

"A lively, insightful, and evidence-based analysis of the most disruptive phenomenon in world affairs today." —Steven Pinker

# THE MYTH OF MARTYRDOM



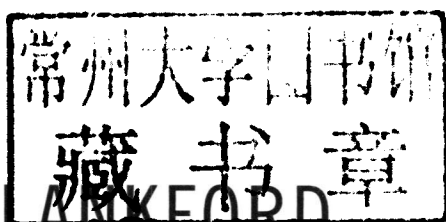
WHAT REALLY DRIVES SUICIDE BOMBERS,  
RAMPAGE SHOOTERS, AND OTHER  
SELF-DESTRUCTIVE KILLERS

ADAM LANKFORD

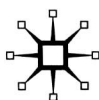
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## PRAISE FOR *THE MYTH OF MARTYRDOM*

“At last an insightful book about martyrdom and suicide bombers. Too many so-called experts have dominated the stage without ever examining the life of a suicide bomber. Lankford, in a thorough and in-depth study, has identified the trauma, chronic depression, and suicidal behavior that characterize their lives. This is a fascinating book with profound implications.”

—David Lester, former president of the  
International Association for Suicide Prevention

“A coherent, must-read for all who would claim to be experts in terrorism—or just curious. Dr. Lankford’s analytic rigor and willingness to examine assumptions make this a textbook example of how to do research and analysis. His conclusions? Suicidal martyrs are not heroes to be admired, but sick people to be pitied. Those who direct them are nothing more than evil. As Keynes once wrote: ‘When someone persuades me I am wrong; I change my mind.’ What will you do?”

—Jim Simon, former Asst. Director of Central Intelligence  
for Administration, Central Intelligence Agency,  
and Chair, Homeland Security Intelligence Council

“More than a decade after the 9/11 attack, scholars and commentators are still offering alternative explanations as to why the plotters were willing to commit suicide. Were they heroic martyrs so dedicated to cause of Islamic Jihad that they were willing to die? Or were they so mentally unbalanced that they wanted to die because their lives had become too depressing, too much filled with anxiety and failure? Adam Lankford explores these hypotheses, not only as they apply to the 9/11 plotters, but also to school shooters, airplane hijackers, lone wolf bombers, and the like. In a must-read book for those interested in these issues, he makes the case for the second hypothesis. He provides a benchmark that others will have to consider as they seek to reach their own conclusions.”

—Donald Daniel, security studies professor,  
Georgetown University, and former  
Special Adviser to the Chairman,  
National Intelligence Council

# THE MYTH OF MARTYRDOM

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Suicide terrorism can be a very dark and disturbing subject, and I spent more than three years investigating the intimate details of attackers' lives. For some, this might sound like a prison sentence, but I tried to maintain a sense of challenge and excitement as if working a puzzle, if only to preserve my *own* mental health.

At the beginning, when I realized that my findings directly contradicted the most well-known experts in the field, there was reason for concern. Sometimes there is resistance to an idea that challenges the conventional wisdom. Though I may have experienced this, fortunately there were anonymous peer reviewers who recognized the weight of the evidence and saw that it warranted publication in academic journals. Although I cannot thank them face-to-face, I am eternally grateful for their support. It is good to be reminded that there will always be open-minded people eager to embrace some new ideas.

A number of other scholars also assisted me along the way. They include Max Abrahms, who sent me his findings on the counterproductive nature of terrorist campaigns; Ken Ballen, who spoke with me about the results of his personal interviews with a number of terrorists; David Lester, who supported my early efforts to pursue research funding; Fielding McGehee, who spoke with me about what really happened at Jonestown in 1978; Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, who sent me their database of past attacks; and Joseph Young, who sent me his findings on several terrorist profiles.

The superb work of many journalists who disseminated my early findings deserves recognition as well. Paul Kix's terrific piece for the

Boston Globe, “The Truth about Suicide Bombers,” helped spark international interest in the topic. Articles by Anne-Catherine Simon for *Die Presse* in Austria, Poul Høi for *Berlingske Tidende* in Denmark, and Daniel Braw for *Helsingborgs Dagblad* in Sweden were also of great value, in addition to many other pieces that I have not listed here. I am hopeful that continued coverage of this research will help us to significantly reduce suicide attacks worldwide.

In addition, Andrew Nichols (Nick) Pratt, Colonel, USMC (Ret.), was kind enough to invite me to George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch, Germany, where I was their suicide terrorism guest speaker for the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies. I greatly appreciated his support and directly benefited from the experience. As part of the program, I met with security officials from Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Colombia, Congo, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Latvia, Lebanon, Macedonia, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Poland, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, South Africa, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, the United States, and Uruguay. Their insights, observations, and questions directly inspired my research for the book’s final two chapters.

Thanks also to my colleagues at The University of Alabama—Rebecca Howell, Ida Johnson, Mark Lanier, Bronwen Lichtenstein, Ariane Prohaska, Kathryn Seigfried-Spellar, and Jimmy Williams—who have been incredibly supportive throughout this process. They were always happy to offer advice or share a laugh, and my comfort in our department made it easy for me to focus on intellectual pursuits. Similarly, my students—whose insatiable desire for answers often mirrored my own—helped me to stay energized and motivated, with a healthy dose of curiosity.

Of course, it takes a certain degree of magic to create the finished product. Thanks to my agent Bob Mecoy, who played a vital role in getting this research into the right hands for publication. I particularly appreciate his enthusiasm and commitment, and I know that he went to bat for me on a number of occasions. And at Palgrave Macmillan,

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Finally, thanks to my family and friends, who became regular participants in the creative process. I cannot begin to count how many times we sat at restaurants and spoke in hushed tones about the suicidal tendencies of violent attackers, all the while wary of disturbing those around us. Or how many conversations began with “I wonder why . . . ,” only to be resolved by something thoughtful they said.

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# ONE

## THE MYTH OF MARTYRDOM

**W**ould you carry out a suicide attack?  
After all, you want to kill Americans. Or maybe it's Europeans, or Jews, or some other "infidel" of the day. You want to make sure that your side wins and the other side loses. And you are willing to do whatever it takes.

*It's really not that hard. Can you dress yourself? Okay, then pull on the bomb vest, one arm at a time, and then pull on another shirt to conceal the explosives. Can you walk? Okay, then stroll down the street to a crowded corner and wait for the perfect moment. Can you wiggle your thumb? Okay, then reach into your pocket and press that little button. It's really not that hard.<sup>1</sup>*

*In fact, it's so easy that donkeys have done it. In Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon, among other places, donkeys have carried out suicide bombings.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the donkeys weren't suicidal. I mean martyrs. The donkeys weren't martyrs. But you will be.*

*So let's get on with it. Wait, what? You're having second thoughts? You're thinking that maybe your life is worth more than a donkey's? And you've heard that in some countries, half of suicide bombers only manage to kill themselves. Yes—that's true.<sup>3</sup>*

*Now you're thinking that maybe you can contribute more some other way. Instead of blowing yourself up today, you could fight for twenty or thirty years, recruit new members, spy on the enemy, forge sensitive documents, build bombs, and strike from afar. And then at that future point, if*

*you're ready to "retire," you could blow yourself up in a suicide attack, satisfied with the knowledge that you did everything you could.*

*I guess you're right—carrying out that suicide attack doesn't make much sense. Even if you're not afraid to die, in the vast majority of cases it's still not worth it. As they say, give a man a bomb vest, and he kills for a day. Teach a man to make bombs, and he kills for a lifetime. That's one of the reasons the U.S. military had so much trouble in Iraq. It wasn't until they started hunting down the bomb makers, instead of the bombs, that they really made any progress.<sup>4</sup>*

*But it all comes down to a very personal question.*

*Would you rather live or die?*

## A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

Most people do not know the truth about 9/11. But it is not because of a conspiracy. And not because they have been lied to.

It is because, when it comes to the motives and psychology of the nineteen terrorist hijackers who set the world on fire that fateful September day, the experts got it wrong. Why were these suicide terrorists willing to kill themselves, along with nearly three thousand innocent civilians who they had never even met? In the aftermath of the deadliest attack on perhaps the most powerful nation in human history, our experts made the same types of mistakes they have made many times before.

As the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States concluded, the strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were successful because of our "failure of imagination." After a nearly three-year investigation, including interviews with more than one thousand individuals in ten countries, at a total cost of nearly \$15 million, the 9/11 Commission determined that "Across the government, there were failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management."<sup>5</sup> But by far, "the most important failure was one of imagination."<sup>6</sup> It was our inability to think.

This book won't make that mistake. At the beginning of this chapter, we were playing pretend, inside the head of a potential suicide bomber. Is that science? No. But it's a useful exercise because it stretches our brains

and can bring us a step closer to the truth. In many cases, human behavior is far too complex to be rigidly sorted into predetermined boxes. That's why we refer to the "art" of homicide investigation and the "art" of interrogation. These complex challenges often defy any strict order of operations or previously determined formulas. Ask any skilled terrorist interrogator or homicide detective if they could successfully be replaced by someone with a "how-to" cheat sheet. Maybe on the simplest of assignments. But not on the tough cases, because a search for hidden truths requires instinct, improvisation, and imagination.

The irony is that the average man or woman on the street is sometimes better at this than the scholars and government experts we count on. Professional success in these fields is often based on conformity: how well you follow a prescribed set of rules, and whether you can play the game without upsetting anyone. But research suggests that when it comes to skills like "divergent thinking," which is associated with creativity and imagination and is critical for advanced problem solving, the less formal education you have received, the better off you may be.

As revolutionary education specialist Sir Ken Robinson recounts, a few years back there was a study of divergent thinking that required subjects to generate new possibilities from scratch. A sample question would be "How many different uses can you think of for a paper clip?" In the counterterrorism realm, we might ask about different uses for bombs or hijacked airplanes instead of paper clips—but more on that to come. Anyway, the study's results were fascinating:

They gave a series of tests to 1,600 three-to-five year olds. . . . Of the 1,600 children, 98% scored at the genius level or higher for divergent thinking. They gave the same tests to the same children five years later at the ages of 8 to 10. Then 32% scored at the genius level in divergent thinking. They gave the same test to the same children at the ages of 14-to-15 and the result was 10%. Interestingly, they gave the same test to over 200,000 adults and the figure was 2%.<sup>7</sup>

Why do most people become less imaginative and less capable of generating new ideas as they grow older? There are many potential

explanations. To some degree, it may be hardwired and almost inevitable: part of the cognitive maturation process required for survival.<sup>8</sup> But Robinson suggests that it's also the fault of our education system, because much of "what we teach in education is about not being wrong, about not taking risks."<sup>9</sup>

But if you're too scared of being wrong, it's awfully hard to get it right.

### THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

So what glaring error did the so-called experts on suicide terrorism make in their diagnoses of the 9/11 hijackers?

They normalized them. They made the logical leap that in terms of their psychology, suicide terrorists were essentially just like ordinary people. "Sure, the 9/11 hijackers had extreme political and religious beliefs," the experts admitted. But were they unstable? No. Were they suicidal? No. Were they struggling with serious personal problems? Of course not. They just really, really believed that they were serving the greater good.

Believe it or not, this was actually the least risky perspective at the time. It fit squarely with past psychological experiments, studies of genocide and mass killing, and studies of institutional violence that had helped identify why large groups of people do such very bad things.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it seemed to reinforce previous findings that the vast majority of terrorists do not have personal pathologies or psychological disorders—they were relatively ordinary individuals before they were recruited and indoctrinated by terrorist organizations.<sup>11</sup> The truth is, this is an accurate characterization of most terrorist leaders and operatives—but not of those who carry out suicide attacks.

The assumption that suicide terrorists were psychologically normal may have also been appealing because it contradicted the public outrage. Everyone knows you can't trust the judgment of angry mobs recently traumatized by a terrorist attack, right? After 9/11, most people figured that anyone who would intentionally crash an airplane into a building

must have something deeply wrong with him. The experts laughed and said no.

Consider the following statements, made by leading authorities around the world:

- Jerrold Post, founder of the CIA's Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior, chair of the American Psychiatric Association's Task Force for National and International Terrorism and Violence, and director of the political psychology program at George Washington University: "We'd like to believe these are crazed fanatics, and some sort of madmen in the grip of a psychosis. Not true . . . as individuals, this is normal behavior."<sup>12</sup>
- Robert Pape, former adviser for two presidential campaigns and professor at the University of Chicago: "The uncomfortable fact is that suicide terrorists are far more normal than many of us would like to believe."<sup>13</sup>
- Scott Atran, professor at the University of Michigan who has made presentations to the U.S. State Department, the U.K. House of Lords, and the U.S. National Security Council at the White House: "No instances of religious or political suicide terrorism stem from lone actions of cowering or unstable bombers."<sup>14</sup>
- Riaz Hassan, Australian Research Council fellow, former visiting professor at Yale University, and professor emeritus at Flinders University: "Most suicide bombers are psychologically normal."<sup>15</sup>
- Robert Brym, Royal Society of Canada fellow and professor at the University of Toronto: "Virtually all suicide bombers are psychologically stable."<sup>16</sup>
- Ellen Townsend, professor at the University of Nottingham: "Suicide terrorists are not truly suicidal."<sup>17</sup>
- Adel Sadeq, head of psychiatry at Ain Shams University: "The psychological make-up [of a suicide bomber] is that of a person who loves life."<sup>18</sup>

There is far more where that came from. Experts have also claimed that suicide terrorists are:

- “qualitatively similar to countless people throughout history who have given their lives for a higher cause”<sup>19</sup> (Larry Pastor, George Washington University Medical Center);
- “much like ordinary soldiers with a strong sense of duty and a willingness to sacrifice all for the common good”<sup>20</sup> (Robert Pape, the University of Chicago);
- “not significantly different from other rebels or soldiers around the world who are willing to engage in high-risk activism out of a sense of duty and obligation”<sup>21</sup> (Mohammed Hafez, Naval Postgraduate School).

Among those who share these views: a U.S. presidential candidate, scores of high-ranking government officials, and a number of world-renowned social scientists.<sup>22</sup>

However, this is one of those cases where laypeople were right to trust their instincts. One of those times when six-year-old kids intuitively understood more than sixty-year-old “experts.” One of those opportunities for us to use our imaginations—while we still can.

### THE FEAR FACTOR

I’m afraid to die. And I bet you are, too.

When I was fifteen, I got hit in the head with a baseball, no helmet. Internal bleeding produced a three-ounce blood clot. Think of a soda can filled to the one-quarter mark with blood, and then imagine that much blood lodged between the inside of the skull and the outer covering of the brain. The technical phrase was “extradural hemorrhage,” but it doesn’t take a neurologist to realize that internal bleeding causes a lot of pressure to build up and that pressure causes pain.

I was rushed to the emergency room with violent nausea, a debilitating headache, and numbness across half my body. After several tests,

I was told that the doctors were going to have to cut open my skull to drain the clot.

My immediate response: “Let’s do it.”

Now, an onlooker may have mistaken my statement for bravery. After all, I had just been informed that a doctor was going to perform some life-threatening procedure that I didn’t fully understand, within inches of my brain. You only get equipped with one of those brains, and you only get one life. But I didn’t flinch.

The truth is, there was not an ounce of courage in my response. I was so overwhelmed by the agony of the moment that I would have jumped at any potential solution—anything that would get me out of the present crisis. I was not courageously marching into surgery—I was desperately seeking to escape unbearable pain.

A similar misconception often surrounds suicide. Famed English writer Charles Caleb Colton once remarked, “Suicide sometimes proceeds from cowardice, but not always, for cowardice sometimes prevents it; since as many live because they are afraid to die, as die because they are afraid to live.”<sup>23</sup>

To some degree, he’s right. One reason why many people *do not* commit suicide when “the going gets tough” is because they are afraid of death. And the same fear also prevents many acts of suicide terrorism. Regardless of their beliefs, most ordinary people would be far too afraid of dying to strap explosives to their bodies and intentionally blow themselves up, much less hijack an airplane and deliberately crash it into a skyscraper.

But far too many commentators have taken this a step too far, concluding that because suicide terrorists do what we are afraid to do, this makes them brave. Worse yet, in some social contexts, these individuals are not only considered brave, but also glorified as heroic sacrificers—“martyrs.”

However, as this book will show, suicide terrorists have a dirty little secret. They’re afraid too—but of life. Much like my response when waiting in the emergency room, suicide terrorists are often desperate to escape unbearable pain—be it real or imagined, physical or psychological.

In fact, many suicide terrorists appear to be overwhelmed by far more fears than the average individual. They don't jettison our fears of death and boldly embrace their fate—they just stack their own fears on top. As the moment of their final act draws near, a natural survival instinct often sets in, and many have second thoughts. For instance, as a preemptively arrested suicide bomber known as Ali explained, "Even in the morning of the operation, I was very brave in my mind . . . [But] from the minute I put on the explosive belt . . . I thought how frightening the belt was, that I was going to explode into pieces."<sup>24</sup> Many suicide terrorists get caught between a rock and a hard place: afraid to live and afraid to die. Blowing themselves up offers a permanent solution to this temporary problem.

But make no mistake, this is not a sacrifice. "Sacrifice" is defined as "the forfeiture of something highly valued for the sake of one considered to have a greater value or claim."<sup>25</sup> But as we will see, most suicide terrorists are so consumed by pain, fear, crisis, and other personal problems that the opportunity cost of their suicide becomes quite affordable. By definition, this also means that their attacks cannot be considered a true "sacrifice," because the suicide terrorists are not forfeiting "something highly valued." Even according to their own statements, they are trading something they put a low value on (their lives in this transient, unhappy, and corrupt world) for something they value highly (heaven and paradise). There is nothing noble or brave about that kind of bargain.

It is not only inaccurate to label these suicide terrorists "normal," "stable," "sacrificial," or "martyrs," but it is also dangerous. It plays directly into the hands of terrorist leaders, increasing the power of their propaganda. It allows them to glorify yesterday's suicide bombers as they recruit new ones for tomorrow. It also helps terrorist organizations conceal that they are exploiting desperate people for their own purposes: capitalizing on the psychological pain of individuals who could live in peace, if only they got the help they needed.

#### ARE SUICIDE TERRORISTS SUICIDAL?

In December 2010, esteemed journalist Paul Kix wrote an article for the *Boston Globe* titled "The Truth about Suicide Bombers." In the piece,