A Durkheimian analysis of the development of terrorism and the motives of suicide bombers

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Abstract
In this article, I present a "Durkheimian" analysis of terrorism, using Durkheim's theories of *social cohesion* and *suicide.* Which social factors influence the development of radical and terrorist feelings and thoughts in individuals? And what are the motives of terrorists generally and suicide bombers in particular? The concepts of *social cohesion, altruism* and *fatalism* play a key role in this analysis. The lack of *social cohesion* in today's individualistic Western society is of major influence on the development of radical and terrorist thoughts and feelings in individuals. The motives of suicide bombers can be regarded as *altruistic,* and as having certain elements of the *fatalistic*. Suicide bombers sacrifice their lives, among other reasons, because they feel so connected with the social group of terrorists that they place greater value on the group target than on their own lives. On the other hand the *fatalistic* motive is also seen in suicide bombers, who miss the connection with regular society and view life as meaningless. Furthermore, there are more suicide bombers in states with a totalitarian regime, which is also in line with the *fatalistic* motive. This suggests that suicide bombers can be labeled under a new category of *fatalistic altruistic* suicide.

Keywords: terrorism, social cohesion, suicide bombers, Durkheim, altruistic, fatalistic.

Introduction
In this article, I will attempt to address terrorism within a sociological context. While many authors look for psychological reasons as to why people become terrorists, there is a good deal of research that shows that terrorists are generally "normal" people with no psychological or mental defects (Abadie, 2006, Dingley, 1997). This suggests that we should look at the context in which people develop into terrorists. Terrorism seems to be a social phenomenon (Richardson, 2006). On the basis of a close study of Durkheim's theory of *social cohesion* and *suicide,* Dingley's book *Terrorism and the Politics of Social Change, A Durkheimian Analysis,* and several articles about suicide bombers and social cohesion, I will attempt to address terrorism within a broad-based sociological context.

The question I will answer in this paper is: *Does a decline of social cohesion in a society have any influence on the development of terrorism, and what are the circumstances in which the probability of people committing a suicide attack increases?*

Importance of social cohesion
Most terrorism emanates from traditional societies in which social structures are changing, with people losing their secure social context as familiar structures disappear. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon: after the modernization projects in Algeria and Egypt, terrorism increased. After western modernity "invaded" Saudi Arabia, we witnessed the 9/11 attacks, and the growing disruption of traditional society in

Palestine by Israeli modernity increased terrorism there. We also see a growth of terrorist attacks in European countries where modernity has disrupted the traditional society, countries like Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and the Basque region in Spain. When the discrepancy between modern political systems based on contemporary industrial values and the mostly religious, traditional societies becomes too large, the disruption of traditional societies by the modern systems can have serious consequences (Dingley, 2010). Social structure gives individuals a certain compass—a direction to their lives. When structures change, some people lose this compass, and thus their connection with society. In such circumstances, some individuals distance themselves from the mainstream society and become more susceptible to involvement in terrorist organizations, because they are looking for a new secure social context.

There is a paradox in this phenomenon. On the one hand, modern laws and changes in policy seek to make society less violent while, on the other hand, individuals who have lost their familiar, secure social context radically resort to pre-modern habits because they feel they don't fit in the new society. Religion and communities become more important for this group of individuals, and the way to pursue their ideals is often violence.

Suicide terrorism
Among the methods used by terrorists and terrorist organizations, suicide attacks have increased in frequency (Tosini, 2009). However, suicide terrorism has a long history. As early as the first century, it was practiced by the Jewish *sicarii*, in the eleventh century among the Moslem Hashishyun, and in the eighteenth century among some Asian groups (Schweitzer, 2001).
Suicide attacks are violent acts whose fulfillment requires the death of at least one individual who does not expect to survive the mission (Moghadam, 2006a).

But what are the motives of suicide bombers? What drives them to kill themselves in order to murder their frequently innocent victims? Although Durkheim never wrote about terrorism, his view on suicide as a social phenomenon seems valuable in analyzing suicide terrorism from a sociological perspective, which considers the context in which individuals live more important than their individual motives.

Durkheim: Suicide as a social fact
Émile Durkheim describes changing suicide rates as a social phenomenon which cannot be explained in terms of the individual motives, but instead has to be seen as influenced by the quality of the social associations and the moral beliefs in the encompassing society. Durkheim distinguished four types of suicide: altruistic, fatalistic, egoistic, and anomic. In this article, I will focus on the first two, because these two types of suicide are the best match for traditional societies going through political, social and economic transitions, while the types of anomic and egoistic suicide fit better into the context of postindustrial societies (Johnson, 1979). According to Dingley (2010) most terrorism occurs within traditional societies, where religion still plays a major role, societies in which policies and structures are changing. This is a theory that closely reflects Johnson's notions of altruistic and fatalistic suicide.

Altruistic suicide bombers
From the altruistic perspective, suicide bombers feel so connected with their social group of terrorists that they place greater value on the group target than on their own lives, and they believe in a beautiful afterlife.
Pedahzur et. al. (2010) present an analysis of a database of Palestinian terrorists—both suicide and non-suicide—

from 1993 to 2002. They use Durkheim's theory, focusing on altruistic and fatalistic suicide. They found support for most of their research hypotheses. I will first review the findings that support the altruistic suicide type. Most suicide bombers have a longer history as a member of a terrorist organization than non-suicidal terrorists before carrying out a terrorist attack. Furthermore, suicide bombers are more religious than non-suicide terrorists; the percentage that is religiously schooled as well as the percentage connected with religious fundamentalist organizations is higher for suicide bombers than for non-suicide terrorists. This suggests that altruism plays a role in suicide attacks, because increased duration of membership in a terrorist organization is associated with increased social cohesion within the group, leading individual members to put group interests above their own. In addition, the more religious somebody is, the greater the likelihood that he believes in a beautiful afterlife, which also fits the altruistic type.

Shimizu (2011) has also found that the duration of group membership plays an important role in the development and strengthening of extremist beliefs and radical behavior. Furthermore, when mainstream society has a negative opinion of the group, the social cohesion and altruistic feelings within the group also intensify.

Tosini (2011) also mentions altruistic feelings as an important factor in his complex ideal-typical model, by which he seeks to explain the motives of suicide bombers. He also touches on the crucial role that cultural and symbolic threats play in terrorist organizations. It could be that terrorists are prone to perceive such "threats" when a society evolves from traditional to modern.

Fatalistic suicide bombers

From the fatalistic perspective, suicide bombers lack a connection with regular society and view life as meaningless.

The findings of Pedahzur et. al. (2010) also confirm that suicide bombers can fit the fatalistic type of suicide. Suicide bombers have a lower socio-economic position than non-suicide terrorists, and they seem to have fewer family ties: they are often young, unmarried, and unemployed. Although Pedahzur et al. consider their results highly significant, other literature has not supported the fatalistic perspective of suicide terrorism. According to Abadie (2004) suicide terrorists do not have significantly more than average family instability or poverty. Further research is required to determine if suicide attacks are correlated with fatalistic attitudes.

Fatalistic altruistic suicide bombers

The motives of suicide bombers can be regarded as *altruistic* as well as having certain elements of the *fatalistic*. Suicide bombers sacrifice their lives, among other reasons, because they feel so connected with the social group of terrorists that they place greater value on their group than on their own lives. On the other hand, the *fatalistic* type of suicide can also match suicide bombers, as Pedahzur and his colleagues observed that suicide bombers have a lower socio-economic position and fewer family ties. They even formulate a new type of suicide: "fatalistic altruistic suicide" which had not been identified in the previous literature.

Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, a decline in social cohesion within a society seems likely to be an important factor in the increase of terrorism. When people lose their familiar, secure social context in mainstream society, they will seek a new secure social context to fit into. This makes them more susceptible to involvement in terrorist organizations.

To answer the second part of the question, suicide bombers seem to fit both the altruistic and fatalistic suicide types. Most of the authors cite the altruistic type of suicide as the best match for terrorist suicide attacks. Nevertheless, Padhazur et. al. (2010) and Dingley (2010) emphasize that suicide bombers also fit the fatalistic suicide type. Padhazur et. al. even formulate a new type of suicide: fatalistic altruistic suicide. In light of the lack of support in the literature, the foundations of this new category seem flimsy indeed. Further research is needed in order to determine if suicide attacks can be both fatalistic and altruistic.

It is also recommended that future research consider whether there are any differences between different religious and secular terrorist organizations. It might be found, for example, that religious suicide terrorists match the altruistic type better than secular suicide terrorists.

Interdisciplinary reflection
In this article, I have addressed suicide terrorism within a sociological context. At the same time, there are numerous different perspectives from which terrorism of any kind can be analyzed. For example, psychologists see terrorists more as independently acting individuals, and focus less on the social context in which the individual lives. Psychologists also generally consider the development of terrorist ideas and the associated acts to be caused by some kind of mental or psychological defect, or a disturbed development in childhood. They also consider social factors, but focus on the individual motives.

Indeed, this is the perspective most commonly adopted, not only among social scientists, but even more so in the media. When a terrorist attack is committed, people speculate about the mental health and psychological defects of the perpetrator(s). In my opinion, and given the results of the studies cited, this view is too narrow, since societies are changing rapidly in our era, and those who study terrorism cannot afford to ignore the influence of social cohesion. In analyzing any social problem, it is important to consider both social and individual factors. I therefore recommend an interdisciplinary approach to further research.

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