Suicide Terrorism in the Middle East:

Origins and Response (Prepared Remarks)

by Martin Kramer **(/experts/martin-kramer)**

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Brief Analysis

On November 8, 2005, Robert Pape and Martin Kramer debated the origins of suicide terrorism and the proper responses to it at The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Following is the full text of Dr. Kramer's prepared remarks. **Read (templateC05.php?CID=2401)** a rapporteur's summary of the entire debate.

I am delighted to appear here with Professor Pape. I enjoyed reading his book, but it is an experience to hear him make the argument in person, in his dynamic manner. And he is to be congratulated for descending from the ivory tower and stimulating our thought with his provocative thesis.

We Want to Believe

Professor Pape's thesis has resonated quite widely, and before I approach it, let me say a word about why I think it has had such an appeal. Why are people eager to find his thesis plausible?

First, it is reassuring. No one likes the idea that we may have embarked on a generations-long struggle against growing tides of suicidal fanatics. Professor Pape tells us that it need not be so, that we have it in our power to stop it now. This reminds me of a scene in The Wizard of Oz. After battling flying monkeys and a nasty witch, Dorothy demands to be transported home. The Good Witch tells her she always had it in her power to go home; she just had to shut her eyes, click her heels three times, and repeat, "There's no place like home." Professor Pape likewise reassures us that if we, too, get our heels off the ground in the Persian Gulf and repeat, "There's no place like offshore," we will awaken safe in our beds in Kansas. It is a very reassuring and appealing notion.

Second, it is empirical. The speculative and polemical interpretations and counter-interpretations of the threat confuse us. We want metrics, pie charts and graphs—something quantifiable and proven. Even when we know that databases can be flawed, samples can be too small, and statistics can be misleading, we still perk up at the first slide of the Powerpoint.

Third, it is secular. The idea of religion as an independent variable is foreign to our mode of thought. As a result, our political sciences have almost nothing to say about it. And what really scares us is Islam, which seems to combine bottomless grievance and limitless ambition. But nationalism—well, that's a horse of a different color. We have faced

it before, its aims are limited, and with nationalists you can sometimes cut a deal and split the difference. Say that al-Qaeda is really just Arabian nationalism, and people will listen.

So the popularity of Professor Pape's thesis tells us interesting things about ourselves. But the question is whether it tells us valid things about suicide terrorism.

Thesis vs. Reality

Now let me start with a statement of beginning assumptions. I do not pretend to have an alternative unified theory of suicide terrorism, incorporating everything from the PKK to the Tamil Tigers. Frankly, I am not sure there is a need for one. I do not know why suicide bombing has to signify the same thing everywhere. Why can't it have different origins and achieve different purposes in different contexts? At the end of the day, it is a weapons system, and the history of such systems is diffusion and mutation under different conditions.

In fact, I think that is precisely the case. So I want to focus on Professor Pape's thesis as it relates to three instances I know best, and that are central to the story: Hizballah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda. Rather than offer a big theory of my own, I am going to ask whether Professor Pape's big theory fits these cases. Remember that Professor Pape's thesis is only as valid as its weakest case. So all I seek to do here is plant one seed of doubt. To anticipate myself, I would summarize my argument as follows: sometimes it fits, sometimes it fits but loosely, and in the most important case for U.S. policy, it is just too small.

The Lebanese and Palestinian cases adhere closest to Professor Pape's theory. Here we have instances of Israeli military occupations, in one case accompanied by settlements, and a host of movements, some Islamist and some not, that have employed suicide bombing in systematic campaigns. But even these cases deviate somewhat from the paradigm, because of the prominence of Islamic themes in their genesis.

Now I find it interesting that Professor Pape does not completely discount religion as a factor. He does allow that "religious difference" serves as a kind of multiplier in suicide bombing campaigns. It is obvious that most of these campaigns take place across religious divides. So Professor Pape lets religion into his formula through the back door. But he clearly casts religious difference as a subordinate factor, which exacerbates the territorial grievances of occupied peoples. And he shows the usual academic reticence about fingering Muslims or Islamists as exceptionally prone to the method.

In the case of Lebanon, the resistance to Israeli occupation did form across a very wide front, and all of the organizations used suicide bombings: the Islamist Hizballah, the Shiite sectarian Amal, and the pro-Syrian secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP).

But I think Professor Pape might have looked more closely at the sequencing of this campaign. It first began with the Islamist Hizballah, and then spread to its secular competitors. Now why did it start there? The evidence shows that it took the reworking of an Islamic concept—the idea of martyrdom—to make the initial breakthrough. Islamism is not present in all suicide bombings. But it had to be there at the creation.

Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, when he was still the spiritual mentor of Hizballah, contributed crucially to that breakthrough. This quote is an example of the conceptual leap that inaugurated the attacks: "What is the difference between setting out for battle knowing you will die after killing ten [of the enemy], and setting out to the field to kill ten and knowing you will die while killing them? There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself." That sounds simple, but it actually involved an overturning of a whole corpus of doctrine and tradition.

Certainly the reality of Israeli occupation was needed to raise the temperature in Lebanon to the point where this breakthrough became possible. But I think it unlikely that secular groups could have reached it independently.

Remember, too, that Muslims under long and repressive occupations in the colonial period did not make the leap either. The precondition is the rise of an Islamist sensibility, and its modern utilitarian outlook. Professor Pape has rightly said that suicide bombings require a "strategic logic," or cost-benefit rationale; a "social logic," or support system; and an "individual logic," or personal motive. To this I would add a "moral logic," which is the entry point for innovative interpretations of Islam. Like the other logics, it is necessary, although like them it is not sufficient.

The Palestinian case gets more complicated than Professor Pape allows, because the context is not just one of struggle against occupation, but also struggle for primacy among rivals. Israel had been in occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for over thirty years, facing nationalist resistance and terrorism, before the first Palestinian suicide bombings. Why did it take so long? Professor Pape would have us believe that frustration with Oslo and settlement expansion made for some sort of tipping point. In his book, he provides graphs of Palestinian opinion and settlement figures.

But over the years there were other spurts of Jewish settlement growth, many Palestinian disappointments, and numerous failed peace plans. Since the 1920s, the expansion of the Jewish presence has prompted repeated, spontaneous uprisings—most notably from 1936 to 1939 and again from 1987 to 1990. Much blood was split, yet there were no suicide bombings. Hamas itself, which played an important role in the first intifada, did not resort to them.

So why did they commence only from the mid-1990s? It seems to me impossible to separate the advent of Palestinian suicide bombing from the intensified political struggle for dominance in the Palestinian arena, primarily between Hamas and the powerful institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—a battle finally fully engaged after the established leadership returned from abroad.

The suicide bombings, pioneered by Hamas originally in open defiance of the PLO, were superficially an emulation of the Lebanese precedent. But they have never served a conventional nationalist concept of liberation. By bombing in Israel proper and against civilians, Hamas and its rivals actually achieved the opposite of nationalist goals: the attacks brought about a reoccupation of much of the West Bank, the legitimation of Israel's security fence, and the loss of international sympathy, traditionally a core element of Palestinian national strategy. It substituted for these tangible assets a crowd-pleasing spectacle of death in Israel's cities, which other groups were quick to copy to preserve their market share.

So the suicide attacks seem disconnected from a nationalist "strategic logic." What the attacks have unquestionably achieved is shattering the political monopoly of the PLO. I submit that was their purpose. True, the Islamized strategy bears a superficial resemblance to a nationalist one. But look closely: the objectives have grown larger (all of Palestine, elimination of Israel), the timeline has grown longer, winning minds has become more important than regaining territory, and international sympathy has lost its strategic significance. In the Palestinian case, the occupation is the context of the suicide bombing, and it is the fuel. But ending the occupation is not the prime objective of the suicide campaign. The Palestinian bombings are spectacles intended to win over converts and build an identity over time.

The Qaeda Exception

So far, then, we can say that Professor Pape's thesis fits best in Lebanon, where suicide bombing was meant to liberate a defined piece of territory in a short time frame; and less in Palestine, where it has been a lever used by upstarts to undercut an establishment. Where I think it does not fit at all is the case of al-Qaeda.

Let me remind you of Professor Pape's claim: al-Qaeda is a movement of Arabian nationalism, provoked by the presence of U.S. troops in Arabia. It may not look like an occupation to us, but it looks like one to them, and they are reacting to it with violence. If we want to prevent another September 11, we should get ourselves out of the Persian

Gulf, to an offshore position.

This is where I part entirely from Professor Pape, because this is where his evidence seems to me forced, and his definitions are over-stretched.

Professor Pape emphasizes the large number of Saudis among al-Qaeda suicide attackers. So for his thesis to hold, he has to maintain that Arabia, too, is under a humiliating foreign occupation. But the size of the occupying U.S. forces is placed at only about 12,000 in 2001, on the eve of September 11. In table 10 of his book, Arabia appears as the occupied region with the largest population of any occupied place: 50 million. But it is also the region with the fewest deaths from the foreign military presence: nil.

Now there is no doubt that bin Laden has criticized the "crusader" presence in Arabia. It is a theme he uses to trump the royal house. But to even put this U.S. presence on the same table as Chechnya, with 50,000 dead, and Lebanon with 19,000 dead—both countries with small populations of a million or so, and which suffered widespread destruction—defies common sense. It is forced, and it is contrived. The U.S. troop presence in Arabia had none of the features of an occupation.

The question, then, is why bin Laden succeeded in mobilizing as many Saudis as he did to attack the United States, especially on September 11. In fact, I see nothing remarkable about the over-representation of Saudis among jihadists. Decades ago, the Saudi royal house set up Saudi Arabia as the font of normative Islam, its defender in all places, in money, missionaries, and manpower. Saudis were schooled to see themselves as the upright minority, duty bound to remind Muslims elsewhere of the demands of the true faith.

Professor Pape is aware of this Saudi specialization, and he wants to factor it out. So he has put together an appendix meant to show that there are other Sunni countries with Salafists in large numbers, and they have not produced as many suicide bombers. His explanation is those U.S. "occupation" forces in Arabia. That occupation is what makes Saudi Salafists more dangerous than, say, Bangladeshi ones.

This is entirely unpersuasive. Simplistic analogies are hazardous, but just as the papacy was long dominated by Italians, so the Salafi "church" is a privileged Saudi domain. In fact, the Saudi prominence in suicide bombings against the United States, like bin Laden's own prominence in al-Qaeda, is the parallel of official Saudi prominence in Islamic causes everywhere.

Nor is Professor Pape persuasive when he claims that the U.S. troop presence in Arabia was the prime theme in al-Qaeda's recruitment campaign. In al-Qaeda's rhetoric, you will not encounter mention of atrocities committed by U.S. troops against Arabians. The casualties of this occupation, as noted by Professor Pape, are nil. The recruiting message is invariably focused elsewhere, on American crimes committed elsewhere: Palestine (via Israel), or directly in Afghanistan, and now Iraq. These are the images that al-Qaeda collects and circulates, and that permeate the general media like Al-Jazeera and the Internet. They are its most powerful recruiting tools.

The contribution of French scholars, and especially Olivier Roy in his book Globalized Islam, is to demonstrate for us the emergence of a transnational network of floating grievance, attached to no single place. We have today a growing number of Muslims for whom any victimization of any Muslim anywhere is vivid, real, and personal. Saudis were always taught to see these distant causes as their own—hence their early involvement in Afghanistan and Bosnia. But now groups like al-Qaeda and its affiliates can deliver the message more widely, and with their own emphases.

What al-Qaeda provides is the "moral logic" that makes the images of torture in Abu Ghraib personally humiliating for a British-born Pakistani in London. It is a mark of modernity to feel passion and obligation over distances. We are not the only ones being globalized in this way, and we are not the only ones transcending nationalism.

So I side here with the French-Iranian sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, who has interviewed imprisoned terrorists

and has written a fascinating book entitled Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs. Yes, he writes, there are movements that use martyrdom in nation-formation or in war with other nations. This is true, he adds, of Iran, Palestine, Chechnya, Algeria, and Afghanistan. The aim for which they fight is clear. But of al-Qaeda he writes, "Although it does have many things in common with national forms of martyrdom, the subjectivity that inspires its actors and the form taken by its hatred of the world are fundamentally different." In this subjective world, if any place is occupied, if any Muslim is oppressed, and it can be shown on television and on the Internet, mobilization for another September 11 is a distinct possibility. Whether there are 10,000 U.S. troops, or 5,000 troops, or no troops in Arabia is quite irrelevant.

Al-Qaeda is meant to be the sum of all Muslim grievances, which can only be redressed through the spectacular humiliation of America and its allies, wherever and whenever possible. It is about who we are, and what we do, and what we have, and what they are not. To say now that it has but limited goals, fixed upon some territory, is to trivialize it. I do not think Professor Pape does that, but I have seen it done by others, and I was alarmed to see them invoke his research.

The Prediction Test

I conclude: no one thesis explains it all. And since Professor Pape did his research, suicide bombing continues to mutate, in directions his thesis did not predict or anticipate. A most remarkable development has been the prominence of North Africans, especially Moroccans, in the "second wave" of al-Qaeda suicide attackers. Even in Professor Pape's tables, they were right behind Saudi Arabia in numbers, and those numbers are growing. We have seen British-born Pakistanis undertake a suicide attack in Israel, and the July 7 attacks in London. And we have seen dozens of suicide bombings of Sunni against Shiite, in Iraq but also across Pakistan. Professor Pape's thesis is just not elastic enough to accommodate all these evolutions. He drew far-reaching conclusions on the basis of one stage in the development of the phenomenon. But it is already mutating in two directions: into more globalized, transnational forms; and into sub-national, sectarian forms.

Professor Pape's thesis is thus a rather thin reed on which to hang his far-reaching policy conclusion: the United States, to end the suicide scourge, should leave where it can, and adopt a posture of offshore balancing. Stephen Walt has made the argument at greater length in his new book, Taming American Power.

I am not unreceptive to the idea, not because I think it will prevent another September 11, but because I think the United States has a lot more to do in the region, and onshore commitments are slowing it down. But offshore balancing is a quaint and archaic way to describe the alternative. The problem in the Persian Gulf for twenty years has been that it is massively unbalanced. Technology, nuclear and otherwise, is spreading unevenly, and there are massive disparities of wealth and population. It is impossible to keep the Gulf on an even keel by an arms sale here or a threat of sanctions there. That means the United States will have no choice but to intervene, or project the willingness to intervene, pretty much on a continuous basis—unless, of course, we all begin to bicycle to work.

But whatever posture the United States assumes, however near or far it will stand, we will still face a globalized jihad to push us back still further. The very fact that we are the balancer, at whatever distance, will make us a target. This is the price of hegemony. It underestimates our adversaries to think they will forget about us if they cannot see the whites of our soldiers' eyes. They, like us, can see over the near horizon. They have a global vision, and a global reach.

Like Professor Pape, I too miss the days when all those people in the Middle East were old-fashioned, deal-cutting nationalists, and a few State Department Arabists and oil company executives could play them from afar. That is the way it was circa 1975. But unlike Professor Pape, I do not think we can bring those days back. We live in world that has grown complex, and no matter how much we click our heels, it won't get us back to Kansas.

Thank you.

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