

To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences Study on Social & Behavioral Science and Improving Intelligence for National Security" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

**Subject: The Suicide Bombing chapter: Changing an emotional consensus**

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

As you review the literature on suicide terrorism and consider advice to upgrade the DNI's databases and analysis methods, I hope that you will draw the connection to Lasswell's thinking about emotional consensus [discussed in memorandum # 85 of December 31, 2009; a reference copy is online at [www.policyscience.net](http://www.policyscience.net)].

**Missing Variables: Essential Consumer Warnings to the DNI and the Public**

As a first step, the DNI needs a generic warning about relying upon social science literature: There are many consumer warnings that are needed and many pitfalls to avoid. Very few researchers and traditions are attempting to be comprehensive, multi-disciplinary, and problem-oriented. And there is an egregious lack of leadership from the President's Science Adviser, or NSF, or the National Academy of Sciences/NRC, universities and professional societies, etc. to assure that basic R&D cumulates in a timely and reliable way for rapid learning and better public policy decisions. And - since none of these institutions has agreed to be responsible or accountable - there is an extra consumer warning that is needed: criticisms and warnings do not necessarily activate self-correction mechanisms.

**Missing Variables and Suicide Bombing**

Specifically, concerning suicide bombing: Lasswell's wider framework (which attends to context/emotional consensus) typically is missing from the domain of variables in standard terrorism databases and analyses (e.g., Robert Pape's Dying to Win: The Logic of Suicide Terrorism - NY: Random House, 2005).

However, as the DNI will know (and as Pape and others confirm), current suicide bombing is rarely an expression of mental illness. These actions occur in a

social world, not in a world of private fantasy or brain disorder. The suicide bombers are socially and politically engaged and an understanding of their suicide bombing can be built upon a straightforward empathy of asking what would lead a normal young person to end their life in this way. We can think of a powerful set of forces, each adding to and reinforcing a decision; and a trajectory of being drawn into social/religious networks with a uniformity of agreement and reinforcement for the fate of the recruit.

Thus, a key component can be a wider sense of an emotional consensus supporting their conduct, including imagining the bombing as a public, heroic, and altruistic act in an historical drama. Often, a drama whose eventual victory will rid a homeland of corrupting foreign invaders and contribute widely, thereby, to lives of other people and future beneficiaries.

### **Potentially Important and Exciting Opportunities**

However, this analysis means that there may be exciting opportunities to shift some of these forces so that their sum falls below the very high threshold that is necessary to induce normal people to take a premeditated suicidal act. In the famous Asch experiments concerning conformity, for example, even one other person in a group who publicly questions what is happening is enough to bring the ambivalence, hesitations, and independence of the subjects to life. And the same one-person-breaking-off effect has been observed in the famous Milgram experiments concerning obedience to authority.

We live in a global media age. With \$75 billion/year, it might not be hard for the DNI to develop a universe of initiatives. There does not need to be a single, silver bullet that hits a mark, dead-center: you can think about beginning to shift a range of variables. <1>

### **How to Shift an Emotional Consensus**

If this is true, the challenge for a special DNI/NIC study would be to survey everything that we know about the question and develop a range of policy options.

There are likely to be many allies. The potential recruit is likely to have reservations and ambivalence about suicide. Parents, family, and relatives may have mixed feelings.

Also, respected cultural/religious leaders may have ambivalence about youthful suicide bombing as a tactic in the future of Arab politics. We have passed the point when it is primarily Americans or residents of NYC who are the targets of Islamic suicide bombing: It is political opponents and innocent civilians of the Islamic faith in public squares and marketplaces in the Islamic world. As the tactic has been evolving toward becoming a permanent and wider, legitimate feature of their national/regional politics so, too, has a potential coalition grown, of thoughtful and resourceful people, who can tip the balance against the tactic.

It is not my purpose, in this brief memorandum, to solve the problem. Or to suggest ideas that are - in the traditions of psychological warfare and thinking about terrorism - original. However, like the surge that Dr. Petraeus was able to organize to apply social science analysis and past lessons, there are astute people within government whose social science ideas about deflecting the recruitment pathways to suicide bombing can be boosted by better databases, wider theoretical frameworks, and better analysis methods.

For example, in England and India Lasswell's kind of wider sensibility is an instinctive response to suicide terrorism: There are huge public demonstrations with outpourings of sympathy for the victims. Part of the strategy is to block, even in the minds of distant potential recruits, any imagining that there is a favorable emotional consensus. And public mourning for innocent Islamic victims is a legitimate act for many Islamic religious leaders, even those who are not religiously moderate or who want to remain apolitical.

### **Recognizing Altruism, Idealism, and Self-Sacrifice**

To achieve a full deployment of social/behavioral science to analyze alternative psychological pathways for policymakers, it also is useful to recognize the altruism and idealistic commitment of recruits to suicide bombing. These motives also can inform the creation of attractive, alternative pathways and choices: "If you are willing to give your life for the Islamic faith and your people, there are alternatives to putting everything into one act of violent destruction. Weigh the contributions that you can make. You can be a teacher for a full lifetime, or develop medical knowledge to cure and care for the sick; you can live your religion in your life and raise children who are shaped by your example . . ." There could be many Islamic Youth Corps - perhaps like the Peace Corps or CCC - to open alternative, legiti-

mate, non-suicide pathways for devout youth. And you do not need to recruit a large N of fundamentalist and idealistic Islamic youth directly and quickly: you are trying to change the space of emotional possibilities and, as in the Asch experiment, interrupt a kind of emotional consensus/spell of conformity.

### Resistance to Manipulation

We know in America - at least with respect to changing youth behaviors like cigarette smoking - that preaching by adults or advertising campaigns have limited effects. Two things work: raising the price of cigarettes by taxation; and creating a sense in young people that they and their friends are being manipulated by tobacco companies. By analogy, in the Arab world, there *is* a very strong cultural cynicism about political competition for power and money and control. Every cafe is filled with Arab males drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and being cynical and astute about politics. There are cultural resources/templates to support skepticism about the real religious motivations of the people who are recruiting idealistic young people and deploying them, as suicide bombers, in battles with each other that are about power, money, and control.

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<1> There have been extensive experience with public service/political advertising that also may be a source of creative ideas. There also are several thousand jihadist-oriented Websites and a wider universe of mosque and other Websites oriented to the Arab world.

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