

Suicide Terrorism in the Middle East:

Origins and Response

by [Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Nov 16, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow and author of one of its most widely read monographs, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.



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. Dr. Pape is professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. Dr. Kramer is the Institute's Wexler-Fromer fellow and author of [Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America \(templateC04.php?CID=142\)](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [Read \(templateC07.php?CID=265\)](#) Dr. Kramer's prepared remarks in their entirety.

Robert Pape

Since many attacks, including September 11, have been perpetrated by Muslim suicide terrorists, many presume suicide terrorism must be a function of Islamic fundamentalism. This presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is misleading and may be encouraging domestic and foreign policies that are likely to worsen America's situation.

Islamic fundamentalism is not as closely associated with suicide terrorism as many people think. The world leader in suicide terrorist attacks is the Marxist, secularist, and Hindu Tamil Tigers, who have perpetrated more suicide terrorist attacks than Hamas or Islamic Jihad. What nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular strategic purpose. The case of Iraq is revealing. If suicide bombings in Iraq were merely a product of Islamic fundamentalism, these attackers would be coming from the largest Islamic fundamentalist countries -- Iran, Sudan, and Pakistan. Information currently available shows that suicide terrorists in Iraq essentially come from neighboring Saudi Arabia and the indigenous Sunni community in Iraq.

Suicide terrorism rarely occurs as an isolated or random event. Instead the attacks tend to occur in coherent, organized, strategic campaigns that terrorist groups use for political, and mainly secular, purposes. A foreign military presence also appears to be a necessary condition for suicide terrorism. The case of Hizballah is noteworthy. Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982 with 78,000 combat troops, and Hizballah was born one month later. More recently, Israel unilaterally abandoned territory in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and has built a

security fence. The result is that attacks against Israel are down 90 percent. As Israel is withdrawing from Gaza and says it will withdraw from more of the West Bank, Palestinians have started turning in members of Hamas when they were not before. As Israel reverses certain pressures, suicide attacks have decreased.

Democracies are viewed as soft and especially vulnerable to coercive pressure; therefore the target societies of every suicide terrorist attack has been a democracy.

The U.S.-led war on terrorism is going badly because it is being waged on a faulty premise. That premise is that suicide terrorism is mainly a product of Islamic fundamentalism. The main cause of suicide terrorism against the United States is the stationing of American combat forces on the Arabian Peninsula starting in the early 1990s. Today, over 140,000 American combat forces are on the Arabian Peninsula. As the American force presence has grown, so has suicide terrorism by al-Qaeda. A major goal of Osama bin Laden is to compel the United States to leave the Arabian Peninsula. Between 1995 and 2004, seventy-one individuals killed themselves for bin Laden. The largest number, thirty four, came from Saudi Arabia, and the majority came from the Persian Gulf, where the United States began to stationing combat forces in 1990.

That said, the United States should not cut and run from the Arabian Peninsula. Access to oil is an important strategic interest. Going forward, the Bush administration should concentrate on three things: (1) al-Qaeda must be the top U.S. priority; (2) the United States should completely transfer the responsibility of securing Iraq to the Iraqi government; and (3) Over the next three years, the United States should switch to offshore balancing, a strategy the United States has used in the past and can use again as the war on terror goes forward.

Martin Kramer

Three cases are central to understanding suicide terrorism: Lebanon, Palestine, and al-Qaeda. Dr. Pape's thesis is more suited to the first two cases than the last, although even those two instances do not entirely conform to his model.

In Lebanon, it is true that a range of organizations used suicide bombings, including the Islamist Hizballah, the Shiite sectarian Amal movement, and the pro-Syrian Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). But suicide terrorism first began with the Islamist Hizballah and then spread to non-Islamist competitors. Hizballah initiated suicide bombings after a complex reworking of the concept of martyrdom, through reliance on Islamic concepts. It is unlikely the secular movements would have reached this breakthrough independently. Occupation raised the temperature necessary for this innovation, but it would not have been sufficient. Beyond a strategic logic, there must be a moral logic, which is the entry point for innovative interpretations of Islam.

The Palestinian case is not simply one of struggle against occupation; it is also a struggle for primacy among rivals. Israel had been in occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for nearly thirty years before the first Palestinian suicide bombing. Why did it take so long? Dr. Pape contends that frustration with Oslo and settlement expansion made for a tipping point. In actuality, Palestinian suicide bombings coincide with intensified political struggle for dominance in the Palestinian arena, specifically between Hamas and the Arafat-led Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Suicide bombing as an alternative strategy has had obviously negative results, such as the loss of international sympathy and the construction of Israel's security fence. This suggests that while occupation is the fuel of the suicide campaign, ending the occupation is not its prime objective. The attacks are used to win converts and to build identity over time.

Dr. Pape's thesis fits least in the case of al-Qaeda. He claims that al-Qaeda is a movement of Arabian nationalism, provoked by U.S. troops in Arabia. By his own reckoning, U.S. forces in Arabia in the late 1990s and up until 2001 numbered only about 12,000, and the number of casualties from this "occupation" were nil. Putting Arabia alongside countries like Chechnya, where conflict has claimed the lives of 50,000 people, or Lebanon, where 19,000

supposedly died during Israel's occupation, is forced and contrived. The U.S. troop presence in Arabia had none of the features of an occupation. Bin Laden criticized the "crusader" presence there, but this was not the primary theme of his recruitment campaign.

The prominence of Saudis in suicide bombings against U.S. targets is the result not of an imagined U.S. occupation, but the very real indoctrination of Saudis that has persuaded them of their role as defenders and definers of normative Islam. Saudis, from the royalty down, have always been overrepresented in Islamic causes, in terms both of money and personnel.

Suicide bombings continue to mutate in ways that defy simple theses. The prominence of North Africans and especially Moroccans in the second wave of al-Qaeda attackers requires an explanation other than occupation. So do attacks by British-born Pakistanis in London. Even when they justify their acts by citing Iraq, this is a case of an entirely vicarious experience of humiliation, stoked by the media. Al-Qaeda's campaign is thus a tool of a transnational, global jihad, liable to strike out anywhere should any Muslim, in any place, even appear to be oppressed. Such attacks have also become a tool of sectarian hatred within nations, as in the case of suicide bombings by Sunnis against Shiites in Iraq and Pakistan.

Dr. Pape concludes that the U.S. can defuse suicide bombs by following a policy of offshore balancing. The problem is that the Persian Gulf is massively unbalanced, in military capabilities, wealth, and population. Only U.S. intervention or the threat of it keeps the region on an even keel. However far offshore the United States decides to stand, it will face a globalized jihad as long as it maintains the region's precarious balance. The only way to apply a brake to suicide terrorism is to undermine its moral logic, by encouraging Muslims to see its incompatibility with their own values.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Joshua Prober.

Policy #1050

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)