A deadly contagion?

XPLOSIVES strapped to his waist, Hussam Abdo faced the Israeli soldiers, and the camera. The Palestinian teenager had just become a global media celebrity: the 'Boy Bomber' of Nablus (see *tinyurl.com/4k8pt*).

Although security forces ultimately thwarted Hussam's attack, this sensational 'reality television' still made for compulsive viewing. 'Terrorism is theatre' wrote the political scientist Brian Jenkins,

WEBLINKS

'Genesis and future of suicide terrorism' article:

www.interdisciplines.org/terrorism/papers/ I

Bibliography on mass media and terrorism:

www.mipt.org/TerrorismBibliography.asp

American Psychological Association statement on
the effects of TV violence on children:

www.apa.org/pubinfo/violence.html





and as the story made headlines around the world, the shock value of the story was undeniable and reminiscent of the 2002 media circus surrounding photos of a baby dressed in suicide bomber gear. Hordes of journalists descended upon Hussam's family home, all jostling for soundbites on what had motivated him. But should they have been taking a look at themselves?

Some myths

More suicide attacks have taken place in the last three years than in the previous quarter century (Atran, 2004); 2003 saw more suicide attacks than ever recorded before; and the World Trade Center disaster **PAUL MARSDEN** and **SHARON ATTIA** on the psychology of suicide bombing and the role of the media.

of 2001 has become paradigmatic of a deadly trend that now has global relevance and global reach. Suicide bombing is indeed a newsworthy topic.

Media explanations for suicide bombing have tended to portray bombers as mentally unstable and religiously motivated. For example, much was made of the alleged facts that Hussam Abdo was mentally retarded and that his religion promised him sex with 72 virgins if he were to become a *shahid* (religious martyr). But beyond soundbite and spin these portrayals have little value. Profiling research based on video testaments, interviews with family and friends, and with suicide bombers who

survive, show most suicide bombers to be psychologically normal (Silke, 2003). There is no evidence to suggest that suicide bombers suffer from personality disorders or psychiatric conditions.

Likewise, the idea that the cause of suicide bombing is religious fanaticism does not stack up with the data; many groups adopting suicide-bombing tactics, including those in the Middle East, are entirely secular. Specifically, the idea that Islamist belief is the root cause of suicide bombing is false; the majority of suicide bombings in the last two decades of the 20th century were conducted by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, from a predominantly Hindu culture (Pape, 2003).

Equally disingenuous is the portrayal of suicide bombers as typically young single men, disenfranchised, unemployed and uneducated. Suicide bombers can be men or women aged anywhere between early teens to late forties, religious or secular, unemployed or employed, destitute or privileged, educated or uneducated, married or single, socially isolated or socially integrated (Pape, 2003).

Another favourite media explanation is that suicide bombers, particularly the young, are somehow brainwashed or coerced into such attacks. However, virtually all would-be suicide bombers are volunteers. The problem today for groups

today what he wants to be, he doesn't say doctor or engineer, or businessman. He says he wants to be a martyr' (Hawley, 2002).

A low-cost, high-return strategy?

Whilst we tend to attribute extreme behaviour to extreme personalities, scientific evidence suggests that this is often more a reflection of our own psychology than it is of those we label. It is, as psychologists are prone to say, a 'fundamental attribution error'. In fact, research consistently shows that the causal locus of behaviour often lies more in the external context and group environment than it does in our heads – we are 'contextual chameleons', ever changing our behaviour to fit the contexts and groups within which we find ourselves. Just as laboratory experiments show people will behave violently when placed in violent contexts and violent groups, a number of researchers now suggest that the causes of suicide bombing lie less in the mind and more in the pathological contexts and groups within which it takes place (Atran, 2003; Silke, 2003).

When we abandon the idea of suicide bombers as mentally ill individuals acting out individual death wishes, and see suicide bombing as a coordinated community response that fits a context of violence, aggression and revenge, then much of the incomprehensibility of suicide bombing dissolves. It is groups, not lone individuals that plan, organise, manage and execute suicide bombing (Merari, 2000), and when understood from a contextualised group perspective, suicide bombing can appear a rational and fitting response to perceived persecution, abuse and killing at the hands of an enemy. It is a highly adaptable lowcost, high-return technique of asymmetric warfare. It creates massive media publicity that can coerce and impress; its adoption as a strategy has been associated with the successful furtherance of political aims (Pape, 2003); it is cost-effective in terms of human cost of operatives killed and the cost of the bomb (typically about \$50); it is efficient in inflicting a far higher ratio of enemy deaths per bomb than other forms of attack, and efficient in minimising the risk of operative capture and subsequent loss of intelligence.

Given this contextualised group-level rationale for suicide bombing, it is therefore not surprising that groups have

MEDIA REPORTING OF SUICIDE BOMBING

'Last Wednesday...Reem Saleh Al-Riyashi...blew herself up, causing the death and wounding of 14 soldiers. Reem met her death as a Shahida embracing her rifle, underlining with unprecedented courage her love for her two small children – her son of three and her daughter of a year and a half – martyring herself in defense of land, honor, family, and the [previous] Shahids'. – Al-Masaa (Egyptian evening newspaper), 17 Jan 2004. (See tinyurl.com/5c4kf)

'To start with, let's see the raw materials. This is gunpowder: We call it kuhul, and we use it inside the bombs. It's made up of basic materials, including charcoal, sulfur and agricultural fertilizers. These are simple components, but the effect is quite good... This is the explosives belt the young men use when they carry out their martyr operations.'

– US Public Broadcasting Service television, 4 April 2001. (See tinyurl.com/3spww)

'When the Shahid [martyr] meets his Maker, all his sins are forgiven from the first gush of blood and he is exempted from the torments of the Grave, he sees his place in Paradise, he is shielded from the great Shock, and marries 72 virgins. He is a heavenly advocate for 70 members of his family, on his head is placed a crown of honor, one stone of which is worth more than all there is in this world.' — Palestinian TV, 17 August 2001.

emerged dedicated to recruiting, training, coordinating and carrying out suicide attacks. Only by understanding these groups and the contexts out of which they emerge will we begin to manage the threat of suicide bombing.

Media contagion

One small aspect of the contextual mix that might contribute to the wave of suicide attacks is mass media publicity (Nacos, 2002). Specifically, positive media coverage of suicide bombing in areas of recruitment may act as effective advertising campaigns for volunteers, whilst negative publicity may nevertheless encourage suicide bombing because it still gives bombers precisely what they want – media attention. This is not to say that the media can cause suicide bombing any more than sex (as opposed to HIV) can cause AIDS; it is at most a vector of transmission that can precipitate its spread.

The idea that mass media coverage can

Hanadi Jaradat, from Jenin, carried out a suicide attack in Haifa

employing suicide attacks is not recruitment, it is managing the over-supply of volunteers (Hassan, 2001). A recent survey of schoolchildren in Gaza found that 70 per cent wished to become a *shahid* in a martyr operation. Iyad Sarraj, psychiatrist and director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, concludes: 'If you ask a little child in Gaza

precipitate the spread of certain kind of behaviour is known as media contagion (Gould et al., 2003). The everyday fact of media contagion is demonstrated by the economics of commercial mass media, which is predicated upon it: most of what we read, see and hear in the media is financed by advertising, and would not exist if media advertising was not effective in precipitating the spread of buying behaviour. From a cognitive perspective, it's not so much that media publicity exerts any kind of mechanistic influence on us, but that it provides us with selective information that we then use to help solve problems and make decisions. In other words, the media's influence is derived from its role in informational gatekeeping and agenda-setting.

Could media contagion be implicated in the spread of suicide bombing? The role of the media in terrorism is politically controversial and much debated (Crenshaw. 1998; Nacos, 1994; Norris et al., 2003; Paletz & Schmid, 1992). Whilst some researchers, using a time series analysis of correlations between media portrayals of violence and violent crime rates, have found a measurable link between media publicity devoted to terrorism and terrorist attacks (e.g. Phillips, 1983), others have not (e.g. Baron & Reiss. 1985). However, we do know from general research on media influence that media violence does appear to play a role in the spread of violent behaviour (Anderson et al., 2003). For example, the statistical link between media violence and violent behaviour has been found to be stronger than that between calcium intake and bone mass, and between asbestos exposure and cancer (Hurley, 2004), with such a link being particularly strong in young people.

We also know that media contagion is

particularly implicated in suicide; highprofile suicide stories in the media are regularly followed by a jump of up to 10 per cent in suicide levels (Stack, 2000). Even fictional suicide stories in the media can produce this copycat effect; when a recent television hospital drama series featured a paracetamol overdose, hospital admissions for paracetamol overdoses jumped by 17 per cent (Hawton et al., 1999). The risk of media contagion is so strong that the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control have issued media guidelines for covering suicide stories, based on the psychology of imitation (see tinyurl.com/6s8so and tinyurl.com/5r2gc).

Finally, we know that media publicity is an overt goal of suicide bombing; the primary targets of suicide-bombing attacks are not those who are injured but those who are made to witness it through media coverage (Atran, 2003). So given that suicide bombing is a form of violent coercion that uses symbolic targets, surprise and resulting media publicity to compensate for relative weakness in destructive power, media coverage is an important metric of success. If media amplification is a goal and a measure of victory for suicide bombing, then it is logical that extensive media coverage may encourage groups to continue employing suicide-bombing tactics.

Broken windows

Of course, just because violent behaviour and suicide can be subject to media contagion, and just because there is a logical group-level rationale why media coverage of suicide attacks should precipitate further attacks, it does not mean that media contagion is necessarily implicated in the spread of suicide

bombing. The psychology of individual acts of suicide and violence may be very different from the coordinated and planned group behaviour involved in suicide attacks, and the group motivation for media publicity may turn out to be insignificant. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that media reporting could ever play any more than a small superficial, precipitating role in the spread of suicide

'media violence does appear to play a role in the spread of violent behaviour'

bombing; it is certainly not an underlying cause. So why waste time worrying about what is at most a single broken window in a metaphorical building that urgently needs structural repair?

The simple answer is that the media is one part of the overall context of suicide bombing that we can immediately do something about, if we choose to do so. The media are a window on suicide bombing that can distort and sensationalise, and in doing so possibly precipitate the spread of such attacks. Whilst more longterm structural work on changing the contexts that produce suicide bombing is under way, we could choose to fix this broken window. Specifically, we could establish a general set of media guidelines for reporting suicide bombing in the mass media that could be implemented wherever there is the political will to do so. A number of media producers, including the BBC and CBS, have already implemented internal recommendations for reporting terrorism in general (Wilkinson, 1997), but currently there are no generally agreedupon and theoretically informed guidelines specifically for media coverage of suicide attacks. One possible option here could be to extend the accepted media guidelines for reporting incidents involving suicide to cover suicide bombing (see box).

These simple recommendations have already proved to be effective in reducing the risk of media contagion. For example, when implemented during a spate of heavily publicised subway-suicide deaths in Vienna, subway suicides dropped by 80 per cent (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). Of course, they have yet to demonstrate efficacy in suicide bombing, and given today's fragmented but globalised and politicised media it would be naive to

PROPOSED MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING SUICIDE BOMBING

- Do not engage in extensive or repetitive reporting of suicide bombing.
- Do not use sensational headlines that focus on the event as a suicide bombing.
- 3. Do not present simplistic explanations for suicide bombing.
- 4. Do not provide 'how-to' descriptions for suicide bombing.
- 5. Do not present it as a tool for accomplishing certain ends.
- 6. Do not glorify suicide bombing or suicide bombers.
- 7. Do not focus on the suicide bomber's positive characteristics.

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believe that they would be universally applied. However, given the current epidemic of suicide attacks and the potential risk of media contagion, perhaps there is a case for promoting and trialling them where there is political or editorial condemnation of such attacks.

In the end, structural problems need structural solutions, but there is also something to be said for fixing broken windows. It is possible that small changes to the environment can make big differences to behaviour. Just as the cosmetic cleaning up of the New York subway seemed to produce a precipitous drop in city crime in the 1990s (Gladwell, 2000), maybe fixing the broken window through which we see a distorted and sensationalised world could be a useful first step in managing the threat of suicide bombing.

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