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Journey of Death: Suicide Bombers in Iraq

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Over the past four years, suicide bombings have become a choice weapon of the insurgency in Iraq. Today, terrorists and insurgents perpetrate suicide attacks regularly, taking a profound physical and psychological toll on the local population and the multinational forces serving in the country. Curbing the incidence of these attacks depends in part on understanding the motivations that trigger them. In his latest book on this challenging topic, Mohammed Hafez offers trenchant insights into the deadly phenomenon of suicide bombing, shedding much needed light on the strategy and ideology behind what often appears to be an inexplicable act of terror.

On July 10, 2007, USIP convened a distinguished panel to discuss the findings of Hafez's new book, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*. The panel included Dr. Hafez, visiting professor at the University of Missouri, Kansas City; His Excellency Samir Sumaidaie, the Ambassador of Iraq to the United States; and Tom Ricks, a Pulitzer prize winner and military correspondent for the *Washington Post*. Steve Riskin, Senior Program Officer with the Grants and Fellowships Program at the Institute, which funded Hafez's study, introduced the panelists. Daniel Serwer, the Vice President of the Institute's Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations moderated the event. The following is a summary of the discussion. It does not represent the views of the Institute, which does not take policy positions.

Taking a closer look at a deadly phenomenon...

According to Hafez's research, suicide bombings in Iraq exhibit three unique and puzzling features. First, insurgents have historically tended to turn to suicide attacks when conventional tactics fail. The attacks in Iraq, however, have not followed this pattern, as the insurgents have engaged in suicide bombings since they began their campaign in 2003. Moreover, not only are suicide attacks being perpetrated, but Hafez also claimed that there has been a distinct upward trend in the use of this deadly tactic. Consequentially, Hafez noted that, "today, Iraq has become the leading nation in which suicide attacks take place."

Second, although suicide bombings in other countries typically target foreign soldiers or non-Muslims, this has not been the case in Iraq. The main targets of the suicide attacks are not the multinational forces or U.S. troops. Instead, the primary targets of such attacks are the Iraqi security forces, particularly the police, and the Shiite community in general.

The third puzzling aspect of these attacks, and the central focus of Hafez's research, is that foreigners are

perpetrating most of the suicide attacks. Although the insurgency is undoubtedly centrally composed of and led by Iraqis, Hafez's research shows that the majority of suicide bombers come from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Tunisia. Eight have even come from Italy. For Hafez, this phenomenon, which he has termed, "martyrs without borders," is one of the most troubling and perplexing aspects of the suicide attacks in Iraq.

Tom Ricks added that there are two distinct types of foreigners flocking to Iraq to participate in suicide missions. The first are non-commissioned officers or young officers, expelled from their own countries because of their extremist beliefs and agendas. These individuals have important skills and experiences that terrorist groups in Iraq are quick to utilize. Such individuals are generally not used to execute suicide missions but instead help plan, organize and coordinate them. While these individuals typically become assets for terrorist organizations, the second type of individual, which Ricks described as the "young, eager jihadi," is not received with the same enthusiasm. Groups like al-Qaeda, who have an acute fear of spies, meet these individuals with suspicion and mistrust. Because of this, these individuals are quickly isolated from the community and almost immediately sent out to perpetrate suicide missions.

In all, the puzzling features of the suicide bombers in Iraq add up to reveal the birth of a third generation of jihadis. The first generation, according to Hafez, participated in the Afghan campaign against the Soviets, and the second generation included those who trained with al-Qaeda in the 1990s. This third generation, however, is unique in many ways. Not only are many of them educated, including doctors, engineers, and lawyers, but their actions are based on the template developed in Palestine and Lebanon—a template that venerates martyrdom as a heroic action to be taken against any occupying force. For this generation, suicide bombing is thus not necessarily a last resort; it is an effective weapon and the duty of the faithful.

...and exploring the tactical, strategic, and ideological motivations.

The use of suicide attacks in Iraq and the upward nature of this trend are hardly random. While there are puzzling features that make the suicide attacks unique, the motivations behind these attacks are not completely enigmatic nor are they fully novel. Although explanations for this phenomenon are undeniably complex, there are specific tactical, strategic, and ideological motivations that play a clear role in prompting the use of such attacks.

Tactically, Ambassador Sumaidaie pointed out that groups such as al-Qaeda have learned that suicide bombers can be highly effective weapons. Not only do these attacks successfully exploit the weaknesses of the multinational troops and the Iraqi security forces, but—perhaps more importantly—they are also convenient, low-cost, and have a significant physical, psychological and political impact. One of the most important psychological impacts, pointed out by Ricks, is that suicide attacks are highly effective at alienating the multinational forces from the local population and the environment. This is because these attacks "take the most routine aspects of life, a taxi passing by or a pedestrian on the street, and turn them into threats," Ricks said. By alienating the multinational forces from the Iraqis, the insurgents make it impossible for the internationals to work closely with the local population.

Strategically, Hafez believes that al-Qaeda is using suicide attacks as a means to achieve one of its overarching goals: creating the necessary conditions to ensure its survival in Iraq. Suicide attacks help al-Qaeda achieve this strategic goal in two specific ways. First, by attacking the Iraqi security forces, al-Qaeda effectively denies the Iraqi state the capacity to maintain a monopoly on the use of force, thereby undermining its ability to provide security. By doing so, al-Qaeda de-legitimizes the new Iraqi government, as well as the multinational forces, in the eyes of the Iraqi people and the international community. Second, because suicide bombings produce "sectarian tensions that polarize the communities," such attacks, according to Hafez, "help al-Qaeda create a base for itself amongst the people." Suicide attacks thus work to cement al-Qaeda's power and control by simultaneously destabilizing the Iraqi government and increasing grassroots popular support for the insurgency.

Tactical and strategic motivations may help explain why these attacks are employed by the insurgency, but do they explain why foreigners are taking this "journey of death," as Hafez asked? Do they explain why a Tunisian living in Italy would go to Iraq to participate in a suicide mission? Ultimately, ideological motivations may be better able to explain why individuals seek out the opportunity to cross borders with the explicit intent of becoming a suicide bomber.

Exploring the ideological motivations of suicide bombers requires a historical perspective and a look at the unintended consequences of the global war on terror. Prior to September 11, Hafez claims that, "the jihadist movement was divided between those who wanted to fight the near enemy—their own governments—and those who wanted to fight the far enemy—foreign governments, the United States, and the West in general." Individuals such as Osama bin Laden, who supported fighting the far enemy, were largely in the minority at that time. Yet, after September 11, perceptions shifted and "the far enemy became the near enemy." This shift occurred because, as Hafez noted, "the war on terrorism cast the net too widely." Because the war on terror generally portrayed all Islamic movements as radical, the U.S. provided funding to a variety of governments who repress Islamic groups in general, such as Algeria and the Philippines. Yet, by conflating all Islamic movements, the global war on terror unintentionally turned what was once an array of distinct Islamic movements with unique goals into a monolithic enemy. The global war on terror thus unintentionally fed the perception that the United States is not only at war with al-Qaeda, but that it is in fact at war with Islam writ large. It is this perception that in turn provides a significant part of the ideological motivation for suicide attacks—a motivation that appeals to a global range of potential recruits.

Searching for an effective strategy...

According to Ricks, "what the U.S. missed for several years in Iraq is that putting down an insurgency is not won by killing insurgents—it is won by making them irrelevant." Only in February 2007, when Army General David Petraeus took over as commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq, did the U.S. recognize this reality and adjust its strategy accordingly. But, short-term strategies, such as a surge in troops, are unlikely to have more than an ephemeral effect, and a full withdrawal, according to Hafez, would likely lead to genocide.

While short-term strategies may be problematic, long-term strategies are rife with contradictions and paradoxes. On the one hand, Hafez stated that if the U.S. and its allies commit to providing Iraq with resources and troops for at least a decade, it might be possible to stabilize the country and expel the extremist groups. But, on the other hand, Hafez noted that staying in Iraq for a sustained period of time could trigger a deterioration of support for the U.S. in the Muslim world and the "continuation of the cult of martyrdom." The question, as posed by USIP's Daniel Serwer, is thus, "how do we square this circle?" In other words, how do we reconcile the paradox that to be effective the U.S. and its allies must remain in Iraq for at least a decade, but that by remaining in the country, they aggravate the situation? Finding a way out of this fundamental paradox is one of the core strategic challenges of this conflict.

Furthermore, Hafez believes that the U.S. must significantly alter its policy toward the terrorist threat more generally. The aggressive strategies employed thus far in the global war on terror have not only failed, they have radicalized many Muslims and fueled a five-fold increase in suicide attacks. Hafez stated that three principles should guide U.S. policy to successfully confront this pressing issue. First, the U.S. should emphasize defense not offense. Hafez claimed that, "the more we become offensive, the more we fall into the trap of al-Qaeda." Second, the U.S. should work to exploit the terrorists' radicalism and extreme violence to undermine grassroots support for their agendas. Third, Hafez recommended, "less may be more." Unlike groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which acquire a great deal of their support by providing social services, groups like al-Qaeda build most of their support by exploiting the missteps of their enemies. Thus, according to Hafez, "the fewer mistakes we make and the less we overreact, the faster we are likely to win against this opponent."

For Ambassador Sumaidaie, winning the war of ideas is fundamental for attaining protracted victory

against groups such as al-Qaeda. Noting the "ongoing campaign by the conservative Islamic establishment to depict the western world in a hostile light and persuade the faithful that Islam is under attack," the Ambassador believes that in the long-term, winning the war of ideas will require a robust focus on education. In the short-term, however, the Ambassador stressed the need to promote responsible media. Without winning the war of ideas, the Ambassador was convinced that, "more suicide bombers will be generated, and they will not only be generated for Iraq. This production line, I am afraid, is targeted for the whole of the western world."

Strategies for curbing the terrorist threat, according to Ricks, must also take into consideration the impact of the information revolution. Ricks stated that the information revolution is prompting the "migration of power from the state to non-state actors," as innovations such as the internet, fax machines, cell phones, and video recorders empower individuals by expanding their audiences. Because the information revolution shifts power toward individuals, strategies and polices designed to enact change must be adjusted to reflect this new source of influence. In other words, because of the information revolution, governments are no longer the sole player negotiating change in their territories—individuals empowered by technology now have a seat at the table as well.

Finally, Hafez also discussed the need to address perceived inconsistencies and contradictions in U.S. foreign policies. In his research, Hafez found that there is a great deal of frustration over cases where the U.S. fails to adhere to its own stated policies. "You say you are for democracy, but when people are elected you impose sanctions on them; you say you are for liberty, but two of your strongest supporters are two of the most repressive regimes in the world; you say you are for ending occupation, yet there are occupations around the world that you are not dealing with"—these are criticisms that Hafez hears in the Muslim world. Dealing with these foreign policy contradictions is an important part of countering the terrorist threat.

...and a path to peace.

Given the increase in suicide attacks in Iraq, as well as a variety of recent terrorist attacks in Europe, the question of how vulnerable the U.S. is to such attacks naturally arises. While it is entirely possible that more suicide attacks will occur on U.S. soil, Hafez believes that the lack of preexisting terrorist networks in the United States makes it more difficult for such acts to be perpetrated. He believes that the existence of such networks in Europe helps explain why these types of attacks occur in cities such as London and Madrid. Yet, the desire to perpetrate attacks on U.S. soil is still strong and the threat should not be underestimated.

Ending the use of suicide attacks, either in Iraq or elsewhere, will not be easy—in fact, it is one of the most significant challenges the U.S. and its allies face in the coming years. Hafez's work provides one of the first steps toward the path to peace, as it sheds much needed light on the motivations triggering this deadly phenomenon. Moreover, his work articulates an important insight for dealing with the terrorist threat— although terrorist groups "can inflict harm on us, they cannot defeat us. We can only defeat ourselves."

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by Christina Caan, a research assistant in the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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