The myth of the myth of martyrdom
doi:10.1017/S0140525X13003488

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Abstract: Lankford asserts that suicide terrorism is attributable to suicidality. We argue in this commentary that this assertion is not well supported theoretically or empirically. In addition, we suggest that failure to acknowledge religious beliefs as motivationally causal for suicide terrorism may place innocent people at risk of murder in the service of political correctness and multiculturism.

Lankford asserts that suicide terrorists are suicidal individuals who just happen to use terrorist organizations to execute their death wish (Lankford 2013c). We propose in this commentary that this assertion is false and, moreover, may be dangerous insofar as it distracts from a more important causal factor: religious belief. Methodological inconsistencies and unsubstantiated assertions may generate an unfounded confidence that “we may understand suicide terrorists better than they understand themselves. Which means we should be able to stop them” (p. 149). Lankford declares that we cannot trust what suicide attackers and their families say, but then supports his arguments by doing just that: directly quoting them. This double standard reflects a methodological problem that renders the evidence Lankford presents as anecdotal cherry-picking. For example, Lankford discounts failed suicide terrorist Wafa’s explicitly stated desire to kill dozens of Jews, but accepts as reliable her statements that she did not care about politics or which terrorist organization sponsored her attack (p. 25). Lankford comments that 9/11 hijacker al Nami’s family “feared a bipolar disorder” (p. 58), apparently corroborating Lankford’s assertion that the terrorist was suicidal. Thus, despite his assertion that we cannot take terrorists or their families at their word, Lankford does precisely that.

Lankford argues that the suicide terrorists’ primary motive is suicidality. He avoids implicating religious beliefs as a cause of suicide terrorism, asserting that mention of religious motivation for these attacks promotes the terrorists’ agenda (pp. 38–39). Yet, beliefs about martyrdom and a glorious afterlife are crucial in motivating suicide terrorism. All one has to do is listen to what the terrorists say, verbatim. There are countless examples of suicide terrorists announcing their goal: Kill many infidels, incidentally sacrificing their physical bodies, to reach paradise. Here are samples from YouTube:

- “God would have given me paradise… It was written in the holy Quran to do jihad against the infidels” (Charlesmartel686, 2007, video time 1:55, 4:55).
- “Yes, I will [kill via suicide bombing]… Even if it includes my family… Those who are not taking part in Jihad are not innocent…” (Umer123khan, 2009, video time 1:21)
- “I wanted to be a martyr for God… God would have given me happiness in paradise.” (Rehov, 2009, video time 3:05).

Harris (2005) and Dawkins (2001) note what might otherwise be obvious but for political reasons is not often stated: Religious beliefs motivate suicide terrorism. Currently, these are typically Islamic beliefs, which include explicit concepts of martyrdom and jihad that explain the character of suicide terrorism. Suicide bombers often receive extensive training and deploy calculated attacks that require sophisticated mental capacities and incredible courage. Dawkins raises the issue of identifying the source of this courage, and much of what we know about Islam suggests that it would be dangerous to disregard the direct link between doctrines of Islam and suicide terrorism. Lankford warns that a sponsoring terrorist organization on U.S. soil, “regardless of its ideology,” would be successful because 34,000 Americans commit suicide.
Individual differences in relational motives interact with the political context to produce terrorism and terrorism-support

doi:10.1017/S0140525X13003579
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Abstract: The psychology of suicide terrorism involves more than simply the psychology of suicide. Individual differences in social dominance orientation (SDO) interact with the socio-structural, political context to produce support for group-based dominance among members of both dominant and subordinate groups. This may help explain why, in one specific context, some people commit and endorse terrorism, whereas others do not.

We agree with Lankford (2013c) that one cannot understand suicide terrorism without considering individual factors as well as contextual ones, and must distinguish perpetrator from audience effects. Nevertheless, although being willing to kill oneself is a necessary condition for executing suicide bombings, this need not imply that what really drives suicide bombers, ramming trucks, and self-destructive killers is simply suicidality proper, conveniently disguised as political terrorism in cultural and religious contexts that ban individual suicide. Firstly, in the case studies he uses to make the latter point, Lankford not only seeks to estimate reliable predictors of suicide—such as prior suicide attempts, expressed death wishes, and debilitating depression—but also includes many “soft” risk factors such as the deaths of parents or siblings in childhood, unemployment, divorce because of infertility, and even disciplinary problems in school. Without knowing the base rates of both kinds of factors among the general population, it is impossible to evaluate the degree to which they lead people to commit suicide, let alone suicide terrorism, particularly when considered in the often war-torn, occupied settings from which Lankford draws many cases.

Just as a suicidal mental condition is insufficient to drive suicide-terrorism, so it may likely be unnecessary. The case of Anders Behring Breivik—who shot 77 teenagers at a political youth camp after seeking to blow up the Norwegian governmental building—demonstrates the uncertainty of clinical judgments based on interpretations of written or limited data records. Although Lankford concludes that Breivik was clearly suicidal because his writings named the plight of conservative “brothers and sisters” being pushed toward suicide, and because he anticipated dying during his terror mission, a final forensic-psychiatric assessment (following extensive clinical interviews and 24 hour observations) not only concluded that Breivik was not psychotic, but found absolutely no evidence that he was suicidal (NTB, Norwegian News Agency 2012). Breivik expressed fear of getting killed by the police on being taken captive.

What clearly is necessary for committing any such acts of terrorism is the willingness to kill civilian others. We agree that this homicidal intent is likely fueled by rage and that cultural and ideological endorsement facilitates suicide terrorism. But both respond to the political reality in which a community finds itself. For example, Pape (2005) argues that suicide terrorist attacks in Lebanon ebbed and flowed with the absence and presence of the Israeli occupation (whereas suicidal intent presumably remained fairly stable). Dismissing this as simply being the result of increased access to weapons and enemy targets ignores the role of the political context in fueling rage towards an enemy group: relationally motivated moral outrage (Rai & Fiske 2011) that they are subordinating, humiliating, discriminating against, victimizing, persecuting, and killing us, or threatening to do so, culminating in the intended killing of perceived enemy civilians.

Such political context effects may play a role even in cases of remote identification with group members suffering at times of conflict or oppression (Sheehy-Skeffington 2009). For example,