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Suicide Terrorism and Democracy What We've Learned Since 9/11

by Robert A. Pape

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, terrorist organizations have increasingly relied on suicide attacks to achieve political objectives. The specific goal sought in almost all suicide terrorist campaigns in modern history is the same: to compel a democratic state to withdraw combat forces from territory prized by the terrorists. This holds true for al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization of greatest concern to most Americans. Al-Qaeda's efforts to mobilize people to kill Americans are driven principally by a simple strategic goal: to drive the United States and its Western allies from the Arabian Peninsula and other Muslim countries.

Terrorist groups that employ suicide as a tactic follow a strategic logic to compel democratic governments to change their policies, but the motivations of the individual attackers have evolved over the past few years. In the London bombings of July 7, 2005, and in the failed plot to blow up airliners over the Atlantic uncovered in August 2006, the actual and prospective suicide terrorists were not personally suffering under foreign occupation, but they did sympathize with the plight of a kindred group. Deep anger at the use of foreign combat forces to suppress national self-determi-

nation by kindred groups is sufficient to inspire self-sacrifice even when personal motives for revenge are completely absent.

Understanding that suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than a product of Islamic fundamentalism has important implications for how the U.S. government should conduct the war on terrorism. Over the next year, the United States and its allies in Iraq should completely turn over the responsibility for Iraq's security to Iraq's new government and should start systematically withdrawing troops. The Bush administration should similarly revisit the deployment of all U.S. military personnel in the Persian Gulf region. The West managed its interests there during the 1970s and 1980s without stationing any combat soldiers on the ground. This "offshore balancing" approach kept our forces close enough that they could respond in the event of an emergency that posed a direct threat to U.S. vital interests. In order to effectively fight al-Qaeda, the United States should complete the transition toward a similar "offshore balancing" strategy by the end of the Bush presidency.

*Robert A. Pape is professor of political science at the University of Chicago and director of the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism. He is the author of *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005).*

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Introduction

Almost every week, a suicide bomber walks into a crowd of Iraqis waiting to join the government's security forces or rams a car laden with explosives into an American military convoy. Almost every month this year, al-Qaeda has released a new video seeking to encourage Muslims to copy the example of the July 7, 2005, London suicide bombers and strap explosives to themselves in order to carry out an attack that would surely kill many Americans or their allies. In April of this year, the Tamil Tigers again began to use suicide attacks as a means to achieve their objectives in Sri Lanka after having stopped using this tactic for several years. And in August, British authorities thwarted an apparent suicide terrorist plot to destroy as many as 10 U.S.-bound airliners in mid-flight over the Atlantic Ocean. Suicide terrorism is not a recent phenomenon, however. Over the past two decades, terrorist organizations in Lebanon, the West Bank, Chechnya, Kashmir, and elsewhere have increasingly relied on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives.

We know the horror. We know not to be surprised, even though suicide attacks often come after months of relative calm. But do we understand what would drive seemingly ordinary people to strap explosives to their bodies and deliberately kill themselves on a mission to kill others?

Recently, we have made strides in understanding suicide terrorism. Just a few years ago, one could listen to seemingly endless reports asking, "Why do only Muslims carry out suicide attacks?" Such news stories dovetailed with the popular notion that suicide terrorism is a product of religious extremism where poor, desperate (Muslim) souls seek to escape the troubles of this world for a quick trip to paradise.

Today, we know significantly more. Much of what we now know challenges the conventional wisdom. Some is disconcerting.

A detailed study of every suicide terrorist bombing and attack around the world from 1980 through the end of 2003—with a total of 462 suicide terrorists who actually killed themselves to complete their missions—sug-

gests that more than half of those bombers were motivated by secular aims. At least 30 percent of all suicide terrorist attacks conducted by Muslims are committed on behalf of groups with purely secular aims, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (also known as the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, or PKK), a Kurdish terrorist group in Turkey. Evidence from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the past two years largely fits within this pattern. Meanwhile, the world leader in suicide terrorism over the years is a group that many in the West have not heard much about—the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. This group—secular in orientation, adhering to a Marxist political ideology, and whose fighters are predominantly Hindu—has carried out more suicide terrorist attacks than Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

Instead of religion, almost all suicide terrorist attacks around the world have in common a specific political goal: to compel a democratic state to withdraw combat forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland or prize greatly. This has been the central goal of every campaign of suicide terrorism since 1980, from Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Chechnya to Kashmir, the West Bank, and Iraq. It also holds true for al-Qaeda, the organization of greatest concern to most Americans.

To put today's suicide terrorism into perspective, it is helpful to look more systematically at the global patterns of suicide terrorism since 1980 and to focus specifically on the case of al-Qaeda. It is further helpful to briefly address suicide terrorism in Iraq. The available data on suicide attacks through the end of 2005, combined with the previous information on the sources of suicide terrorism, provides a solid foundation for developing a new strategy for the United States to mitigate the danger we face.

Global Patterns of Suicide Terrorism

Although terrorism has long been part of international politics, we do not have good

explanations for the increase in suicide terrorism before 9/11. Traditional studies of terrorism tend to treat suicide attack as one of many tactics that terrorists use, and so do not shed much light on the recent rise of this particular type of attack.¹ The few studies that explicitly address suicide terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s tend to focus on the irrationality of the act of suicide from the perspective of the individual attacker. As a result, they concentrate on individual motives—either religious indoctrination or psychological predispositions that might drive individual suicide bombers.² This work is important and largely accounts for the twin explanations commonly offered in academic and journalistic accounts, namely that suicide terrorism is a product of either Islamic fundamentalist indoctrination or suicidal individuals who would likely end their lives in any event.³

These first-wave explanations of suicide terrorism were developed during the 1980s and were consistent with the data from that period. However, as suicide attacks mounted from the 1990s onward, it has become increasingly evident that these initial explanations are insufficient to account for which individuals become suicide terrorists and, more importantly, why terrorist organizations are increasingly relying on this form of attack. First, although religious motives may matter, modern suicide terrorism is not limited to Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic groups receive the most attention in Western media, but, as noted above, the world's leader in suicide terrorism is actually the Marxist/Leninist Hindu Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).⁴

Second, although study of the personal characteristics of suicide attackers may someday help identify the individuals that terrorist organizations are likely to recruit for that purpose, the vast spread of suicide terrorism over the last two decades suggests that suicide terrorists do not fit a single profile. Until recently, the leading experts in psychological profiles of suicide terrorists characterized them as uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated, single men in their late teens and early twenties.⁵ Now we know that suicide terrorists can be college

educated or uneducated, married or single, men or women, socially isolated or integrated, teenaged or middle aged (they've ranged from 15 to 52). At least one of the individuals arrested in August in the United Kingdom was a woman, married to one of the other would-be suicide bombers, and the mother of a young child.⁶ In other words, although only a tiny number of people become suicide terrorists, they come from a broad cross-section of lifestyles, and it may be impossible to pick them out in advance.⁷

This study goes a step beyond the first wave explanations and shows that the *groups*, not necessarily the individual bombers, follow a strategic logic. Viewed from the perspective of the terrorist organization, suicide attacks are designed to achieve specific political purposes: to coerce a target government to change policy, to mobilize additional recruits and financial support, or both. Moreover, most governments that have been targeted by suicide terrorism made concessions toward the terrorists' political cause. Most of those concessions were driven by the coercive pressure of the suicide attacks or occurred at times and under circumstances wherein they could plausibly be attributed to the suicide attacks. Leaders of suicide terrorist organizations have in fact come to believe that suicide attacks are an effective coercive tool. During the past 25 years, suicide terrorism has been steadily rising because terrorists have learned that it pays.

Defining Suicide Terrorism

Terrorism involves the use of violence by an organization other than a national government to cause intimidation or fear among a target audience.⁸ Although one could broaden the definition of terrorism to include the actions of a national government to cause terror among an opposing population, adopting such a broad definition would distract attention from what policymakers would most like to know: how to combat the threat to state security posed by subnational groups. Furthermore, a

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broader definition could also create analytic confusion. Terrorist organizations and national governments have different levels of resources, face different kinds of incentives, and are susceptible to different types of pressures. Accordingly, the determinants of their behavior are not likely to be the same.

Suicide terrorism is an aggressive, distinct form of terrorism. The purpose is not simply to die, but to kill. What distinguishes a suicide terrorist is that the attacker does not expect to survive a mission and often employs a method of attack that requires the attacker's death in order to succeed (such as a car bomb, suicide vest, or ramming an airplane into a building). In essence, a suicide terrorist kills others at the same time he kills himself.⁹ In principle, suicide terrorists could be used for demonstrative purposes, in other words, showing the resolve of the group, or they could be limited to only targeted assassinations.¹⁰ In practice, however, suicide terrorists often seek simply to kill the largest number of people possible. This feature is important because if suicide terrorism were mainly a tactic used to advance a religious agenda, killing large numbers of people in the target audience would be a rather poor way to achieve this end because it would alienate those in the target audience who might be sympathetic to the terrorists' cause. So, although killing large numbers maximizes the coercive leverage that can be gained from terrorism, it does so at the greatest cost to the terrorists' basis of support.¹¹ Thus, while coercion is an element in all terrorism, coercion is the paramount objective of suicide terrorism.

The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism

At its core, suicide terrorism aims to compel a target government to change policy. The strategic logic is simple: suicide terrorism attempts to inflict enough pain and threaten enough future pain to overwhelm the target country's interest in resisting the terrorists' demands. The common feature of all suicide terrorist campaigns is that they inflict pun-

ishment on the opposing society, either directly, by killing civilians, or indirectly, by killing military personnel in circumstances that cannot lead to meaningful battlefield victory. Suicide terrorism, rarely being a one-time event, generates coercive leverage both from the immediate panic associated with each attack and from the risk of civilian punishment in the future. The suicide terrorism campaign succeeds if it induces an opposing government to concede and change the policy, or if the opposing population changes the government, which then results in a change of policy.

Although the element of suicide is novel and the pain inflicted on civilians is often spectacular and gruesome, the heart of the strategy of suicide terrorism is the same as the coercive logic used by states when they employ strategic air power or economic sanctions to punish an adversary: to cause mounting civilian costs to overwhelm the target state's interest in the issue in dispute and so to cause it to concede the adversary's political demands. Targets may be economic or political, military or civilian, but in all cases the main task is less to destroy the specific targets than to convince the opposing society that it is vulnerable to more attacks in the future.

The rhetoric of major suicide terrorist groups reflects this logic. Abdel Karim, a leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a militant group linked to the Palestinian Fatah movement, said the goal of his group was "to increase losses in Israel to a point at which the Israeli public would demand a withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip." The infamous 1998 fatwa signed by Osama Bin Laden and others against the United States reads: "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim."¹²

Why “Suicide”?

Suicide terrorists’ willingness to die magnifies the coercive effects of punishment in three ways. First, suicide attacks are generally more destructive than other terrorist attacks. An attacker who is willing to die is much more likely to accomplish the mission and to cause maximum damage to the target. Suicide attackers can conceal weapons on their own bodies and make last-minute adjustments more easily than ordinary terrorists. For example, the Jordanian suicide bombings of November 2005 involved a husband and wife team; the wife’s bomb failed to detonate, but she told investigators that her husband was able to alter his focus when her bomb failed to go off.¹³ Suicide terrorists are better able to infiltrate heavily guarded targets because they do not need escape plans or rescue teams. They can use certain especially destructive tactics such as “suicide vests” and ramming vehicles into targets. The 315 suicide terrorist attacks that occurred from 1980 to 2003 killed an average of 12 people each, not counting the attackers or the unusually large number of fatalities on September 11, and account for 48 percent of all deaths caused by terrorism during the period, even though they constitute only 3 percent of all terrorist attacks.¹⁴ Some of the deadliest attacks of the last two years have been carried out by suicide terrorists. For example, suicide attacks in Iraq have been particularly destructive relative to other forms of violence. And there is good evidence from past cases that suicide attacks are far more lethal than ordinary strikes. A systematic survey of damage caused by Japanese air attacks on the U.S. Navy from October 1944 through August 1945 found that Kamikaze missions were four to five times more likely than conventional missions to damage or sink their targets.¹⁵

A second way in which suicide increases the coercive effects of terrorism is through its signaling of the likelihood of more pain to come if the target government fails to make concessions. Suicide is an especially convincing signal of future intent because it suggests that the attackers could not have been deterred, and future attackers will not be, by

a threat of costly retaliation. Although the capture, conviction, and execution of Timothy McVeigh gave reason for some confidence that others with similar political views might be deterred, the deaths of the September 11 hijackers did not, because Americans would have to expect that future al-Qaeda attackers would be equally willing to die.

Organizations that sponsor suicide attacks can also deliberately orchestrate the circumstances around the death of a suicide attacker to further increase expectations of future attacks. This might be called the “art of martyrdom.” The more that suicide terrorists justify their actions on the basis of religious or ideological motives that match the beliefs of a broader national community, the more the status of terrorist martyrs is elevated, and the more plausible it becomes that others will follow in their footsteps. Suicide terrorist organizations commonly cultivate “sacrificial myths” that include elaborate sets of symbols and rituals to mark an individual attacker’s death as a contribution to the nation. In addition, suicide attackers’ families often receive material rewards both from the terrorist organizations and from other supporters.¹⁶

Third, suicide terrorist organizations are better positioned than other groups that employ terrorist tactics to increase expectations about escalating future costs by deliberately violating norms in the use of violence. They can do this by crossing thresholds of damage, by breaching taboos concerning legitimate targets, and by broadening recruitment to confound expectations about limits on the number of possible terrorists.

Targeting Democracies

Previous analyses of suicide terrorism have never had the benefit of a comprehensive survey of all suicide terrorist attacks worldwide over an extended period of time. The lack of complete data together with the fact that many such attacks—including all those against Americans—have been committed by Muslims has led many in the United States to assume that Islamic fundamentalism must be the underlying main cause.¹⁷

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That, in turn, has fueled a belief that anti-American terrorism can be stopped only by wholesale transformation of Muslim societies. That was one of the primary justifications employed by the Bush administration to build public support of the invasion of Iraq, and it remains a central objective of U.S. strategy, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia. Comprehensive study of the phenomenon of suicide terrorism, however, shows that the presumed connection to Islamic fundamentalism is misleading.

The research presented in my book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, was based on a complete dataset of suicide terrorist attacks around the globe from 1980 to 2003. Using hundreds of reports in native-language newspapers, computer databases, and expert analyses, the survey counted every instance in which at least one terrorist killed himself or herself while attempting to kill others. Attacks authorized by national governments, such as those by North Korea against the South and Iranian human wave attacks in the Iran-Iraq war, were excluded.¹⁸

Overall, there were 315 separate suicide terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2003, and these occurred in a variety of countries, including Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, and the United States.

The data showed that all suicide terrorist campaigns have in common a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists value. Religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective.

Three general patterns in the data support the conclusion that suicide terrorism is mainly a strategic phenomenon. As I explained in *Dying to Win*, these three properties are consistent with the above strategic logic but not with irrational behavior or religious fanaticism:

1. **Timing:** nearly all suicide attacks occur in organized, coherent campaigns, not

as isolated or randomly timed incidents;

2. **Territorial goals:** suicide terrorist campaigns are directed at gaining control of what the terrorists see as their national homeland territory, and specifically at ejecting foreign forces from that territory; and

3. **Target selection:** suicide terrorist campaigns in the last two decades have been aimed at democracies, which make more suitable targets from the terrorists' point of view. Nationalist movements that face nondemocratic opponents have not resorted to suicide attack as a means of coercion.

This study incorporates new information from the past two years to further refine the argument set forward in *Dying to Win*. I find that suicide terrorism continues to follow a strategic logic, but that the motivations of the individual attackers, and the intended targets for coercion, have evolved—with important implications for counterterrorism strategies going forward.

Timing

A suicide terrorist campaign can be distinguished from isolated attacks if it consists of an intended series of attacks that terrorist leaders explain and justify as aimed at gaining political concessions from a target government, and that continues until the terrorist leaders deliberately abandon the effort, either because sufficient gains have been attained or because they've become convinced that the effort has failed.

Of the 315 separate suicide terrorist attacks between 1980 and 2003, 301, or 95 percent, were parts of organized, coherent campaigns, whereas only 14 were isolated or random events. Nine separate disputes led to suicide terrorist campaigns during this period: the presence of American and French forces in Lebanon, Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the independence of the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka, the independence of the Kurdish region of Turkey, Russian occupation of Chechnya, Indian occupation of Kashmir,

Indian control of Punjab, and the presence of American forces in Iraq and the Persian Gulf region. These nine disputes gave rise to 18 distinct campaigns, because in certain disputes the terrorists elected to suspend operations one or more times either in response to concessions or for other reasons. Since 2003, we have seen a continuation of many of these campaigns, namely by al-Qaeda, the Tamil Tigers, Chechen rebels, and the Palestinians (Islamic Jihad and Hamas). In addition, Iraqi rebels are engaged in a campaign in response to the presence of American forces in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and a new dispute—the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan—has given rise to a new suicide terrorism campaign. The destructive effects of that campaign have been felt almost entirely by the Afghan people, but the coercive effect is intended for the Western democracies with troops in the country.

From the 1980 to 2003 data, I found that the attacks comprising each campaign were organized by the same terrorist group (or, sometimes, a set of cooperating groups, as in the ongoing “second intifada” in Israel/Palestine), clustered in time, publicly justified in terms of a specified political goal, and directed against targets related to that goal. For the last two years, that has generally remained true, though the evidence is far from clear given that the four known suicide terrorist groups in the case of Iraq claimed credit for only 40 percent of suicide attacks in that country.¹⁹ Murky information on the identity of suicide attackers is normal in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Suicide terrorist groups in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere commonly provide our best information about the identity of the attackers, but often years afterwards, in order to safeguard the security of their ongoing operations.

The most important indicator of the strategic orientation of suicide terrorists is the timing of the suspension of campaigns, which is most often based on a strategic decision by leaders of the terrorist organizations that further attacks would be counterproductive to their coercive purposes—for instance, in response to full or partial concessions by the target state to the ter-

rorists’ political goals. Such suspensions are often accompanied by public explanations that justify the decision to opt for a cease-fire. Furthermore, the terrorist organizations’ discipline is usually fairly good. Although there are exceptions, such announced cease-fires usually stick for a period of months at least, normally until the terrorist leaders make a new strategic decision to resume in pursuit of goals not achieved in the earlier campaign. That pattern indicates that both terrorist leaders and their recruits are sensitive to the coercive value of the attacks.

If suicide terrorism were mainly irrational or even disorganized, we would expect a much different pattern, in which political goals were not articulated (for example, references in news reports to rogue attacks) or in which the stated goals would vary considerably even within the same conflict. We would also expect the timing to be either random or event-driven in response to particularly provocative or infuriating actions by the other side, but little if at all related to the progress of negotiations over issues in dispute that the terrorists want to influence. That is not the pattern that we see in the data on suicide terrorism.

Territorial Goal

Suicide terrorism is a costly strategy, one that would only make strategic sense for a group when high interests are at stake and, even then, as a last resort. Suicide terrorism maximizes coercive leverage at the expense of support among the terrorists’ own community and so can be sustained over time only when there already exists a high degree of commitment among the potential pool of recruits. The most important goal that a community can have is the independence of its homeland (population, property, and way of life) from foreign influence or control. As a result, a strategy of suicide terrorism is most likely to be used to achieve nationalist goals, such as gaining control of what the terrorists see as their national homeland territory and expelling foreign military forces from that territory.

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No suicide campaign has ever been waged against opponents who did not have military forces on territory that is important to the terrorists.

Every suicide campaign between 1980 and 2003, including the five that were ongoing as of December 2003, had as a major objective—or as its central objective—forcing a foreign government to remove its military forces from territory prized by the terrorists. No suicide campaign has ever been waged against opponents who did not have military forces on territory that is important to the terrorists. Although attacks against civilians are often the most salient to Western observers, every suicide terrorist campaign that I studied between 1980 and 2003 has included attacks directly against the foreign military forces in the country, and most have been waged by guerrilla organizations that also use more conventional methods of attack against those forces.

Even al-Qaeda fits this pattern. A major objective of al-Qaeda is the expulsion of U.S. troops from Muslim lands, and there have been frequent attacks by terrorists loyal to Osama Bin Laden against American troops there. To be sure, there is a major debate among Islamists over the morality of suicide attacks, but there is little debate over al-Qaeda's objection to American forces in the region. A poll taken by the Saudi government in 2002 found that over 90 percent of Saudis agreed with bin Laden that foreign forces should be expelled from the Arabian peninsula.²⁰

Within the past two years, individuals who are not personally suffering under foreign occupation have carried out terrorist attacks out of sympathy to the plight of a kindred group. The 7/7 bombers in London, and at least some of the foreign fighters entering Iraq to wage suicide attacks, fit this profile. Although much is still unknown about the participants in the failed plot to blow up airliners in August 2006, those individuals—largely Britons of Pakistani descent—exhibit some of the same characteristics. Individuals with dual loyalties joined in a wider campaign, hoping to coerce democratic societies into changing their policies, out of a sense of national identification with the plight of kindred groups under foreign military occupation. This is an important development that

extends the strategic logic of suicide terrorism beyond those with personal experience of foreign combat presence on homeland territory. It shows that deep anger at the use of foreign combat forces to suppress national self-determination by kindred groups is sufficient to inspire self-sacrifice to protect those communities, even when personal motives for revenge are completely absent.

Even if suicide terrorism follows a strategic logic, could some suicide terrorist campaigns be irrational in the sense that they are being waged for unrealistic goals? It is true that some suicide terrorist groups have not been realistic in expecting the full concessions demanded of the target, but this is normal for disputes involving overlapping nationalist claims, which are often seen as indivisible by both sides. Rather, the ambitions of terrorist leaders are realistic in two other senses. First, while suicide terrorists' methods are extreme, the political goals quite often reflect common, straightforward nationalist self-determination claims of their community. Second, these groups often have significant support for their policy goals versus the target state, goals which are typically much the same as those of other nationalists within their community. Differences between the terrorists and more "moderate" leaders usually concern the usefulness of a certain level of violence and, sometimes, the legitimacy of attacking additional targets besides foreign troops in the country, such as attacks in other countries or against third parties and civilians. Thus, it is not that terrorists pursue radical goals and then seek others' support. Rather, terrorists are simply the members of their societies who are the most optimistic about the usefulness of violence for achieving goals that many, and often most, support.

The behavior of Hamas illustrates the point. While pursuing the apparently unrealistic goal of abolishing the state of Israel, Hamas terrorism has provoked Israeli retaliation that has been costly for Palestinians. Prospects of establishing an Arab state in all of "historic Palestine" may be poor, and most Palestinians agree that a two-state solution

would be desirable.²¹ Hamas's terrorist violence was carefully calculated and controlled to achieve specific intermediate objectives. In April 1994, as its first suicide campaign was beginning, Hamas leaders explained that "martyrdom operations" would be used to obtain an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza and noted that the final objective of creating an Islamic state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean might later require other forms of armed resistance.²²

Democracies as the Targets

Suicide terrorism is more likely to be used against states with democratic political systems than authoritarian governments for three reasons. First, democracies are often thought to be especially vulnerable to coercive punishment. Domestic critics and international rivals, as well as terrorists, often view democracies as "soft," usually on the grounds that their publics have low thresholds of cost tolerance and a high ability to affect state policy.²³ Even if there is little evidence that democracies are easier to coerce than other regime types,²⁴ this image of democracy matters. Since terrorists can inflict only moderate damage in comparison to even small interstate wars, terrorism can be expected to coerce only if the target state is viewed as especially vulnerable to punishment.

With respect to suicide terrorism in Iraq over the past three and a half years, the punishment is most often endured by the Iraqi people, but the coercive effect is intended both for the nascent Iraqi democracy, and the mature American one. Americans who feel a moral obligation to leave Iraq in a better state than when we removed Saddam Hussein from power in April of 2003 despair over the horrific losses inflicted on the Iraqi people. U.S. personnel—both civilian and military—have also been targeted by suicide bombers, but force protection for the military as well as the nearly impenetrable fortress known as the Green Zone in Baghdad provide considerable protection for American personnel against suicide (and other) forms of attack.

Those strategies for reducing the threat of terrorism have had harmful unintended effects, limiting the ability of U.S. personnel to interact on a regular basis with the Iraqi people and impeding the success of reconstruction activities, but they have enabled most Americans to escape the worst ravages of the ongoing suicide terrorism campaign.²⁵ Yet, such attacks still have coercive effects, specifically on the U.S. public. If suicide terrorists can cause sectarian violence to spread in Iraq and therefore significantly increase the costs to American personnel there and to taxpayers at home, they could cause the public's cost-benefit calculus to change enough to lead to a withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraqi soil. Indeed, this may already be happening.

In the meantime, the Iraqi people have borne the brunt of the concerted suicide terrorism campaign in their country. Some Iraqis have simply chosen to leave the country. For those who remain, many are willing to sacrifice some of their new-found freedoms in exchange for greater security, and a few have called on the fledgling Iraqi government to reestablish autocracy. Others have reacted to the terrorist campaign by forming ethnic militias, which have, in turn, engaged in revenge killings and other forms of violence, all actions that have undermined the legitimacy and power of the Iraqi government.

The second reason why suicide terrorism is more likely to be employed against democracies than authoritarian governments reflects a calculation of likely costs and perceived benefits. Suicide terrorism is a tool of the weak, which means that regardless of how much punishment the terrorists inflict, the target state almost always has the capacity to retaliate with far more extreme punishment or even by exterminating the terrorists' community. Accordingly, suicide terrorists must not only have high interests at stake, they must also be confident that their opponent will be at least somewhat restrained. Democracies are widely perceived as less likely to harm civilians, and no democratic regime has committed genocide in the 20th century, although recent

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scholarship casts strong doubt on the presumption that democracies are generally more restrained than authoritarian states.²⁶

In fact, the target state of every modern suicide campaign has been a democracy. The United States, France, Israel, India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Russia were all democracies when they were attacked by suicide terrorist campaigns, even though the last three became democracies more recently than the others. To be sure, these states vary in the degree to which they share “liberal” norms that respect minority rights; Freedom House rates Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Russia as “partly free” (3.5–4.5 on a 7-point scale) rather than “free” during the relevant years, partly for this reason and partly because terrorism and civil violence themselves lower the freedom rating of those states. Still, all of those states elect their chief executives and legislatures in multiparty elections and have seen at least one peaceful transfer of power, making them solidly democratic by standard criteria.²⁷

The Kurdish nation, which straddles Turkey and Iraq, illustrates the point that suicide terrorist campaigns are more likely to be targeted against democracies than authoritarian regimes. Although Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was far more brutal toward its Kurdish population than was Turkey, violent Kurdish groups used suicide attacks exclusively against democratic Turkey and not against the authoritarian regime in Iraq. There are plenty of national groups living under authoritarian regimes with grievances that could possibly inspire suicide terrorism, but none have. Thus, the fact that rebels have resorted to this strategy only when they face the more suitable type of target (i.e., a democracy), counts against arguments that suicide terrorism is a nonstrategic response, motivated mainly by fanaticism or irrational hatreds.

Al-Qaeda’s Strategic Logic

Many Americans ask how Muslims, many of whom are middle class and well educated, can kill themselves to kill Americans and others in the West. The answer is both simple and dis-

turbing: it is because of deep anger over Western combat forces in the Persian Gulf region and other predominantly Muslim lands.

From 2002 to the end of 2005, al-Qaeda carried out more than 17 suicide and other terrorist bombings that killed nearly 700 people—more attacks and victims than in all the years before 9/11 combined. Although many people hoped that Western counterterrorism efforts would have weakened al-Qaeda, by the measure that counts—*the ability of the group to kill us*—al-Qaeda is stronger today than before 9/11. As we shall see, the London suicide terrorist attack on July 7, 2005, and the attempted bombings two weeks later, stem closely from al-Qaeda’s strategic logic, which seeks to expel foreign occupiers from the Arabian peninsula and Afghanistan. Furthermore, al-Qaeda’s efforts to mobilize American “home-grown” suicide attackers and others to kill Americans are driven principally by this same strategic logic. Though there is no denying that al-Qaeda deploys the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism to recruit potential followers, its immediate goals are fundamentally political in nature.

To make sense of al-Qaeda’s campaign against the United States and its allies, I compiled data on the 71 terrorists who killed themselves between 1995 and 2004 in carrying out attacks sponsored by Osama bin Laden’s network. This study was able to collect the names, nationalities and detailed demographic information on 67 of these bombers, data which provides insight into the underlying causes of al-Qaeda’s suicide terrorism and how the group’s strategy has evolved since 2001.

Most important, the figures show that al-Qaeda is today less a product of Islamic fundamentalism than of a simple strategic goal: to compel the United States and its Western allies to withdraw combat forces from the Arabian Peninsula and other Muslim countries. Over two thirds of al-Qaeda suicide attackers have been nationals from predominantly Sunni Muslim countries, especially Saudi Arabia, other states on the Arabian Peninsula, and Afghanistan. Few are from many of the world’s most populous Islamic

fundamentalist countries. Sudan—an Islamic fundamentalist country with a population almost the same size as Saudi Arabia—has never produced an al-Qaeda suicide terrorist. Iran—whose population of 70 million people is steeped in Islamic fundamentalism and is three times the size of Saudi Arabia—has never produced one either. Iraqis, Shiite and Sunni alike, have similarly resisted al-Qaeda’s appeals. The first case of an Iraqi waging a suicide attack outside of Iraq occurred in Jordan in November of 2005.

Even the one third of al-Qaeda suicide attackers who are transnational in nature (in other words, are not drawn from al-Qaeda’s Arabian core) are powerfully motivated by anger over Western combat operations against kindred groups. The 7/7 bombers in some ways complicate the picture. The individuals who committed the London suicide attacks would surely be considered part of al-Qaeda’s transnational support. The attackers, mostly British citizens of Pakistani extraction, were not ethnically related to those suffering under foreign occupation. They were, however, individuals with dual loyalties, and sympathy with the plight of coreligionists suffering under foreign military occupation played a powerful role in the suicide bombers’ motivations. Here, as before, the pivotal motivation was foreign occupation of a territory prized by the terrorists. And here, as before, suicide terrorism was seen as an effective weapon with which to coerce the democratic nation(s) occupying the prized territory.

First, the al-Qaeda group that claimed responsibility for the London attacks said that they were intended to punish Great Britain for its military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The al-Qaeda statement was released just hours after the July 7 attack and went on to threaten Italy and Denmark with terrorist attacks if those states “did not withdraw their troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.”²⁸

Second, Hussein Osman, one of the four would-be July 21 bombers captured in Rome, said in his interrogation by Italian authorities: “Religion had nothing to do with this . . . We

were shown videos with images of the war in Iraq.”²⁹

Third, Mohammad Sidique Kahn, the ringleader of the July 7 bombers, made a video that al-Qaeda released several months after that attack. In it, Kahn says that the purpose of the London attacks was to punish Britain because its “democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world Until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight.”³⁰

Divided Loyalties and Nationalism

Although the airline bombing plot in August 2006 was thwarted, the arrest and detention of at least 26 individuals in the UK reveals that more than a year after the 7/7 attacks, British Muslims still identify with the plight of kindred groups suffering under foreign occupation and are willing to engage in suicide terrorism to effect a change in British policy. And yet, such sentiments should not be blown out of proportion. When the British Home Office conducted a detailed survey of the attitudes of the 1.6 million Muslims living in Britain in April 2004, it found that between 8 and 13 percent believed that more suicide attacks against the United States and the West were justified. These numbers are troubling enough, but they also reveal the limits of divided loyalties: according to the report, “the great majority of British Muslims (up to 85%) regarded the attacks on western targets, including the 9/11 attacks, as unjustified.”³¹

Among those who endorsed suicide terrorism, the survey went further to identify the specific reason—Iraq. In other words, the principal factor driving support for suicide terrorism among radicalized British Muslims was not “Islamofascism,” but deep anger over British military policies in the Persian Gulf region, policies which were seen as deeply harmful to a kindred ethnic group.

The pool of would-be al-Qaeda suicide terrorists is drawn from one of two groups: individuals who suffer or perceive personal harm or humiliation as a result of foreign

Though al-Qaeda deploys the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism to recruit potential followers, its immediate goals are fundamentally political in nature.

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military occupation, and individuals who suffer no personal ill-effects from foreign occupation but who identify with the plight of a kindred group that does. This suggests a simple implication for the security of the United States: if al-Qaeda’s truly transnational support were to dry up tomorrow, the group would remain a robust threat to the United States. However, if al-Qaeda no longer drew recruits from the Muslim countries where there is an American *combat presence*, the remaining transnational network would pose a far smaller threat and might well simply collapse.³²

Al-Qaeda’s Other Goals

Although al-Qaeda leaders may harbor other goals—such as establishing an Islamic fundamentalist state—the history of suicide terrorism shows it is unlikely the group would be able to achieve that purpose through the use of suicide attacks. Over the past two decades, there have been 18 suicide terrorist campaigns and not a single one has been waged by terrorist groups in the offensive pursuit of territory, either to conquer the national homeland territory of another community or to establish a political system on the territory the terrorists prize. Instead, every suicide terrorist campaign since 1980 has been waged for defensive control of territory, to establish self-determination for a community facing the presence of foreign combat forces.

That is true even when suicide terrorism has produced impressive political gains for the terrorist group. For instance, after Hezbollah’s suicide attacks compelled American, French, and Israeli forces to abandon territory in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah suicide attackers did not follow the Americans to New York, the French to Paris, or the Israelis to Tel Aviv. Indeed, after Israel’s military forces completely abandoned Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah suicide attacks stopped completely and have not resumed to this day. To be sure, Hezbollah remains committed to establishing an Islamic fundamentalist state. However, there is no evidence—even after 18 years of suicide attacks to

eject foreign forces from Lebanon—that Hezbollah is likely to use suicide attacks for that purpose.

Understanding more about the strategic logic of suicide terrorism helps to explain why that is. Suicide terrorists—for al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and all other groups using this tactic—are overwhelmingly walk-in volunteers, not long-time members of terrorist groups. They are not produced in madrassas; fewer than a half dozen of the 462 suicide terrorists in this study fit that description. Suicide terrorism is mainly a demand-driven, not a supply-manufactured, phenomenon, and there is one principal motive driving individuals to take up that mission, which stands head and shoulders above the rest: deep anger at the presence of foreign combat forces on territory that the terrorists prize. Some individual attackers prize the territory for secular reasons. Some for religious reasons. It is common for nationalist sentiments to blend secular and religious commitments to territory. However, the important point is that were it not for deep anger at the presence of foreign combat forces, suicide terrorism would be an exceedingly rare phenomenon.

War on America’s Allies

A closer look at al-Qaeda’s suicide terrorist campaign against the United States and its allies in 2002 and 2003 helps to clarify the strategic logic guiding their operations. As Table 1 shows, what is common across al-Qaeda suicide attacks since 9/11 is neither their geographic location nor the nationality of the attacker, but rather the identity of the victims killed; al-Qaeda has killed citizens from 18 of the 20 countries that Osama bin Laden has cited as supporting the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—but during that same period, al-Qaeda has not conducted a successful terrorist attack either on U.S. soil, nor has it—with the notable exception of the July 2003 bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta—conducted an attack against a predominantly American target.

There is good evidence that the shift in al-Qaeda’s targeting scheme since 9/11 was the

Table 1
Al-Qaeda vs. United States and Allies, 2002–03

	Date	Weapon	Target	Killed	Identity of Victims
1.	April 11, 2002	Car Bomb	Synagogue, Djerba, Tunisia	21	14 Germans, and 1 French national
2.	May 8, 2002	Car Bomb	Sheraton Hotel, Karachi	14	11 French nationals
3.	June 16, 2002	Car Bomb	US Consulate, Karachi	12	Local residents working w/U.S.
4.	Oct 6, 2002	Boat Bomb	French Oil Tanker, Yemen	1	1 French national
5.	Oct 12, 2002	Car Bomb	Nightclub, Bali, Indonesia	202	88 Australians, 25 British
6.	Nov 28, 2002	Car Bomb	Hotel, Mombasa, Kenya	13	3 Israelis
7.	May 12, 2003	3 Car Bombs	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	34	8 Americans, plus a number of other Westerners
8.	May 16, 2003	Car Bombs	Casablanca, Morocco	31	French, Spanish, and Italians
9.	June 7, 2003	Car Bomb	German Military Bus, Kabul	4	4 Germans
10.	Aug 5, 2003	Car Bomb	Jakarta, Indonesia	15	Western tourists
11.	Nov 8, 2003	Car Bomb	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	17	Arabs working with the U.S.
12.	Nov 15, 2003	2 Car Bombs	2 synagogues, Istanbul, Turkey	31	9 Turkish nationals
13.	Nov 20, 2003	2 Truck Bombs	British Embassy, Istanbul Turkey	25	British nationals and Turks working with the UK
14.	Dec 25, 2003	2 Truck Bombs	Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf	14	Government Allied to U.S.
15.	Dec 28, 2003	Car Bomb	Airport, Kabul	5	European Troops

Note: Victims came from 18 of 20 countries OBL cites as supporting US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

product of deliberate choice. In December 2003, the Norwegian intelligence service found an al-Qaeda planning document on a radical Islamic web page that described a coherent strategy for compelling the United States and its allies to leave Iraq. The 42-page document, dated September 2003, assumed that new spectacular attacks directed against the United States would be insufficient to compel America to change its policies. Instead, the document advised that attacks be directed at America's European allies, who could be coerced to withdraw their forces, thus increasing the economic and other burdens that the United States would have to bear in order to continue the occupations of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Arabian peninsula.

The document went on to evaluate the prospects of using spectacular terrorist attacks to coerce Spain, Great Britain, and Poland to withdraw from Iraq and concluded that Spain—due to the high level of domestic opposition to the Iraq war—was the most vulnera-

ble. The document recommended strikes against Spain just before the March 2004 national elections. Below are important passages from the analysis of the likely outcome of terrorist attacks in Spain:

In order to force the Spanish government to withdraw from Iraq the resistance should deal painful blows to its forces. This should be accompanied by an information campaign clarifying the truth of the matter inside Iraq. It is necessary to make utmost use of the upcoming general election in Spain in March next year.

We think that the Spanish government could not tolerate more than two, maximum three blows, after which it will have to withdraw as a result of popular pressure. If its troops still remain in Iraq after these blows, then the victory of the Socialist Party is almost secured, and the withdrawal of

What is common across al-Qaeda suicide attacks since 9/11 is the identity of the victims; al-Qaeda has killed citizens from 18 of the 20 countries that Osama bin Laden has cited as supporting the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

the Spanish forces will be on its electoral program.

Lastly, we are emphasise (sic) that a withdrawal of the Spanish or Italian forces from Iraq would put huge pressure on the British presence (in Iraq), a pressure that Toni (sic) Blair might not be able to withstand, and hence the domino tiles would fall quickly. Yet, the basic problem of making the first tile fall still remains.³³

Although they did not employ suicide tactics, terrorists did strike trains in Madrid in March 2004, carrying out a coordinated series of bombings in which 190 people were killed and more than 2,000 injured. Soon thereafter, Spain did withdraw its forces from Iraq, just as the document predicted.

Shortly after Spain's decision to withdraw from Iraq, bin Laden issued a statement in which he offered to cease attacks on European countries that withdrew their forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. On April 15, 2004, bin Laden said: "I hereby offer [the Europeans] a peace treaty, the essence of which is our commitment to halt actions against any country that commits itself to refraining from attacking Muslims or intervening in their affairs The peace treaty will be in force upon the exit of the last soldier of any given [European] country from our land."

Bin Laden then taunted his Western audience:

As for those who lie to people and say that we hate freedom and kill for the sake of killing—reality proves that we are the speakers of truth and they lie, because the killing of the Russians took place only after their invasion of Afghanistan and Chechnya; the killing of the Europeans took place only after the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; the killing of the Americans in the Battle of New York took place only after their support for the Jews in Palestine and their invasion of the Arabian Peninsula.

He concluded with a chilling but simple offer: "Stop shedding our blood in order to protect your own blood."³⁴ Officially, European states rejected bin Laden's offer. However, the number of European states leaving Iraq has been growing ever since.

The July 7, 2005, London attacks were part of al-Qaeda's new strategy. Indeed, al-Qaeda issued a statement specifically linking the London attacks to British operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and warned Italy and Denmark to pull their forces out or face the same threat of terror.

The bottom line, then, is that al-Qaeda has not been fundamentally weakened in terms of its ability to coerce democratic governments to change their policies. Since 2001 al-Qaeda has concentrated on those U.S. allies most vulnerable to coercion and has achieved a significant degree of success in dividing the West and peeling away key support. Hence, far from being discouraged, the past few years are likely to have encouraged Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders in the belief that they will ultimately succeed in their ultimate aim: causing the United States and its allies to withdraw military forces from the Persian Gulf region.

Indeed, Americans should take little comfort in the knowledge that al-Qaeda has decided to focus over the past few years on hitting U.S. military allies. As of 2006, this component of al-Qaeda's strategy has nearly run its course and was always viewed as a step toward adding more pressure on the United States by increasing the military and economic burden of keeping U.S. troops in Iraq and the rest of the Arabian peninsula. Furthermore, a statement released by Osama bin Laden on January 19, 2006, suggests that al-Qaeda may now be shifting from a focus on American allies back to its main target, the United States, and to American targets around the world. Using language similar to the 2003 document found by Norwegian intelligence, bin Laden says that although al-Qaeda has recently focused on "the capitals of the most important European countries of the aggressive coalition" in Iraq, "operations are in preparation" to carry out

“similar operations in America.”³⁵ Given that Spain withdrew its forces from Iraq in 2004 and Britain and Italy both called for substantial withdrawals in 2006, it is hardly surprising that al-Qaeda believes that the time is right to focus again on American targets.

Suicide Terrorism and Democracy in Iraq

The strategic logic of suicide terrorism helps to explain why this form of violence has continued unabated in Iraq. The brief lull in violence after the nationwide elections in January 2005 seemed to suggest that the march of democracy was trampling the threat of terrorism. But as electoral politics has taken root, the Iraqi insurgency and suicide terrorism have actually gained momentum. The elections in December 2005 were followed by an increase in violence, and that violence did not abate even after a national unity government was formed in June 2006. Likewise, Iraqis have not witnessed a notable decrease in the number of suicide attacks following the killing of al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, one of the chief instigators of sectarian violence through suicide attacks.

The rise of suicide terrorism in Iraq is a prime example of the strategic logic driving this phenomenon. Prior to the American and allied invasion in March 2003, Iraq had never had a suicide terrorist attack in its history. Since then, suicide terrorism has been doubling every year. Altogether in Iraq, there were 20 suicide attacks in 2003, nearly 50 in 2004, and 125 in 2005.³⁶

Much is made of the fact that we aren't sure who the Iraqi suicide attackers are. That is not unusual in the early years of a suicide terrorist campaign. Hezbollah published most of the biographies and last testaments of its “martyrs” only after it abandoned the suicide-attack strategy in 1986, a pattern adopted by the Tamil Tigers as well.³⁷

At the moment, our best information indicates that the suicide attackers in Iraq are Sunni Iraqis and foreign fighters, principally

from Saudi Arabia. The next largest group appears to be from Syria, and then Kuwait.³⁸ If so, this would mean that the main sources of suicide terrorists in Iraq are from Iraq itself or from neighboring Arab countries most likely to sympathize with the plight of a kindred ethnic group, in this case Sunni Arabs. This is fully consistent with what we've learned since 9/11 about the strategic logic of suicide terrorism.

Although the normal human impulse is to sympathize with the plight of those suffering attacks, some may wonder if the rise of suicide terrorism in Iraq is necessarily detrimental to American security. Is it not better to have these killers far away in Iraq rather than here in the United States? The answer is no— not so long as a large U.S. military force engaged in direct contact with these forces is contributing to a sense of occupation within the wider population (and potentially sympathetic transnational communities as well). Leading U.S. intelligence officials consider the presence of over 140,000 American combat troops in Iraq to be “the single most effective recruiting tool for Islamic militants.”³⁹ This is consistent with what we have seen in the past two decades. The presence of tens of thousands of American combat forces on the Arabian Peninsula after 1990 was the primary motivating factor that al-Qaeda used to recruit suicide terrorists. Those individuals, in turn, attacked American embassies in Africa in 1998, the destroyer USS Cole in 2000, and the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11.

The longer this suicide terrorist campaign continues, the greater the risk of new attacks in the United States. A chilling harbinger is the November 2005 suicide attacks on American hotels in Jordan by four Iraqi suicide bombers—the first known case in which Iraqis have conducted suicide attacks outside of Iraq.⁴⁰

A New Strategy for Victory

The fact that suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than a product of Islamic fundamentalism has

Since 2001 al-Qaeda has concentrated on those U.S. allies most vulnerable to coercion and has achieved a significant degree of success in dividing the West.

America needs a strategy that safeguards our vital interests in the region but does not stimulate the rise of a new generation of suicide terrorists.

important implications for how the United States and its allies should conduct the war on terrorism. Spreading democracy in the Middle East is not likely to be a panacea as long as foreign combat troops remain in the region. If not for the world's interest in Persian Gulf oil, the obvious solution might well be to simply to abandon the region altogether. Complete disengagement from the Middle East, however, is not possible; America needs a new strategy that safeguards our vital interests in the region, but does not stimulate the rise of a new generation of suicide terrorists.

Beyond recognizing the limits of military action and stepping up domestic security efforts, Americans and their major-power allies would do well to recall the virtues of our traditional policy of "offshore balancing" in the Persian Gulf. During the 1970s and 1980s, the West managed its interests there without stationing any combat soldiers on the ground, but by keeping our forces close enough—either on ships or in bases near the region—to deploy in huge numbers in the event of an emergency that posed a direct threat to U.S. vital interests. That worked splendidly to defeat Iraq's aggression against Kuwait in 1990.

Over the next year, the United States and its allies in Iraq should completely turn over the responsibility for Iraq's security to Iraq's new government and should start systematically withdrawing troops. The overall goal should be to complete the transition toward "offshore balancing" by the end of the Bush presidency. But large numbers of these soldiers should not simply be sent to Iraq's neighbors, where they will continue to enrage many in the Arab world. Instead, U.S. policy should focus on keeping the peace from a discrete distance, minimizing the U.S. military footprint, and encouraging the other countries in the region to play a constructive role in stabilizing Iraq and in isolating and defeating Islamic extremists.

Notes

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9. For the definition of a suicide attack, see Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 10; and Merari.

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32. Political support for leaders, such as U.S. support of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf, can also serve as a catalyst for attacks, but it does not trigger the same degree of hostility.
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