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Christoph Reuter: My Life Is a Weapon

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Power of the Powerless,
the Powerlessness of the Powerful



You will notice that the plane will stop, then will start to fly again.

This is the hour in which you will meet God.

—Extract from the spiritual “instruction manual” for the suicide attack on the World

Trade Center, found in Muhammad Atta’s briefcase

In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue):
whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday’s slaughter,
they were not cowards.

—Susan Sontag

In the mid-1990s, when I began my research on suicide bombers, first in Israel and, later in Lebanon and Iran, they were a rare phenomenon. They were a part of the Middle Eastern terrorism scene—noticed only occasionally, and attributed to Islamic fundamentalism, by the West—although in fact no one knew much about who was committing these attacks and what motivated them. The name of al-Qaeda was known, at most, to Afghanistan experts. For us, there is something unnerving, something disturbing, about the notion that human beings would sacrifice their own lives in order to kill others, in

the belief that their lives have value only as a weapon. In more remote areas—in Lebanon, in Israel—this is how it has always been: but not in the great cities of Europe or in the United States of America. It didn't affect us—or so we thought. We barely noticed that the explosions of these human bombs had reached epidemic proportions, and that the tactic had made its way to Sri Lanka in 1987 (long before it reached as far as Israel), or that, by the 1990s, it had arrived in Turkey, Kashmir, and Chechnya.

By the summer of 2003, suicide bombers had changed the world. The “end of history,” hailed by winners of the Cold War, now appears in reality to have been merely the end of the old rules. On September 11, 2001, four attacks by nineteen suicide bombers, armed with nothing more lethal than a couple of box-cutters, suddenly forced America to start waging a new type of world war. As this is being written, George W. Bush's “war on terror” has toppled regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq; has deeply divided America from many of its Western allies; has enflamed anti-American prejudice in the Islamic world—and no one can say how it will end. To this date, the real enemy—the followers of Osama bin Laden, trained in suicide and murder, and embodying his nihilistic version of the ideology of a jihad bent on destroying everything—remains undefeated, as we see by the unending string of new attacks in such places as Casablanca, Riyadh, Mombasa, Karachi, Indonesia, Tunisia. Indeed, here is an opponent who cannot be defeated by superior military force; it has moved outside all the conventional rules of power and war in which we have always trusted.

“Cowardly” is how the early commentators, in their initial helplessness and horror, characterized the events of September 11; but they quickly came to see that the one thing these attacks most certainly were not was cowardly.

Suicide attacks affect us profoundly and powerfully. They remind us that there are people who consider their struggle—whatever the cause—to be more important than their own lives. They stir up fear in us; they pull the rug out from under our feet. For there is no way to retaliate against attackers who strike, not merely in order to kill

people, but to die at the same stroke. They annihilate the entire logic of power, since no credible threat can be made against someone who has no desire to survive.

All our notions of security and our civilization have been based on this unspoken assumption, which we heretofore have believed to be self-evident. For example, consider that for airport security checks, up until now, the only precaution thought necessary was the matching of every piece of luggage with an on-board passenger, since, as everyone knew, nobody would think of blowing themselves up in midair. Or so we thought.

The presumption of individual rational self-interest and fear of death underlies the functioning of the market economy and the power of the state: suicide bombers cancel these out. Deterrence, punishment, and retaliation all become meaningless when faced with an aggressor who will impose the utmost penalty on himself at the very moment of his victory. The fear of death has long been the ultimate instrument of power wielded by the state and the priesthood, whether in the Christian church or in Islam: neither the state nor any other power can threaten us with anything worse than death. By the same token, the taboo against suicide has typically reinforced the power of religion, because of the conventional monotheistic belief that only God may decide who will live and who will die. But in the present case, we are faced with people in revolt not only against the state but also all other candidates for supreme authority, religious or secular. Suicide bombers simultaneously defy the ultimate sanction, rendering the mightiest power impotent. There is no sanction beyond that of death.

What we have experienced in recent years is the reinvention of a historical archetype that many political historians thought had long since disappeared: the martyr. Martyrs today are of incalculable propaganda value. They say to their own people: Follow our example—the cause is greater than our (and your) lives. And they say to the outside world: We fear humiliation more than we fear death, and, therefore, we have no fear of your well-trained and well-equipped armies, your high-tech arsenal. To the potential recruit for a suicide mission, the more powerless he may have felt before committing the

attack, the more dramatically death will exalt him. After a life devoid of any previous significance, he now becomes a powerful ideal; his very name inspires fear. In his own person, he has realized Andy Warhol's dictum that everyone is allotted "fifteen minutes of fame."

Just as important as the killing is the dying that it makes it possible. The suicide attack that took place on August 12, 2001 (just a month before the attacks on New York), at the Wall Street Café in Shariat Motzkin, a suburb of Haifa in northern Israel, seems in retrospect but a small, insignificant precursor of what was to come. It was barely reported at the time, and is now all but forgotten. On that day twenty-eight-year-old Muhammad Mahmoud Nassr, carrying enough explosives strapped to his waist to cause carnage, approached the waitress at the café bar, lifted his T-shirt, and asked her if she knew what "that" was. People started screaming and throwing chairs in his direction; everyone rushed outside. Muhammad Mahmoud Nassr, alone in the empty café, cried "Allahu akbar"—God is great—and then blew himself up: his torso was ripped apart, while his head landed on a table. It was a baffling and, fortunately for those in the café at the time, futile attack—and it was met with the same blank incomprehension that all such acts tended to evoke. The international and Israeli media passed over it, generally relieved that nobody had died—except the attacker, and that was *his* problem. Yet what looked like failure concealed an urgent hidden meaning: Look at how easily I could terrify you. And you are absolutely right to be afraid.

In its early centuries, Christendom was teeming with martyrs; early Islam was no stranger to them either. Even today, the city squares in the heart of Beirut and Damascus, for instance, are both called "Martyrs' Square." And today, in a modern world that knows only one, asymmetric superpower, the experience of total subjugation has returned. In an era when de facto suicide missions are routinely launched against political and military allies of the remaining superpower, the old ideals of martyrdom are gaining a new currency. The problem now, however, is that the ideal has been equipped with weapons and technologies of unprecedented destructive power.

Two thousand years ago, there were already certain groups who went into battle with the specific goal of dying, among these the Jewish Sicarians in the Imperial Roman world. Later, in the medieval Crusades, the assassins appeared; and such fighters took part in the Muslim revolts in the eighteenth century against Western colonial powers based on the Malabar coast of southwest India, in northern Sumatra, and in the southern Philippines Islands.¹ These activists were inspired by feelings of religious duty and personal heroism. They exalted the memory of slain warriors in poems and songs, thus inspiring others to imitate them. For a brief time, in very different conditions, suicide attacks were revived, among the Japanese kamikaze pilots in World War II, but the movement faded again after the war had ended, and in any case it is difficult now to determine to what extent these suicides were indeed “volunteers.”

That someone might deliberately set out to murder others by killing himself is deeply shocking, which is why the names of these assassins and kamikaze pilots, notwithstanding their military ineffectuality, have become seared into the collective memory of every nation, and are now synonymous with either cold-blooded murder or world-renouncing heroics. But before the dawn of the modern age, the options available to any one individual bent on murdering another individual were limited to such weapons as daggers, swords, or bows and arrows. Then firearms appeared; Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, and contemporary newspapers wrote: “Dynamite: politicians don’t like the sound of it.”² This assessment was ironic in a macabre way: the “sound” of explosives was certainly audible in Russia when anti-czarists (who were already proud to be known as terrorists) used dynamite in their attacks on Czar Alexander III and his supporters. Explosives had become the weapon of the future for terrorist groups of all persuasions.

Cars were invented, and, soon after that, airplanes—and with flight came the ability to turn four passenger planes into weapons capable of murdering three thousand people, requiring only a readiness to sacrifice oneself, a limited knowledge of piloting, and a few box-cutters.

The ever-increasing rate of technological advances has made our world more vulnerable, and has powerfully enhanced the rewards of the suicidal will. All one need do is strap a couple of kilos of TNT around the waist, or grab the steering wheel from a bus driver, and dozens are dead; wield a couple of box-cutters, thousands lose their lives. And yet, despite this capability, the phenomenon seemed to have disappeared from global conflict in the decades after Japan's kamikaze attacks.

For the last twenty years, however, these attacks have become more widespread—as the profile of those who commit them has also expanded: Islamist and nationalist Palestinians attack Israelis; Chechen women crash trucks filled with explosives into Russian barracks; the remnants of Saddam Hussein's followers bomb U.S. soldiers, as well as themselves, to death. Moroccan Jews in Casablanca, French engineers in Karachi, American guest-workers in Riyadh, Australian tourists in Bali—all are targets for sudden strikes by Islamist groups.

Yet, while these attacks have become ubiquitous, real intelligence on who is committing them, and where, and why, is only gradually emerging from the shadows of false political assumptions and plain ignorance. Suicide attacks are a highly complex phenomenon. This book aims to piece together, in a logical sequence, what is known about its origins—which societies facilitate its development, what conditions are most favorable for its spread, and how the various tactics used have been developed. It undertakes, in a sense, a series of journeys: back to the early days of the Islamic warfare, and out into the specific locales of individual wars and peoples. For if one begins simply by lumping together all the groups that have resorted to using suicide attacks as a weapon during the last two decades, one is drawn invariably to the point where they intersect: the attacks themselves. If instead, however, the analysis is focused on such specifics as whether an isolated group or the majority of the population is behind an attack; whether the attack is initiated by nationals or foreigners; whether Islam or some other religion, or no religion at all, plays a role; whether the attackers are slum-dwellers or university students; and whether their opponents are hostile neighbors, openly declared enemies, or random

Westerners—then individual cases will be seen to be very different from each other.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, many journalists, politicians, and psychologists conjured up pictures of demons: suicide bombers were described as fanatics and lunatics. These fanatics believed, it was said, that they were bound for a Paradise, where they imagined there would be seventy-two virgins awaiting them. But even if this explanation were accurate, why would such “lunatics” turn up just now? Terrorists were already around in the 1960s and 1970s, but they didn’t include their own death in their plans. When Peter-Jürgen Boock, a former member of West Germany’s Red Army Faction, was asked whether German terrorists had studied suicide attacks in the South Yemen training camps in the 1970s, he said, no—“nobody who trained there wanted to commit suicide—and that includes the Palestinians. We wanted to achieve certain aims: we wanted to hijack airplanes, free prisoners, get money, take hostages. We all knew we could die doing it. But that wasn’t our intention.”³

Since September 11, a vast amount of information has been collected from many sources, and the last hours, days, and weeks of most of the attackers have been painstakingly reconstructed, down to the weight (to the nearest tenth of a gram) of the piece of soap found in the motel room where the leader of the attack, Muhammad Atta, spent his last night. But when it comes to the crucial question of how the plan could work—finding nineteen young men bent on taking along with them in death the greatest possible number of innocent people—these detail-happy reconstructions remain curiously opaque. The attackers weren’t poor; they didn’t come from the ghetto that is Gaza; they hadn’t personally been mistreated by any Western power, far less robbed of their freedom. They were neither hermit-like fanatics, nor had they undergone years of brainwashing in isolated camps before being sent out as robots to steer the captured planes to their doom. On the contrary, the three attackers who had lived in Germany for years fell within the everyday spectrum of normality. Although they were at times introverted and antisocial, they could also be warmhearted and friendly. Muhammad Atta, believed to be the head

of the group, spent years studying at Hamburg-Harburg Technical University; his professor, Dittmar Machule, considered him to be a talented urban architect, giving him the equivalent of an “A” grade on his final dissertation, which took as its topic the preservation of a multi-faith neighborhood in the traditionally tolerant Syrian city of Aleppo. Atta would turn out to be the greatest enemy and destroyer in the history of another multi-faith, traditionally tolerant city—New York.

The attackers were strictly religious and, like Muhammad Atta, would scrape the frosting off the American muffins they ate, lest they contain pork fat.⁴ They could live in the present: they enjoyed the occasional drink, danced, and flirted, like the Lebanese Ziad Jarrah, who, on the morning of September 11, called his girlfriend on the phone to say good-bye. They draped hand-towels over the innocuous pictures of semi-naked women that hung on the wall of a motel room in Florida, yet they watched (at the same motel) a pornographic movie on a pay-per-view channel on television.⁵ These men simultaneously embodied two extremes, although, on the surface they didn’t exhibit the kind of profile that would have made it even remotely possible to predict what they planned to do. And as for the appeal of the seventy-two virgins in Paradise—what use would Muhammad Atta have for them? This was a man so terrified of women that in his will he decreed that no woman would be allowed to visit his grave, that his corpse was to be prepared only by women wearing gloves, and that no one should touch his genitals. A man with such a pathological fear of women— aspiring to endless sex in Heaven? Unlikely.

Based largely on their experience with the therapeutic treatment of members of Western sects, psychologists have attempted to reconstruct the general methods used to recruit suicide bombers. They use terms such as “mental programming” and “destructive cults,” implying highly sophisticated strategies of subtle brainwashing attacking the person’s identity. “Sleep deprivation, withholding of food and drugs, surreptitious hypnosis, overwhelming the subject with sensory stimulation, and manipulation of feelings of guilt and fear are just some of the methods employed in order to destroy someone’s self-

esteem. The subject is given a new name and new clothes, and forced to carry out rituals that reinforce his new identity.”⁶ The same underlying motif is consistent: the attacker’s soul is seen as a hard disk susceptible to being reprogrammed: “Here you have an adolescent from the slums. First, he’s put in a Qur’anic school, then he spends months being prepared in a training camp. He’s subjected to military drilling, ascetic exercises, and meditation. His brain is washed empty and then refilled with the truisms of the secret order. . . . His whole face assumes a smile of eternal bliss.”⁷

While this sort of scenario would work well as a Hollywood film script, the real world is altogether different. Individual psychological models of interpretation, important though they are, can’t function as the complete explanation. For while they do tell us something about motivations, they are completely incapable of explaining why these attacks begin at a particular time, and in a particular place; why they spread throughout the world in very specific patterns; and why some militant organizations have employed them while others haven’t. Using a single model for all deeds of this kind obscures the fact that the paths that lead up to them, and the indoctrination of the attackers, are quite different in each case. The psychological patterns are familiar to us: in the same way that a sadistic concentration-camp commander could also be a connoisseur of the arts and a loving family man, the nineteen attackers, before they became mass murderers, were able to function as normal, unremarkable people. So what drove them to do it at all? What made them band together? John Horgan, the Irish expert on terrorism, warned people against coming up with over-hasty interpretations after September 11: “All we’re seeing is the end-point, the drama,” he said. “And that in turn dictates our assumptions about the nature of these people.”⁸ You can’t consider the nineteen men of September 11 in isolation—but it would be equally wrong to treat all suicide bombers, from New York to Colombo, as being exactly the same. In order to understand the phenomenon, you have to dissect its constituent parts.

The clichéd model of brainwashing does actually work in some isolated sectarian groups, such as Ansar al-Islam in Kurdish northern Iraq.

But, it doesn't apply to the dozens of Palestinian attackers, whose biographies have been examined by the psychologist Ariel Merari; he has reached the conclusion that groups cannot "create" suicide bombers, but merely reinforce existing predispositions. The presupposition that the attackers consist solely of fanatical, single, uneducated men from the slums is simply wrong: women and secular people are just as likely to blow themselves up and, according to a study by Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian expert in survey research, the readiness to commit such an act increases with the person's level of education. Neither is the unchanging misery of their living conditions the crucial factor; if it were, half the Somali population would have already blown itself up. However, what *is* crucial is the relationship between the individual and his status and expectations—or, more to the point, the thwarting of these expectations.

While the path taken by suicide attacks may have branched out in many different directions, it is hardly an arbitrary one. Why have Hamas, Hezbollah, the PLO, and other Palestinian guerrilla organizations, along with Muslim fighters in Bosnia and Kosovo, used these tactics—when the IRA in Ireland hasn't, nor have the Red Brigade in Italy, the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, Aum Shinrikyo in Japan? Why did this phenomenon begin in the Islamic world, and why has it moved beyond it—in some cases? Why have groups with no ties to Islam, such as the secular PKK in Turkey or the Tamil Tiger separatists (the majority of them Hindus), adopted murder by suicide as a weapon?

In the West, members of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and cadres of the Algerian GIA are indiscriminately labeled "terrorists," but not all Islamist terrorist groups adopt suicide attacks as a weapon. Militants of the GIA, for example, set about slitting the throats of hundreds of inhabitants of one village in a single night, but never blew themselves up.⁹ These groups can be distinguished from one another in many respects, notably in their use of suicide attacks. In some such groups, there is a fluid transition to conventional criminality and Mafia-like structures, whereas others put their "cause" above their lives

and thus maneuver themselves and their followers into a position which allows for neither compromise nor capitulation.

The facile explanations for suicide attacks offered in the Western media lead only to further questions. If the attacks are to be attributed to radicalized Islam per se, why have they appeared only in the last twenty years? If poverty and misery are the decisive factors, how can we explain the fact that all the September 11th attackers came—so far as we know—from comfortably middle-class families? And if Muslim attackers blow themselves up in order to get their hands on the seventy-two virgins of Paradise, how can we account for such actions by non-believers, women, or anyone with sexual phobias? The obvious explanations are no better at accounting for the frequency of such attacks in specific circumstances.

Perhaps the thorniest question is how a society can come to tolerate, and indeed foster, a practice so opposed to the survival instinct as to be pathological. What are we to make of all those mothers and fathers who profess to be proud of their son or daughter for having blown him or herself to pieces in order to kill others? What makes an Iranian mother declare, in the heat of the Iran-Iraq War of the early 1980s, that she rejoices that her five sons died as martyrs, and only regrets that she doesn't have any more offspring to offer? And what would she say today, twenty years later?

Murder by suicide began its modern-day renaissance at the start of the 1980s, on the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War, in which tens of thousands of Iranian youths, each with a little key to Paradise around his neck, charged towards Iraqi machine-gun positions in the name of God and the Ayatollah Khomeini. It was as if the charismatic leader of the Iranian revolution had picked up a silent antique instrument and made it sing again. By mobilizing the ancient sacrificial myths of Shi'ite Islam, a rebellious sect born 1,300 years ago in a revolt against the ruling caliphs, Khomeini successfully reawakened the notion of self-sacrifice as a weapon of war.

While it might seem absurd in retrospect, this notion, which cost countless thousands of lives without leading to any appreciable military

gains, turned out to be a successful export. Iranian Revolutionary Guards brought it to Lebanon to help their religious brothers, the Lebanese Shi'ites, construct Hezbollah, the "Party of God." Where the Iranians had prepared the ground for suicide attacks as a means of doing battle, Hezbollah cultivated it to perfection. Lebanon turned out to be a magnet for its most talented strategists and practitioners; in this tiny multi-ethnic state, amid intense competition between rival ideologies and sects, the Shi'ites of Hezbollah were the first to "brand" suicide attacks as "martyr operations." Following the first five spectacular Hezbollah suicide attacks in 1982 and 1983 in Lebanon, guerrilla-fighters around the world adopted this name, along with the modus operandi. All it takes is a few individuals ready to sacrifice themselves, one or more trucks, several tons of explosive, a little prudent preparation, and voilà, a tiny movement can take on the greatest military power the world has every known. The efficacy of those first Hezbollah attacks in Beirut and Tyre is not in doubt: they prompted the United States and France to withdraw their troops from Lebanon entirely, and compelled Israel to retreat to a strip of land in southern Lebanon, from which it subsequently withdrew in May 2001.

Suicide attackers are not cruise missiles on two legs, killing machines who come out of nowhere with the wrath of God or the murderous orders of a cult leader programmed into them. They are, whatever lengths they or we will go to forget it, people—individuals with families rooted in a given society. An individual who runs amok is capable of casting off all social attachments and allegiances—these cases can always be found in dictatorships and democracies alike. The suicide bomber, however, retains ties to his milieu and to the sponsoring group or movement. The very decision to volunteer for a bombing mission hinges on what relatives, friends, and local religious leaders have said about the actions of earlier volunteers. Suicide attackers will only be properly understood, insofar as any comprehensive understanding can be possible, by scrutinizing their spiritual-intellectual world, the ideologies that have molded them, and the myths they grew up with—even when these are as outrageously para-

noid as the existence of a global Jewish-Western conspiracy against Islam, a theory that Osama bin Laden continues to promulgate to attract and exploit millions of adherents throughout the Islamic world.

The phenomenon of suicide bombers, as we shall see below, is not limited to those who do the actual deed itself. What makes the deed effective is its embeddedness within a network of reimagined and re-awakened medieval myths and popular-culture hero-worship. This culture combines modern-day marketing techniques like trading-cards, film music, and video-clips, with a “creative” reinterpretation of theology that lends religious legitimacy to the attackers’ suicides by characterizing them as the noblest form of fearlessness in the face of death. Another element essential to the success of this phenomenon is the pre-existence of an enemy ripe for demonization. In the Lebanese case, Hezbollah was blessed with an enemy straight out of central casting—Israel, the seemingly omnipotent Jewish state already occupying Lebanese territory, in defiance of international law.

Hezbollah’s successful creation of a modern-day mythology of self-chosen martyrdom led to its further export of this practice, which now vaulted across geographical and religious boundaries. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, suicide bombing had spread around the world in ways that could no longer be explained solely as shared religious motives or half-forgotten traditions. In 1987 it was embraced by the decidedly secular but intensely nationalist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. It then erupted in 1993 in Israel, and then in Turkey, Kashmir, and Chechnya, until, most recently, thanks to the shadowy global network of al-Qaeda, it now finally permeates all national frontiers. Within each of these countries and regions, and increasingly across national borders, the effective staging of suicide bombings, and the dramatic political fallout they provoke, have encouraged widespread adoption of the practice by political groups of widely diverse hues. In addition to this tactical emulation, the bombings have also become a weapon of mass psychology. What German psychologists call the “Werther effect,”¹⁰ in which the suicide becomes an idol whom others strive to emulate, has, in some cases, infected entire societies.



This can be seen in present-day Palestine, which, as we shall see, has developed a culture of death within its own civil society. Such epidemics are neither inevitable nor incurable, however, and approval levels for suicide attacks have been known to fluctuate dramatically in response to changes in the political climate. In earlier periods of relative peace and hope in Palestine, such as the early phases of the Oslo peace process, the practice was widely rejected. By contrast, in today's climate of daily Palestinian humiliation by the imposition of omnipresent Israeli roadblocks, with the sealing-off of towns and "preventive liquidation" of militant leaders—which can often result in civilian casualties, including small children and expectant mothers—the majority opinion is more likely to support such tactics. While this general acceptance of suicide bombers and the epidemic spread of their ideology is symptomatic of something hopeless and pathological, it may also be seen as a community-wide message of defiance directed at the oppressor: "See! It's not merely isolated individuals who are willing to sacrifice themselves to strike back at you—we're *all* ready."

As if to make a mockery of all Israeli defensive measures, Palestinian attackers persist in blowing themselves up in the same place in Jerusalem's city center—near the Sbarro Pizzeria, inside the Sbarro's, in front of the Sbarro's—as if to reinforce the message that no real protection or escape is possible. And the Israeli government's repeated promises to retaliate ever harder, using the full weight of its armed forces to put a stop to the terrorists once and for all, meet with the same response: still more attacks. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, elected to office in the midst of a wave of suicide attacks, vowed to unleash maximum military power, to "let the army win," and to "destroy the infrastructure of terrorism." But during his three years in office, more Israeli civilians have been killed in suicide attacks than ever before. Every assassination of a militant leader of Hamas, Islamic

Jihad, or the Al-Aqsa Brigades increases rather than diminishes their destructive force.

The attackers, their supporters, and suppliers understand that their enemy is stronger in a conventional military sense. Yet they also believe that their opponent is weaker in a deeper, existential, or spiritual sense. “They have grown soft, the attacker believes; they want to live, and live well, and they are afraid of death.” Despite their own obvious military inferiority, the suicide bombers and their allies draw consolation and strength from the assurance of this “cowardice” of the other side. They can only profit by it, of course, if they are willing to repudiate this “cowardice” and the reverence for life which they see as associated with it. This is the rationale for the (for us) irrational abandonment of the natural will to survive, and in its place, the embracing of one’s death. When this fearlessness is added to the dynamics of a calculated struggle for power, the old rules of superiority, power, and deterrence simply fall away. Here is the Archimedean point by which we may understand suicide attacks.

It is difficult to imagine how the collective psychology supporting suicide attacks can be maintained indefinitely. By negating the essential value of life, murder by suicide has enormous psychic costs. No child is born with ten kilos of TNT strapped to its stomach. Everywhere—in every known human society—children are comforted, cared for, protected, and loved by their parents. Disabling this life-affirming reflex and instead raising children to an “age of martyrdom,” in which they are encouraged (tacitly or otherwise) to volunteer to kill themselves and others, would tear any society apart over time.

We shake our heads in disbelief, or we may shudder, at televised images of ostensibly proud parents, smiling as they accept congratulations on their son’s or daughter’s martyrdom, and telling foreign reporters of their joy over their child’s deed. But if these parents did not express pride, they would be guilty of a double betrayal: first, of the child, who would otherwise have died for nothing; and also of his faction, or even the community as a whole, which for its part is flattered that its struggle is now seen as so important and sanctified by

the self-sacrifice it inspires. One can call it a kind of long-term loan, for which the terms of repayment are still undisclosed.

However technically simple they are to effect, suicide attacks require an essentially unyielding desire to walk away from what are sometimes relatively auspicious personal prospects. When suicide attacks take place in clearly delineated geographical areas, then society, too—or at least the attackers' social peers—are forced to respect what the attackers have done, and even to honor it. Any personal benefit from the deed must be in remembrance of those who did it. The belief in a future Paradise may well play a role in rationalizing the deed for many attackers, making it easier for them to go through with it. But if asked what sort of Paradise they envisage, those determined to die invariably give answers that are distinctly worldly: they want to be remembered posthumously as heroes, with their pictures on every wall, and they want to carry out God's will by hastening the liberation of their country.

Notwithstanding the pretense of traditional religion in which their actions are typically cloaked, suicide bombers are quintessentially modern, in that they have left behind the traditional interpretations of religion in order to exploit only selected aspects of religion. They are a mixture of the Battle of Karbala and cable television—old myths and new media. They have no ethnic ties to any particular culture, nor are they indissolubly linked to any one religion; rather, they are moderns, whom no God and no religious commandments can restrain any longer. To reach this point, though, they must overcome the single greatest obstacle that all monotheistic religions place in the path of suicide bombers: the ban on killing oneself. For in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the power over human life, including the right to take it away, belongs exclusively to God. But for the suicide attackers and their defenders—whether they consider God great (following Bin Laden) or dead (following Nietzsche)—it ultimately all boils down to a single issue: they take their lives and, therefore their deaths, into their own hands.

It is no coincidence that such would-be martyrs (who embrace death as they strike out at their enemies) appeared first of all within

Islam and, more specifically, among the Muslim minority of the embattled Shi'ites. Islam, in its political form, is a well-suited ideology for war. It first arose in the context of a political movement that included a strong military component, and the connection was never severed. The mental image of Muhammad and his crowd of followers setting off on a conquest under the Prophet's banner is easily conjured; a group of Buddhists doing something similar is hard to picture.

The Qur'anic term "jihad," like many other terms in teachings of the Prophet, can be read in a variety of ways. Childbirth is called "jihad," as is looking after a sick father; the exercise of willpower in resisting temptation—these are all jihads. At its core, the word means the "exertion" or "effort" of following "the path of God" for one's own salvation and for Islam. Obviously, there are many kinds of paths. A war is properly called a "jihad" when it is launched to defend oneself and one's community against the infidels (although this has never stopped any Muslim ruler from fighting his Muslim neighbors). The term has proven especially useful to Osama bin Laden, whose efforts to market himself as a persecuted defender of the true tradition have met with considerable political success.

With the growth of Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, suicide attacks have detached themselves from specific local or regional problems and from pragmatic political programs and agendas. Al-Qaeda's rhetoric, at once deeply rooted in Islamic tradition and a twisted, aberrant, contemporary outgrowth of that same tradition, is able to unite followers from more than a dozen nations with nothing in common but a messianic ideology of destruction. The fact that al-Qaeda has nothing tangible to gain from its operations—it does not fight conventional wars in order to capture territory—is not a disadvantage. On the contrary, this makes it virtually unassailable. The network is everywhere and nowhere, using each and every regional conflict as a convenient staging-ground for its global mission. Al-Qaeda seeks out and colonizes existing conflicts, from Chechnya to Kurdistan, Kashmir, and Karachi—and makes them worse. It dispatches its own warriors to local scenes of conflict to recruit native volunteers, who are taught to see their heretofore parochial struggle against the backdrop

of a global war of civilizations. Al-Qaeda is an apocalyptic sect whose worldview has been successfully cobbled together out of disparate components, including conspiracy theories, the experience of genuine oppression in the homelands of its adherents, and the public humiliation of the Palestinian people, as broadcast daily on live television.

Over the last two decades, suicide attacks have become the most effective weapon of an array of terrorist organizations around the globe. However different their individual origins, programs, aims, and politics are from each other, militant groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda are united in their exploitation of suicide attacks to hit their enemies where they are most vulnerable. Self-styled martyrs, from New York to Haifa and New Delhi, by highlighting the fact that their enemies value their own lives more highly than they themselves do, aim to turn the tables, and render the powerful powerless. Combating them effectively requires a global approach, and especially a grasp of the interconnectedness of such events, and of all these militant groups with each other. Groups from Morocco to Iraq are linked together as though by invisible paths and secret passageways. Thus, injustices perpetrated in Chechnya or on the West Bank can stir up hatred within Morocco and Saudi Arabia, and unintentionally provide aid and comfort to opportunists who stoke the flames of righteous anger elsewhere.