



Suicide attacks -- a short history

By

Mir Jamilur Rahman

Suicide attack, or suicide bombing, in which the attacker has no hope to survive after accomplishing his mission, is not a new phenomenon. It has been with us since WWII. It is a type of warfare which is adopted by disgruntled people. The present and the second half of the last century have seen it developing into an efficient killing machine. The motivation for such attacks could be nationalist, religious or idealism. This type of warfare was also used by Japanese military in WWII against the US navy when Japan had almost lost the war.

The present wave of suicide bombing is sometimes attributed to despair and deprivation. It was assumed that the bombers came from a poor, neglected segment of society. This view was once expressed by US President Bush. JI chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed also holds the same view. The results of at least one study are consistent with despair being a cause of the attacks. A 2007 study in Afghanistan found that 80 per cent of the suicide attackers had some kind of physical or mental disability. A study of the remains of 110 suicide bombers for the first part of 2007 found 80 per cent were missing limbs, suffered from cancer, leprosy, or some other ailments.

The tradition of suicide instead of defeat and perceived shame was deeply entrenched in the Japanese military culture. For instance, loyalty and honour unto death was one of the main traditions in the samurai life. Taking advantage of this strong belief in the Japanese soldier, the Japanese military had adopted suicide attacks as an extension of its defence tactic against the advancing US forces. These suicide attacks were carried out by kamikaze pilots beginning in October 1944. Japan had suffered several critical military defeats and had lost the industrial and military capacity to stop the advancing Americans.

Kamikaze pilots, especially trained for the job, would attempt to crash their aircrafts -- laden with explosives, bombs, torpedoes and full fuel tanks -- into American ships. The goal of crippling as many American ships as possible was considered critical enough to warrant the sacrifice of an aviator and his aircraft. The best-known kamikaze attack was carried out on US carrier Bunker Hill on May 11, 1945. It killed 372 personnel out of a crew of 2,600.

The earliest reference of a suicide attack could be found in the Biblical story of 'Samson and Delilah'. Samson (probably 11th century BC) possessed incredible strength which lay in his hair. He was a leader of the Israelites and could defeat an army single-handedly. Delilah his beloved betrayed him to the Philistines that his strength lay in his hair. Samson was drugged to sleep. The soldiers cut off his hair while he slept and captured and blinded him, making him feeble and helpless. But when his hair grew again he regained his strength. He pulled down the pillars of the temple where a large number of Philistines had gathered to worship. Samson said: 'Let me die with the Philistines!' Down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more as he died than while he lived.

The first modern suicide bombing--involving explosives deliberately carried to the target either on the person or in a civilian vehicle and delivered by surprise -- was in 1981; perfected by the factions of the Lebanese Civil War and especially by the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, the tactic had spread to dozens of countries by now . Those hardest-hit are Sri Lanka during its prolonged ethnic conflict, Lebanon during its civil war, Israel and the Palestinian Territories since 1994, and Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003. According to an estimate as of early 2008, 1,121 Muslim suicide bombs have blown themselves up in Iraq alone.

Pakistan is now the main target of suicide bombers who are trained and activated by some unknown Islamic groups. These groups most probably are working out from FATA. The Afghan government with the help of NATO force has sharply brought down the incidents of suicide bombings. But Pakistan so far has not been as successful as Afghanistan in curbing terrorism. Almost every day there is an attack on some government building or a crowded place resulting in heavy casualties.

The people blame America for terrorism in this region. They strongly, though wrongly, believe that Pakistan is fighting an American war. They do not trust the government when it says that Pakistan has joined the war against terrorism in its own national interest. The war against terrorism is winnable if only people were to realize that it is their war and nobody else's.

Mir Jamilur Rahman, "Suicide attacks -- a short history," *The News*. 15-10-2008.

Keywords: Social sciences, Social problems, Political issue, World War 1939-1945, Crimes, Terrorism, War-Afghanistan, Foreign policy, Foreign relation, Suicide, Bombing, Civil war, Forces-America, Mental illness