (Pape, 2005). Groups which have significant power have no need to resort to suicide bombing to achieve their aims; consequently, suicide bombing is overwhelmingly used by guerrillas, and other irregular fighting forces. Among many such groups, there are religious overtones to martyrdom: attackers and their supporters may believe that their sacrifice will be rewarded in an afterlife. Suicide attackers often believe that their actions are in accordance with moral or social standards because they are aimed at fighting forces and conditions that they perceive as unjust.

According to Robert Pape, director of the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism, 95% of suicide attacks in recent times have the same specific strategic goal: to cause an occupying state to withdraw forces from a disputed territory. Robert Pape's studies have found that suicide attacks are most often provoked by political occupation. Pape found the targeted countries were ones where the government was democratic and public opinion played a role in determining policy. Other characteristics Pape found included a difference in religion between the attackers and occupiers and that there was grassroots support for the attacks (Pape, 2005). Attackers were disproportionately from the educated middle classes (Atran, 2006). Characteristics which Pape thought to be correlated to suicide bombing and

bombers included: Islam, especially the influence of Salafi Islam; brutality and cruelty of the occupiers; competition among militant groups; and poverty, immaturity, poor education, past history of suicide attempts, or social maladjustment of the attackers (Pape, 2005).

In targeting potential recruits for suicide terrorism, it must be understood that terrorist attacks will not be prevented by trying to profile terrorists. They are not sufficiently different from everyone else. Insights into homegrown jihadi attacks will have to come from understanding group dynamics, not individual psychology. Small-group dynamics can trump individual personality to produce horrific behavior in otherwise ordinary people (Pape, 2005).

Other researchers have argued that Pape's analysis is fundamentally flawed, particularly his contention that democracies are the main targets of such attacks (Wade and Reiter, 2007). Scott Atran found that non-Islamic groups have carried out very few bombings since 2003, while bombing by Muslim or Islamist groups associated with a "global ideology" of "martyrdom" has skyrocketed. In one year, in one Muslim country alone – 2004 in Iraq – there were 400 suicide attacks and 2,000 casualties (Atran, 2006). Still others argue that perceived religious rewards in the hereafter are instrumental in encouraging Muslims to commit suicide attacks (Oliver and Steinberg, 2004). Suicide operatives are overwhelmingly male in most groups, but among the Chechen rebels and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) women form a majority of the attackers (Pape, 2005).

In his book *Dead for Good*, Hugh Barlow describes recent suicide attack campaigns as a new development in the long history of martyrdom that he dubs *predatory martyrdom*. Some individuals who now act alone are inspired by emails, radical books, the internet, various new electronic media, and a general public tolerance of extreme teachers and leaders with terrorist agendas (Barlow, 2007).

All acts of war in Islam are governed by Islamic legal rules of armed warfare or military jihad. These rules are covered in detail in the classical texts of Islamic jurisprudence (Khan, 2006). In orthodox Islamic law, jihad is a collective religious obligation on the Muslim community, when the community is endangered or Muslims are subjected to oppression and subjugation. The rules governing such conflicts include not killing women, children or non-combatants, and leaving cultivated or residential areas undamaged (Lewis and Churchill, 2008). For more than a millennium, these tenets were accepted by Sunnis and Shiites; however, since the 1980s militant Islamists have challenged the traditional Islamic rules of warfare in order to justify suicide attacks (Khan, 2006; Lewis and Churchill, 2008).

According to a report compiled by the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism, 224 of 300 suicide terror attacks from 1980 to 2003 involved

Islamist groups or took place in Muslim-majority lands (Pape, 2005). Another tabulation found a 4.5 fold increase in suicide bombings in the two years following Papes study and that the majority of these bombers were motivated by the ideology of Islamist martyrdom (Atran, 2006).

Recent research on the rationale of suicide bombing has identified both religious and sociopolitical motivations (Hafez, 2007; Hassan, 2011). Those who cite religious factors as an important influence note that religion provides the framework because the bombers believe they are acting in the name of Islam and will be rewarded as martyrs. Since martyrdom is seen as a step towards paradise, those who commit suicide while discarding their community from a common enemy believe that they will reach an ultimate salvation after they die (Oliver, & Steinberg, 2004). Leor Halevi, a professor at Vanderbilt University and author of "Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society", suggests that some suicide bombers are perhaps motivated by an escape from the potential punishment of the tomb that comes with martyrdom (Halevi, 2007). Other researchers have identified sociopolitical factors as more central in the motivation of suicide attackers (Bloom, 2007; Hassan, 2009; Takeda, 2010).

Pape suggests that resentment of foreign occupation and nationalism is the principal motivation for suicide attacks: Beneath the religious rhetoric with which such terror is perpetrated, it occurs largely in the service of secular aims. Suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than a product of Islamic fundamentalism... Though it speaks of Americans as infidels, al-Qaida is less concerned with converting us to Islam than removing us from Arab and Muslim lands (Pape, 2005).

According to anthropologist Scott Atran and former CIA case officer Marc Sageman, support for suicide actions is triggered by moral outrage at perceived attacks against Islam and sacred values, but this is converted to action as a result of small world factors. They tend to go to violence in small groups consisting mostly of friends, and some kin. These groups arise within specific "scenes": neighborhoods, schools (classes, dorms), workplaces and common leisure activities: soccer, paintball, mosque discussion groups, barbershop, café, online chat-rooms (Atran, 2007; Sageman, 2007).

The evidence from the database largely discredits the common wisdom that the personality of suicide bombers and their religion are the principal cause. It shows that though religion can play a vital role in recruiting and motivating potential future suicide bombers, the driving force is not religion but a cocktail of motivations including politics, humiliation, revenge, retaliation and altruism. The configuration of these motivations is related to the specific circumstances of the political conflict behind the rise of suicide attacks in different countries (Lankford, 2010).

Understanding the terrorist organization's logic is more important than understanding individual motivations in explaining suicide attacks (Hoffman, 2003). Suicide bombings have high symbolic value because the willingness of the perpetrators to die signals high resolve and dedication to their cause. They serve as symbols of a just struggle, galvanize popular support, generate financial support for the organization and become a source of new recruits for future suicide missions. Suicide bombings serve the interests of the sponsoring organization in two ways: by coercing an adversary to make concessions, and by giving the organization an advantage over its rival in terms of support from constituencies. Contrary to the popular image that suicide terrorism is an outcome of irrational religious fanaticism, suicide bombing attacks are resolutely a politically-motivated phenomenon (Schweitzer, 2000).

Humiliation, revenge and altruism appear to play a key role at the organizational and individual levels in shaping the sub-culture that promotes suicide bombings. Humiliation is an emotional process that seeks to discipline the target party's behavior by attacking and lowering their own and others' perceptions of whether they deserve respect (Barlow, 2007). Suicide bombings have high symbolic value because the willingness of the perpetrators to die signals high resolve and dedication to their cause. People tend to have a strong aversion to what they perceive as injustice, with the dark side manifested as revenge. One consequence of the desire for vengeance is an individual's willingness to endure sacrifice to fulfill the act. Contemplation of revenge can appear to achieve a range of goals, including righting perceived injustices, restoring the self-worth of the vengeful individual and deterring future injustice. Revenge is also a response to the continuous suffering of an aggrieved community. At the heart of the whole process are perceptions of personal harm, unfairness and injustice, and the anger, indignation, and hatred associated with such perceptions. Men attach more value to vengeance than women; and young people are more prepared to act in a vengeful manner than older individuals. It is not surprising, then, to find that most suicide bombers are both young and male (Davis, 2004). The meaning and nature of suicide in a suicide bombing are strikingly different from ordinary suicide. Suicide bombing falls into the category of altruistic suicidal actions that involve valuing one's life as less worthy than that of the group's honor, religion, or some other collective interest. Religiously and nationalistically coded attitudes towards acceptance of death, stemming from long periods of collective suffering, humiliation and powerlessness enable political organizations to offer suicide bombings as an outlet for their people's feelings of desperation, deprivation, hostility and injustice (Gambetta, 2005).

For the individual, participating in a suicide mission is not about dying and killing alone but has a broader significance for achieving multiple purposes, from personal to communal. These include gaining community approval and political success; liberating the homeland; achieving personal redemption or honor; using martyrdom to effect the survival of the community; refusing to accept subjugation; seeking revenge for personal and collective humiliation; conveying religious or nationalistic convictions; expressing guilt, shame, material and religious rewards; escaping from intolerable everyday degradations of life under occupation, boredom, anxiety and defiance. The configuration of these purposes varies and is an outcome of specific circumstances of the political conflict behind the rise of suicide attacks as a tactic and a weapon (Hassan, 2010).

Tactics

Hezbollah's attacks in 1983 during the Lebanese Civil War are the first examples of the modern suicide terrorism (Kurz & Bartles, 2007). Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK) used the first suicide attack in 1996, and al Qaeda in the mid-1990s (Kurz & Bartles, 2007). The number of attacks using suicide tactics has grown between 2000 and 2005 (Atran, 2006). These attacks have been aimed at diverse military and civilian targets.

In Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, suicide bombings have been perpetrated generally by Islamist and occasionally by secular Palestinian groups including the PFLP (Pedahzur, 2004). In 1993, Hamas carried out the first suicide attack (Kurz & Bartles, 2007). Between October 2000 and October 2006, there were 167 clearly identified suicide bomber attacks, with 51 other types of suicide attack (Schweitzer, 2007). It has been suggested that there were so many volunteers for the "Istishhadia" in the Second Intifada in Israel and the occupied territories, that recruiters and dispatchers had a 'larger pool of candidates' than ever before (Schweitzer, 2007).

In the ten years after September 11, 2001, there were 336 suicide attacks in Afghanistan and 303 in Pakistan, while there were 1,003 documented suicide attacks in Iraq between March 20, 2003, and December 31, 2010. Suicide bombings have also become a tactic in Chechnya, first being used in the conflict in 2000 in Alkhan Kala. A number of suicide attacks have also occurred in Russia as a result of the Chechen conflict, notably including the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002 to the Beslan school hostage crisis in 2004. The 2010 Moscow Metro bombings are also believed to result from the Chechen conflict. There have also been suicide attacks in Western Europe and the United States. The September 11, World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks killed nearly 3000 people in New York, Washington D.C and Shanksville, Pennsylvania in 2001. An attack in London on 7 July 2005 killed 52 people (Wikipedia, 2012; Mir, 2011; Pedahzur, 2004).

Conclusion

The causes of suicide bombings lie not in individual psychopathology but in broader social conditions (Falk & Morgenstern, 2009). Understanding and knowledge of these conditions is vital for developing appropriate public policies and responses to protect the public. For one, the conventional wisdom that bombers are insane or religious fanatics is wrong. Individual bombers show no personality disorders and the attacks themselves are often politically motivated, aimed at achieving specific strategic goals such as forcing concessions or generating greater support. Moreover, the motivations are complex: politics, humiliation, revenge, retaliation and altruism, all drive the individual to engage in, and the community to condone, suicide bombing. Indeed, as Hassan notes, participating in suicide bombing can fulfill a range of meanings from the “personal to communal” (Hassan, 2009; Gambetta, 2005).

Suicide bombings are carried out by motivated individuals associated with community based organizations. Strategies aimed at finding ways to induce communities to abandon such support would curtail support for terrorist organizations. Strategies for eliminating or at least addressing collective grievances in concrete and effective ways would have a significant, and, in many cases, immediate impact on alleviating the conditions that nurture the subcultures of suicide bombings. Support for suicide bombing attacks is unlikely to diminish without tangible progress in achieving at least some of the fundamental goals that suicide bombers and those sponsoring and supporting them share (Hassan, 2009; Onuoha, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Straziuso, 2012).

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