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Afghanistan and the Logic of Suicide Terrorism

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A YOUNG man wearing a military uniform is sitting on the floor and reading from the Holy Qur'an. After a few minutes, he starts his sermon by introducing himself and his objective. "My name is Amanullah Ghazi and I am from the province of Khost. The infidels have come to our country and they are misleading us from our path. It is the duty of every Muslim to sacrifice oneself in the path of God. In the Qur'an, God has mentioned, if you follow My way, I will offer you the paradise." He continues, "I have come for Jihad and this is the way you should follow. InshaAllah (God Willing) I will meet you in paradise." He ends his talk and moves towards his motorcycle, which is wrapped with a large amount explosives. He is followed and filmed by his handler until he reaches his endpoint – a military training center in the heart of Kabul -- where he blows himself up, killing 13 people and injuring over 50 others.

This was the first filmed "will" of an Afghan suicide attacker that appeared recently in DVD and VCD format throughout the various parts of Southeastern Afghanistan. The objective of the piece was straightforward – inspire and motivate the particular segment of the population that is disillusioned with the Coalition Forces and the Afghan government to jihad. Given that suicide terrorism is an emerging phenomenon in Afghanistan, distributing such videos will have a major impact in radicalizing and further motivating future volunteers.

Setting the Stage

Suicide terrorism, like terrorism in general, is a complex and difficult issue to define. A leading authority on the subject, Mia Bloom, notes that the terrorist executes the action in order to achieve a political goal and with the complete awareness that he is going to his death. Other standard definitions focus more on the goals of the act by stating that the suicide attacker's intention is to harm as many people as possible with the objective of effecting some type of political change.

The act of suicide for a particular objective has been around for centuries -- from Samson to the Japanese Kamikaze pilots. However, the recent trend of religiously-inspired suicide attacks started to appear in the early 1980's by such groups as the Hizbollah and Al Dawa. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), not a religious entity, perfected the tactic on land, air and sea through their Black Tigers unit. The LTTE, one of the most professional terrorist organizations, has been responsible for the killing of many political leaders including the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

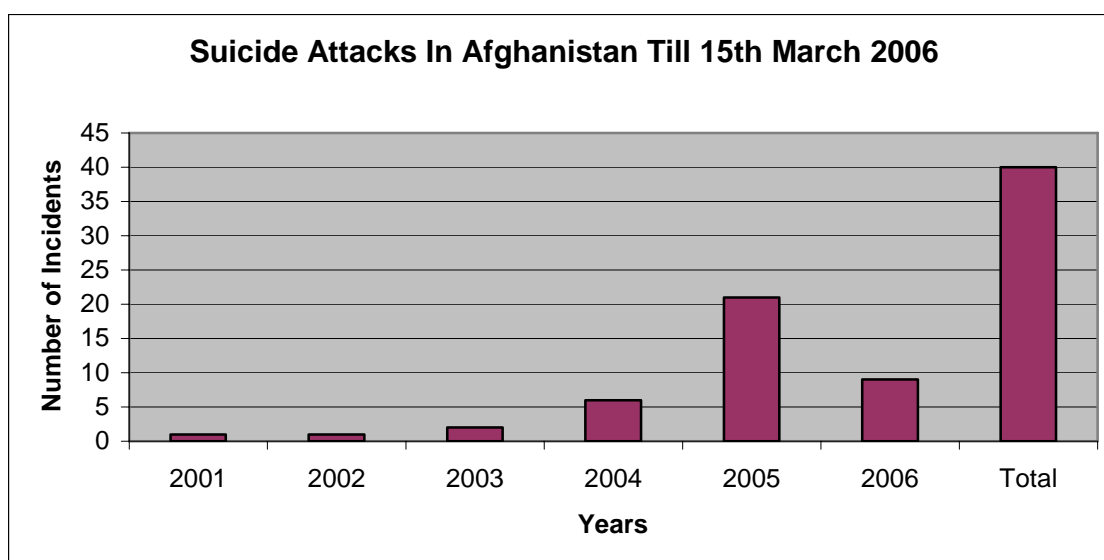
They were one of the first groups to use women as suicide attackers and till today 30 to 40 percent of their attacks have been delivered by women.

Because of the effectiveness of the tactic, Al Qaeda joined the bandwagon in the late 1990's and conducted, coordinated and synchronized attacks using multiple bombers. Their actions were witnessed in the 1998 embassy bombing in East Africa and clearly during September 11th. The greatest impact of Al Qaeda has been to inspire other groups to adopt their modus operandi. Besides the massive proliferation of the global Jihadi ideology to groups with otherwise local grievances, Al Qaeda's tactical influence has also manifested itself in the global rise of suicide bombings; in fact out of more than 600 suicide attacks carried out in history, over 70 percent have taken place since 9/11.

The Afghanistan Case

Conflict has been a constant factor during the last three decades of Afghan history, although there was no record of a suicide attack until September 9th 2001 when two Al Qaeda members assassinated Commander Ahmad Shah Masoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance.

After the Coalition Forces came to Afghanistan, the trend of suicide attacks started to emerge very slowly with one attack carried out in 2002, two in 2003 and six in 2004. However, from this point on, the pace changed. Learning from the effectiveness of the insurgents in Iraq, the groups carried out 21 attacks in 2005 with the southern city of Kandahar and the capital Kabul as their primary targets. This year has already witnessed nine suicide attacks, with the latest one targeting former President and current Senate leader, Professor Sibghatullah Mujaddedi.



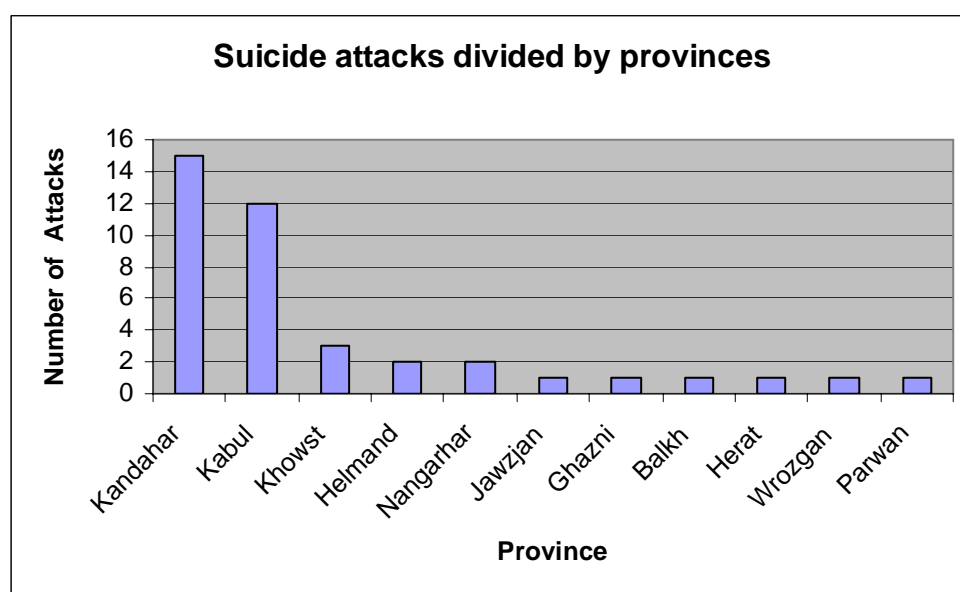
Speaking about the adoption of suicide attacks, Mullah Dadullah, a top military commander of the Taliban, stated in a recent interview with Al Jazeera: "The reality is that the Mujahedeen of each area implement tactics they see suitable."

There are several specific reasons why Taliban and the foreign elements decided that suicide terrorism constitute ‘suitable tactics’ for the Afghan theatre.

Firstly, suicide attacks are effective due to their maximum impact yet minimal resources, especially, since the groups know they are engaged in asymmetric warfare, with a much more powerful adversary. Data show that when fighting force on force, the group’s chances of inflicting casualties on the coalition forces are only around five percent. With suicide tactics, the chances go much higher.

Second, devastating attacks have instilled fear in the people’s hearts leading them to believe that the government cannot protect them, further destabilizing the authority of local government institutions. Consequently, the gap between the government and the population is slowly expanding.

Most importantly, suicide attacks have provided renewed visibility to the Taliban and their allies that the guerrilla attacks were just not generating. Given their high casualty and high profile nature, every suicide attack conducted is reported in the regional and international media providing augmented exposure to the cause.



The key question is who is responsible for the attacks?

Many Afghans believe that the attacks are not carried out by locals, noting that “it is not culturally acceptable or a characteristic tactic of the Afghan people”. This belief ignores the fact that Afghan culture has not been as isolated as it may have in the past. At one point, one quarter of Afghanistan’s 25 million population became refugees and a particular part of that population attended foreign madrasahs where they were radicalized and immersed in extremist ideologies. The relatively easy to access DVDs, VCDs and other forms of technology allows ideas to spread rapidly. We only need to look at the above stated case of Amanullah.

Underlying all of this is the exposure to Al Qaeda, which has spread its extremist global ideology to various groups. During their reign, from June of 1996 till November of 2001, Al Qaeda and Taliban established a very close 'marriage of convenience' where Al Qaeda supported and trained many Taliban cadres. Following the post 9/11 transformation of the Taliban from a conventional military force into an insurgent one, this training and indoctrination are starting to reap benefits.

Need for a fatwa

Afghanistan is not the first nation to face the threat of suicide attacks and will most likely not be the last. While dealing with the suicide threat may be difficult for any state, it is not impossible, especially, if operational and strategic measures are implored.

Operationally, the Afghan government must enhance the capacity of its intelligence in order to disrupt the network that organizes and supports such activities. As many researchers note, suicide attackers hardly ever work alone. There is always an underground infrastructure that provides the essential financial and material resources and arranges everything else, including target identification and time and date of the attack.

Strategically, the Afghan *ulama* must oppose suicide bombing by issuing a *fatwa* (religious decree) to that effect. They should also explain that suicide bombing does not lead to an eternal life in paradise, nor the permission to see the face of Allah, or the loving kindness of *72 houris* (beautiful maidens) who will serve the suicide bomber in heaven.

In my mind, the *ulama* should not allow *fatwas* to be manipulated by the extremists for their negative effects on the Muslim world. This responsible action by the *ulama* is congruent with the Islamic legal principle of *Sadd al Dhara'ii* (closing the gate of evil).

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