



## **Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers' Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance**

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*A motivational analysis of suicidal terrorism is outlined, anchored in the notion of significance quest. It is suggested that heterogeneous factors identified as personal causes of suicidal terrorism (e.g. trauma, humiliation, social exclusion), the various ideological reasons assumed to justify it (e.g. liberation from foreign occupation, defense of one's nation or religion), and the social pressures brought upon candidates for suicidal terrorism may be profitably subsumed within an integrative framework that explains diverse instances of suicidal terrorism as attempts at significance restoration, significance gain, and prevention of significance loss. Research and policy implications of the present analysis are considered.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Suicide terrorism, Significance, Terrorist motivation, Ideology, Trauma

“Mankind’s common instinct for reality has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism. In heroism, we feel, life’s supreme mystery is hidden. We tolerate no one who has no capacity whatever for

it in any direction. On the other hand, no matter what a man's frailties otherwise may be, if he be willing to risk death, and still more if he suffer it heroically, in the service he has chosen, the fact consecrates him forever." (William James, 1902/1969, p. 330)

## Introduction

The motivations underlying suicide terrorism are of major interest to terrorism researchers, possibly for two underlying reasons. One reason is *epistemic*, and it stems from curiosity about a bizarre phenomenon: The readiness of seemingly unexceptional human beings *not only* to massively murder innocents, *but also* to sacrifice their lives in the process, contrary to the basic human instinct of physical survival. The second reason is *pragmatic*. Understanding terrorists' motivation may be a precondition for altering it, hence it offers a potentially important tool for counterterrorism.

Major recent analyses (e.g., Bloom, 2005, Pedahzur, 2004, Sageman, 2004, or Stern, 2003) devoted considerable attention to terrorists' motivations. They differed, however, in the kind and variety of motives identified as relevant to suicide terrorism. Some authors emphasized a *singular* motivation (Pape, 2005; Sageman, 2004); others listed a potpourri of motives (Bloom, 2005; Stern, 2003).

For instance, Sageman's (2004) work on terrorist networks emphasized the *quest for emotional and social support* by Muslims of European Diasporas who feel rejected by, and alienated from, the local societies. Pape (2005) highlighted *resistance to foreign occupation* as a main motivating force. Spekhard and Akhmedova (2005) assigned this role to *personal loss and trauma*. And Nasra Hassan (2001) concluded that Hamas terrorists' main motivation concerned entering "Paradise . . . being in the presence of Allah . . . meeting the prophet Muhammad" and reaping the rewards of participating in a Holy war.

In contrast to an emphasis on a single crucial motivation (quest for social support, coping with trauma, martyrdom), Bloom (2005) listed diverse motivations for suicide terrorism, including honor (pp. 87, 145), dedication to the leader (p. 64), social status (p. 65), personal significance (p. 88), pain and personal loss (pp. 35, 86–87, 145), group pressure (p. 85), humiliation and injustice (pp. 35, 86), vengeance (pp. 63–64, 86–87), or feminism (pp. 143, 145–147; i.e., convincing society of women's contribution). Similarly, Stern (2003) mentioned as possible motives humiliation (pp. 32, 62, 281, 285), exposure to violence (p. 53), occupation (pp. 57, 59, 136), lack of alternative prospects (p. 69), modernization (p. 69), displacement (pp. 132, 284), restoration of the glory of Islam (p. 135), poverty (p. 284), moral obligation (pp. 148, 281), need to belong (p. 9), desire to enter heaven (p. 125), simplification of life (p. 69), inspirational leadership (p. 171), friendship (p. 47), status (pp. 51, 22, 54, 282), glamour (p. 51), and money and support for one's family (pp. 51, 62). In a similar vein, Ricolfi (2005) suggested that "the motivational drive to engage in suicide missions is likely to be found in

a *cocktail of feelings*, which include desire for revenge, resentment, and a sense of obligation towards the victims, as revealed in the . . . video recorded pronouncements” (p. 106, emphasis added).

A reasonable step in dealing with such heterogeneity might be to reduce it by classifying the varied motives identified so far into fewer, more general, motivational categories. Several authors have hinted at such a classification typically based on a partition between *ideological reasons* and *personal causes* for becoming a suicide terrorist (Pedahzur, 2005; Taarnby, 2005).

In these terms, alienated individuals’ quest for social and emotional support (Sageman, 2004) may be assumed to stem from their *personal* experience. So do the pain, trauma, and redemption of lost honor, often listed as motives. In contrast, liberation of one’s land, or carrying out God’s will, pertain to *ideological* factors (Atran, 2004, 2006) that transcend individual actors’ life circumstances. By ideology, one usually means a belief system centered upon some social or collective *ideal* (e.g., based on the values of justice, fairness, or inalienable rights). Ideology’s motivating power resides in its identifying a *discrepancy* from an ideal state and offering a means of removing the discrepancy through action. A *terrorism-justifying ideology* identifies a *culprit* (the enemy, e.g., the West, Israel) presumed responsible for the *discrepancy* and portrays violence against that culprit (e.g., jihad) as an effective *means* for moving toward the ideal state.<sup>1,2</sup>

Beside ideological reasons and personal causes, a third motivational category likely involved in suicidal attacks involves a sense of social *duty and obligation* whether internalized or induced by peer pressure. This is apparent in data on the Japanese Kamikaze pilots (e.g., Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006) but it is also relevant to present-day suicidal terrorism (Bloom, 2005; Gambetta, 2005; Merari, 2002; Stern, 2003).

Classification of terrorist motives into *ideological*, *personal*, and *social* is helpful, yet insufficient. It is descriptive rather than analytic, and it stops short of explicating the underlying dynamics of suicidal terrorism. Several questions remain. For instance, is either of these motive categories unique to terrorism, or

<sup>1</sup> In a recent paper on the Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq, Hafez (2006) identified three themes that constitute the gist of the ideological belief system to which volunteers to suicidal missions were expected to subscribe and that were presented in insurgent videos, audio recordings, and biographies of prior suicide bombers, content analyzed by the author. The ideological narratives contained in these communications are “often presented in a sequence as . . . a play in three acts. Act one depicts the unmerciful humiliation [of the] Muslims in Iraq. The second act shows the impotence of existing Muslim regimes and their collusion with the West. The final act insists on the inevitability of Muslim victory because pious and heroic cadres have stepped forward to redeem the suffering and humiliation of their fellow Muslims through faith in God, sacrifice on the battlefield, and righteousness in their cause” (p. 96).

<sup>2</sup> Whereas the notion of ideology as traditionally conceived has been taken to imply a relatively intricate belief system that requires an extensive background knowledge to enable the extraction of its action implications, recent sociological analyses (following up on Goffman, 1974) have suggested that ideological gist can be effectively contained in relative simple frames or schemata (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 2004; Gamson, 1992; Johnston & Noakes, 2005).

could they foster alternative activities in alternative circumstances? The answer seems obvious. Alienation, pain, and trauma could foster numerous nonviolent activities. The same holds for ideological objectives and social pressures. As concerns ideological objectives, Mahatma Gandhi's ideological commitments identified nonviolence as the supreme means for the pursuit of freedom from foreign rule (Bondurant, 1988); Gandhi's ideological commitment to nonviolence was adopted by Martin Luther King in reference to the civil rights movement in the United States. Similarly, social pressures and a sense of duty and obligation represent psychological mechanisms of influence capable of inducing any kind of commitment, not necessarily commitment to violence. Thus, the question is *what precise role* do these motives play in terrorism and under what circumstances might they instigate it.

It is also of interest to ask whether all three motivational categories constitute *authentic* terrorism-driving forces and if not which is, and which isn't. Different authors varied in their position on this issue. Some (Sageman, 2004; Spekhard & Akhmedova, 2005) regarded personal circumstance factors as the *true* explanations of terrorists' behavior and viewed their ideological statements as *post hoc justifications*. As Spekhard and Akhmedova (2005) put it "*the political statements of the individuals involved in terrorism appear less of a driving force for their participation than as a means of justifying their actions . . .*" (p. 25). Similarly, Sageman (2004) agreed with Dambruoso that "[the jihadists' motivation] is not religious, it is psychological and personal" (p. 108).

Other authors put greater faith in terrorists' idealism. Pape (2005) in particular noted that "egoistic and anomic motives are insufficient. Altruistic motives, either alone or in conjunction with others, play an important role" (p. 184). Too, Gunaratna (2006) argued that "what actually motivates Al Qaeda is not power, wealth or fame but an ideological belief in their struggles" (p. 29).

Atran (2004) observed that terrorists "are motivated not by personal comfort or immediate gain but rather by religious or ideological conviction and zeal" and that "debriefings with captured Al Qaeda operatives at Guantanamo, and with Jemmah Islamiyah prisoners in Singapore suggest that recruitment to these organizations is more ideologically driven than grievance-driven" (pp. 68–69). Yet other authors (e.g., Pedahzur, 2005) proposed a differentiation whereby some individuals carry out terrorist acts for ideological reasons (such as commitment to a cause or an ideology), whereas others do so because of personal crises. In short, recent analyses of terrorists' motivations enumerate a broad variety of possible motives and include a heterogeneity of positions and perspectives on this issue. These differences among scholars require sorting out.

The present paper attempts to "connect the dots" furnished by several recent analyses of motivational factors in suicidal terrorism. By synthesizing a widely dispersed literature, it seeks to uncover a deep motivational structure that may afford a common understanding of numerous disparate instances of this phenomenon and suggest how the various motive-categories identified thus far may

functionally relate to each other. As a preview of what is to come, we first introduce the concept of “significance quest” as an overarching motive propelling suicidal terrorism. We then explore the implications of this motivational notion and review empirical evidence relevant to those implications. We finally explore the ramifications of our analysis for counterterrorism and discuss strategies for minimizing suicidal terrorism at levels of military strategy, foreign policy, immigration programs, and educational initiatives.

### **The Quest for Significance as the Underlying Motivation for Suicidal Terrorism**

The quest for personal significance has been hailed by psychological theorists as a major motivational force in human behavior. In this vein, Victor Frankl (2000) wrote “that a fundamental characteristic of the human reality [which he came to term] . . . its *self transcendent* quality [denotes the fact that] being human always relates and points to something other than itself . . . [a person] is oriented toward the world out there . . . [she or he] is actualizing himself to the extent that he is forgetting himself by giving himself . . . through serving a cause higher than himself . . . [According to Frankl then,] self-transcendence is the essence of human existence” (p. 138).

Abraham Maslow’s (1943) influential theory of motivation identifies self-esteem and self actualization concerns as top-level human strivings of obvious affinity to Frankl’s “search for meaning” notion. In Maslow’s (1965) terms, “the business of self actualization” (p. 78) can best be carried out via commitment to an important job, that is, to a transcendental cause of recognized societal significance (Frankl, 2000, p. 84).

Recent analyses of human motivation (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004) have implied that in the human species the biological need for physical survival is intimately linked to the quest for personal meaning and significance. The reason is assumed to stem from humans’ awareness of their own mortality and the implied threat of personal insignificance; the nightmare of ending up as “a speck of insignificant dust in an uncaring universe.” It is this awareness that motivates people to “do well” in culturally prescribed ways and to be “good” members of society. A supreme “goodness” in this sense is the readiness to sacrifice oneself for the group in an hour of need (typically, in case of a severe perceived threat to the group’s survival).

As Crenshaw (2007) recently summarized it: “the [suicidal] act is not just about dying and killing. The expectation of gaining status and respect as a martyr for the cause is important, so that individual action is linked to anticipation of both popular approval and collective political success. . . . Sacrifice for the cause is both personally redemptive and a mark of honor, a way of becoming a hero and part of an exalted elite. *It* [contrasts sharply with] *an otherwise insignificant or disappointing life*” (p. 153).

Putting the group first is highly valued and rewarded by nothing less than the promise of immortality. The group remembers its heroes and martyrs; symbolically, their lives go on in the group's collective memory. Furthermore, through the act of sacrifice, one's personal identity is meshed with that of the group (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003) so that the group's continued existence becomes inseparable from one's own. As Elster (2005) noted, "a common denominator [of motivations for suicidal terrorism] is a desire to transcend death by living on in the grateful or admiring memory of others. . . ." (p. 241). From yet a different perspective, personal sacrifice may serve the individual's gene pool and/or value system shared by one's kin. Hence, suicidal terrorism may be powered by evolutionary forces (Abed, 1997; Buss, 1996; Trivers, 1985).

Finally, in the jihadist ideology at least, *Shahadat* (martyrdom) does not signify an end of individual existence, but rather immortality in highly pleasurable circumstances. For male shaheeds, it entails the promise of paradise and the allure of wedding numerous (72) virgins of incomparable beauty (Hafez, 2006). Paradise is also promised to female shaheeds. It is believed to entail removal of the severe restrictions on their sexual relations, the possibility of having liaisons with past Muslim heroes, becoming one of the 72 virgins, bestowal of great beauty irrespective of one's worldly physical appearance, the opportunity to meet Allah and the prophet Muhammad, and liberation from the grave's pains for 70 members of one's family (Berko & Erez, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

In a sense then, whether reflecting symbolic immortality and a place in the group's collective memory or concrete immortality as denizens of paradise, paradoxically, *the willingness to die in an act of suicidal terrorism may be motivated by the desire to live forever.*

### **Is the Significance Quest Unique to Suicidal Terrorism?**

Is the significance quest assumed to underlie suicidal terrorism unique to this particular phenomenon? Obviously not. As noted by motivational theorists such as Frankl (2000), Becker (1962), or Maslow (1943, 1967), the quest for significant existence constitutes a fundamental human striving, accounting for a broad preponderance of human activities. We behave in accordance with the dictates of our culture and its norms. The adolescent culture tells the teenager what counts as "cool" and what activities are "trendy" and likely to gain the peers' approval. The norms of aesthetics and morality suggest to members of a community what is valued and respected in their culture, hence what constitutes a "good life" and confers significance on one's existence. At moments of crisis, however, an opportunity may present itself for an enormous significance gain, unimaginable in

<sup>3</sup> Berko and Erez (2006) based their analysis on in depth interviews with 13 Palestinian female prisoners between the ages of 16 and 26 sentenced for terrorist activities (including attempts at suicide bombings) and held in Israeli security prisons.

ordinary circumstances; such opportunity may often be coupled with the potential for considerable significance loss in case one had failed to respond to the challenge. On this analysis, the underlying motivation for suicide terrorism involves the coupling of a quest for significance with a collective crisis situation, involving a perceived threat to one's group, and a terrorism-justifying ideology whereby a suicide attack is portrayed as an act of heroic sacrifice (martyrdom) lending one's existence and demise an aura of supreme glory. As Gambetta (2005) put it, "All suicide missions belong to a family of actions in which people go to the extremes of self-sacrifice in the belief that by doing so they will best further the interests of a group or the cause they care about and identify with" (p. 270).

The foregoing analysis begs the question as to motivational commonalities and differences between suicidal and nonsuicidal brands of terrorism. To start with a commonality, endorsement of a terrorism-justifying ideology may well underlie the activities of nonsuicidal participants in the terrorist enterprise, operators of improvised explosive devices (the IEDs), and other personnel carrying out the logistic, financial, supply, or transportation tasks of a terrorist organization. A major difference between suicidal and nonsuicidal terrorists seems to reside in the specific role one assigns oneself within the common ideological context. Thus, whereas many may agree that the goal of the terrorist organization is worthy, and that terrorism constitutes an effective and morally warranted means to that goal (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006), only some may adopt the act of suicidal terrorism as their personal assignment. Because of the extremity of the act, and its exclusivity (that is, incompatibility with alternative, socially sanctioned objectives), it will likely require a conjunction of psychological forces of supreme magnitude (particularly intense significance quest, particularly powerful social pressures, and a particularly engulfing presence of a suicide-prompting rhetoric). In this sense, then, the motivations involved in suicidal and nonsuicidal types of terrorism may differ in *degree* rather than in *kind*. Simply put, suicidal terrorism confers upon one greater prestige and represents a more auspicious opportunity for significance gain. For instance, in the case of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), even though all members of the organization are required to commit suicide when captured, the "Black Tigers, the LTTE suicide unit . . . are considered elite" (Stack-O'Connor, 2007, p. 52). As Ricolfi (2005) put it in reference to Palestinian suicide bombers: "A martyr is not an anonymous militant who carries out a mission, and whose name may remain unknown. A martyr is a volunteer who has been selected, who leaves a last will and testament . . . and who will be remembered by his fellow countrymen through photographs, posters, murals, and plaques exhibited in public places. . . . While a militant may die anonymously, and thus sacrifice himself twice, a martyr pays 'only' with his life but obtains fame and recognition in return. The symbolic calculation may explain why certain people may prefer to choose martyrdom directly over militancy of a more traditional kind" (pp. 113–114). In summary, suicidal terrorism represents an extreme case of significance quest, an

opportunity to catapult oneself to the pinnacle of cultural veneration by an act of supreme sacrifice for an ideologically touted cause.

### Implications

Our analysis has several testable implications. If reminders of one's own mortality convey one's potential insignificance then such reminders should *augment* the quest for significance as defined by one's cultural norms and accepted ideological frames. In some cases, such norms and ideologies may identify the suicide mission against one's enemies as a most honorable act, lending one a sense of immense veneration and significance.

If our theory is valid, adoption of cultural causes that lend one a sense of personal significance should reduce death anxiety. Furthermore, perceived loss of significance through events other than mortality reminders should fuel efforts at significance *restoration*. Finally, a threat of *potential* loss of significance should instigate *preventive actions* designed to fend it off. Taken as a body, these implications identify a deeper motivational theme, *of significance quest*, that ties together the categories of personal circumstances, ideological reasons, and social pressures involved in suicidal terrorism. This theme is consistent with empirical data of various kinds. We review them below.

### Terror Management Research

Recent psychological research supports the idea that reminders of one's own mortality motivate individuals to embrace their group's culture and ideals. By now this prediction has been corroborated in hundreds of psychological experiments carried out in numerous world locations. In one well-known study, it was found that when research participants were reminded of their mortality, they recommended a more severe sentence for a prostitute, representing a deviation from cultural norms (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Yet other work found that exposing Italians to death reminders increased their bias in favor of Italy (their ingroup) and the perception that Italy was cohesive and united. Castano and Dechesne (2005) recently concluded from this research that: "Becoming part of collective entities [allows] individuals to extend their selves in space and time [and hence] to overcome the inherent limitations of their individual identity inextricably linked to a perishable body" (p. 233).

Recent research by Pyszczynski and colleagues (Pyszczynski et al., 2006) looked at the effect of mortality salience on Iranian students and their respective support for martyrdom. When Iranian students answered questions about an aversive topic (unrelated to death), they evaluated a fellow student who opposed martyrdom attacks against the United States more favorably than a student who supported martyrdom attacks. However, the reverse was found when Iranian



**Table 1.** Frequency of Traumatic Events in the Lives of Suicide Bombers

Traumatic Event	Frequency	%
More than one family member killed	16	47
Father or mother killed	5	15
Brother killed	8	23
Husband killed	1	3
Family member disappeared after arrest	3	9
Family member tortured	1	3
Total	34	100

students answered questions about their own death. In this instance, they rated more highly the student who supported martyrdom than the one who opposed it.

### Real-Life Death Reminders

Mortality reminders can come in the form of personal trauma occasioned by the loss of a loved one. Spekhard and Akhmedova (2005) carried out an extensive study of Chechen suicide terrorists via interviews with their family members and close associates and with hostages who spoke with the terrorists during the three-day siege in Moscow's Dubrovka theater. The relevant data are displayed in Table 1.

As can be seen, all of the interviewees mentioned traumatic events that appeared to alter the course of the fallen terrorists' lives. Indeed, the authors concluded: "when we looked for the primary motivation in our sample of terrorists we would have to say that it was *trauma* in every case" (Spekhard & Akhmedova, 2005, pp. 25–26). Of particular interest, Spekhard and Akhmedova (2005) observed that their subjects sought out ideological inspiration in response to their personal trauma. Specifically, "In the interviews concerning the accomplished suicide terrorists eighty-two percent (28/34) were secular Muslims prior to their experiences of trauma. Of these, twenty-seven had no prior relationship to fundamentalist militant groups but sought out the Wahhabists radical groups in direct reaction to the traumas they had endured knowing full well of the groups' beliefs and terroristic practices" (p. 22). It appears then that personal trauma, feelings of alienation, and disenfranchisement, etc., may spur a quest for meaning that in cases of a severe intergroup conflict may be afforded by a terrorism-justifying ideology.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Spekhard and Akhmedova's (2005) findings do not imply that *all* cases of suicidal terrorism are motivated by personal trauma. Their sample, after all, is opportunistic and highly specific. Their data do suggest, however, that *some* cases of suicidal terrorism may reflect a motivating force of personal trauma and encounter with death. According to the present analysis such encounters may well prompt the experience of significance loss and the quest for significance restoration.

### Commitment to Cultural Causes Attenuates Death Anxiety

Terror management research demonstrates a link between overcoming death anxiety and commitment to cultural causes. In turn, commitment to cultural causes may attenuate death anxiety. In other words, if death reminders cause anxiety because of the insignificance threat (the “speck of dust” prospect) they convey, and if embracement of cultural causes restores one’s sense of significance, then embracement of cultural causes should attenuate death anxiety. In support of this possibility, Durlak (1972) found a significant negative correlation ( $r = -.68$ ;  $p < .001$ ) between purpose in life defined in terms of commitment to cultural objectives and measured by the Crumbaugh (1973) PIL (Purpose in Life) test and fear of death. Illustrating the reverse effect, Mikulincer, Florian, Birnbaum, and Malishkevich (2002) showed that depriving people of a sense of belonging increases death-related cognitions. Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Simon (1997) first reminded half of their participants about death and assessed their reactions to pro- and anti-U.S. essays. Unsurprisingly, accessibility of death thoughts increased after the reminder of death. Importantly, accessibility of death thoughts declined after participants were given the opportunity to derogate the critic, in this sense defending the cultural norm.

The link between a sense of “oneness” with the group and the attenuation of death anxiety (possibly instilling the readiness to sacrifice oneself for the collective) appears to have been intuitively understood by leaders whose causes required from their followers acts of supreme self denial. In this vein, Mao Tse Tung asserted “All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. . . . To die for the people is heavier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather” (quoted in Lifton, 1968, p. 27).

Overcoming death anxiety through commitment to ideological objectives plays a significant part in the indoctrination of contemporary suicide terrorists. One failed suicide terrorist interviewed by Nasra Hassan (2001) was asked “How did you feel when you heard that you’d been selected for martyrdom?” He answered: “*It’s as if a very high, impenetrable wall separated you from Paradise or Hell,*” he said. “*By pressing the detonator, you can immediately open the door to Paradise—it is the shortest path to Heaven.*” Another failed suicide terrorist recounted: “*I spent a month in a mosque. I learned how important it is to be a shaheed. It is the loftiest objective. It’s the biggest and most holy thing you can do. And then you receive all the rewards in Paradise . . .*”

### The Ubiquity of Ideological Justifications for Suicidal Terrorism

Explicit statements by failed suicide terrorists, or farewell videos left by “successful” ones, contain ample evidence for ideological arguments. We examined over 300 clips from the MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute) TV database (from late 2004 to the present). MEMRI’s TV monitoring center

oversees every major Arab channel focusing on political, cultural, religious, and social developments and debates in the Arab and Muslim world and in Iran. Its database contains a large number of video clips from farewell tapes of suicide terrorists, interviews with captured terrorists, and failed suicide terrorists who were captured and imprisoned and those who escaped from prison. It additionally includes interviews with the mothers (and father in one case) of successful suicide terrorists.

We had four coders independently go through 300 clips (from late 2004 to the present) in two pertinent categories, namely "Jihad and Terrorism" and "Suicide (Martyrdom) Operation." From among all the clips in these two categories we identified seven farewell videos from suicide terrorists and five interviews with mothers of successful suicide bombers. We analyzed these videos in terms of the motives they implied for carrying out suicide missions and engaging in terrorist attacks. The researchers used a set of keywords to identify and group the motives into the two general categories: ideological/collectivistic and personal. For the category of ideological/collectivistic motives we used the key words: martyr, Jihad, Allah, heaven, role model, pride, honor, love of country, defense/fight for (one's people/country/community/homeland), wedding (to the black-eyed virgin of the paradise), support of one's brethren (e.g., Iraqi brethren), fighting infidels (e.g., Americans), occupation (of) homeland, sacred, etc. We operationally defined the category of personal motives in terms of all statements regarding individual affairs (e.g., the loss of a family member, destitution). As can be seen in Table 2, that includes the seven farewell videos from MEMRI; the suicide terrorists' statements reveal exclusively ideological motivations.

We broadened our search by analyzing several recent tapes featured on the Web site of the Palestine Media Watch (PMW). The PMW is an organization established in 1996 to gain an understanding of Palestinian society through monitoring of the Palestinian Arabic language media and schoolbooks. PMW describes and comments on the Palestinian culture and society from numerous perspectives, including studies carried out on youth summer camps, analyses of poetry, schoolbooks, religious ideology, crossword puzzles, etc. In September 2006 this Web site featured six farewell tapes of recent suicide terrorists. Of these, five mentioned religion as the reason for their fateful decision, represented in terms such as "Allah," "Qu'ran," "Prophet," "purify," "jihad," or "martyrdom." Four tapes mentioned the rewards for martyrdom related to reaching "Paradise" and wedding the "Maidens of Paradise." Two mentioned nationalism, including language about "liberating occupied Palestinian land," and one mentioned collectivistic revenge for ills inflicted on the Palestinians by the Israelis (see Table 3).

The PMW Web site also featured nine recent interviews with mothers of successful suicide attackers. All nine mentioned religion, expressed in language about "Allah," "Shahada," etc. One mentioned nationalism (fighting for the "homeland"). Three mentioned "pride and honor" accorded the terrorists and their families by the community, and three out of the nine mentioned Paradise and its

**Table 2.** Motivations for Suicide Terrorism (Farewell Tapes on MEMRI)

Terrorist	Organization	Motivation	Keywords
Shehzad Tanwee	Al-Qaeda	religion, nationalism, revenge	oppress (our people), massacre (of our people), crusade, love Jihad and martyrdom for the sake of Allah, avenge (the blood of our children)
Abu Muhammad Al-San'ani	Al-Qaeda	religion, nationalism, revenge	vengeance (upon the American pigs and their apostate collaborator dogs), assault on the home of . . . , Paradise, heaven, Allah accepts me, sacrifice, martyr
Abu Mu'awiya Al-Shimali	Al-Qaeda	religion, nationalism	Paradise, religion, honor, martyr, we have been attacked, for the sake of Allah, peace, sacrifice, redeem honor
Abu Dahham Mohammed Sadiq	Al-Qaeda	religion religion, nationalism	Allah, Lord of the world in Allah's cause, religion, obedience, one true God, Allah, ethical stances, my people, protect and avenge my Muslim brothers and sisters, martyrs, heroes, Paradise
Hanadi Jaradat	PIJ	religion, nationalism	Allah, martyr, Zionist colonialist, my country
unknown	Al-Qaeda	nationalistic revenge	people of the west, it's time for us to be equals—as you kill us, you will be killed, honorable sons and daughters of Islam, our land

**Table 3.** Motivations for Suicide Terrorism (Farewell Tapes on PMW)

Terrorist	Organization	Motivation	Keyword
Adham Ahmad Hujyla Abu Jandal	Hamas	religion, nationalism	no God but Allah, leave the Muslim countries
Mu'min Rajab Rajab Abu Hafs	Hamas	religion, 72 virgins, nationalistic revenge	in the name of Allah, take revenge, wedding with the maidens of Paradise, Quran, Jihad, impurity, Judgment day
Bassem Al-Takrouri	Hamas	religion, 72 virgins	heaven, fulfill duty, maidens of Paradise, martyr
Mujahid Al-Jabari	Hamas	religion	Jihad and martyrdom-seeking, Quran, the life (afterlife)
Reem Riyashi	Hamas	religion	heaven, enemies of my religion, with Allah's grace
Al-Moayed Bihokmillah Al-Agha	Hamas	nationalism	we will destroy you everywhere

**Table 4.** Motivations for Suicide Terrorism (from Mothers' interviews on MEMRI & PMW)

Organization	Motivation	Keywords
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, nationalism, wedding (with 72 virgins)	Shahada for the homeland, for Allah, the wedding
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion	Shahid, Praise Allah, Day of Judgment
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion	Jihad for Allah, religious obligation, afterlife, eternal bliss
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, marry (72 virgins)	Shahada, marry the Dark Eyed (the 72 virgins)
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, 72 virgins	praise Allah, Shahada, 72 dark-eyed
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, pride and honor of the family	Shahada, for Allah Almighty, pride for us, honor for us, pride for the whole family
Palestine organization, unspecified	Religion, pride and honor	Praise to Allah, honor, pride
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, honor	praise Allah, granted me honor
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion	Shahids for Allah
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, nationalism	martyrdom, go on Jihad and to heaven, role model for all the countries
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, pride	praise Allah, to heaven, pride of martyrdom
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion, nationalism, 72 virgins	love of Palestine, the black-eyed virgins, martyred for Allah, lovesick for his homeland, wage Jihad for the sake of Allah
Hizbullah	religion, nationalism, 72 virgins	martyrdom, resistance, paradise, marry the black-eyed virgins
Palestine organization, unspecified	religion	sacrifice, Jihad for the sake of Allah, duties of Islam

Maidens. Table 4 presents our analysis of stated reasons for the suicide action from the nine PMW and the five MEMRI interviews of mothers of successful suicide bombers (one father as well). Once again, the statements by suicide bombers and their parents suggest that the motivation underlying their acts was ideologically based.

In a recent work, Oliver and Steinberg (2005) discuss a video titled "The Giants of Al Qassam Imlaq" and recorded by three Hamas soldiers prior to a planned suicide mission (that was ultimately thwarted). Ideological statements pervade their rhetoric as well. For instance, the first of the three Giants Mahir Abu Surur stated that the martyr's mission was to "present our spirits and make our blood cheap for the sake of Allah and out of love for this homeland and for the sake

of the freedom and honor of this people in order that Palestine remain Islamic, and Hamas remain a torch lighting the road of all the perplexed and all the tormented and the oppressed, and Palestine be liberated.” The remaining Giants offer similarly ideological reasons for their intended actions (Oliver & Steinberg, 2005, p. 120).

*Authentic or manufactured ideologies?* One might wonder whether the farewell videos left by the would-be suicide terrorists or their parents reflected these individuals’ genuine beliefs, or whether their statements were prepackaged, and “put in the speakers’ mouths” by the terrorists’ organizational launchers. Even if the latter were the case, however, (i.e., if the statements were, in fact, premanufactured), it doesn’t mean that the statements’ substance wasn’t authentically embraced by their deliverers. Three psychological arguments militate against such a conclusion: (1) It is unlikely that one would go so far as to sacrifice one’s own life for something one didn’t actually believe; (2) the sheer act of making such statements and rehearsing them may well produce the well known “saying is believing effect” (Higgins, McCann, & Fondacaro, 1982; Janis & King, 1954), in which the communicator ends up believing a statement he or she was induced to recite, particularly if the communication was addressed to a respected audience; and (3) It is generally conceded that such tapes are typically used as effective recruitment devices; hence, they are likely to be believable to candidates for suicidal missions. Furthermore, the contents of the tapes are, if anything, more likely to be firmly embraced in temporal proximity to the mission, when social and personal pressures to fully commit to the mission are mounting.

To summarize, (1) mortality salience may prompt individuals to strengthen their commitment to collectivistic (cultural) causes embodied in prevalent ideologies; (2) in numerous instances personal losses and traumas (arguably representing real-life inducements of “mortality salience”) may lead individuals to embrace ideological causes (Spekhard & Akhmedova, 2005); and (3) in the preponderance of cases suicide terrorists’ stated reasons for their actions were in fact ideological. These data are consistent with the possibility that mortality salience represents a significance loss prompting an attempt at significance restoration via an embarkation on a culturally revered act (self sacrifice for a collective cause) identified as such in a prevalent ideological frame.

### **Alternative Sources of Significance Loss**

It is important to note that reminders of one’s own mortality constitute merely one among several cues to insignificance. Other such cues may originate in one’s current life circumstances. Feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement by Muslim youth in European Diasporas (Sageman, 2004) could be of this ilk. So could social shame and ostracism to which one might be subjected by failing to live up to the norms of one’s society.

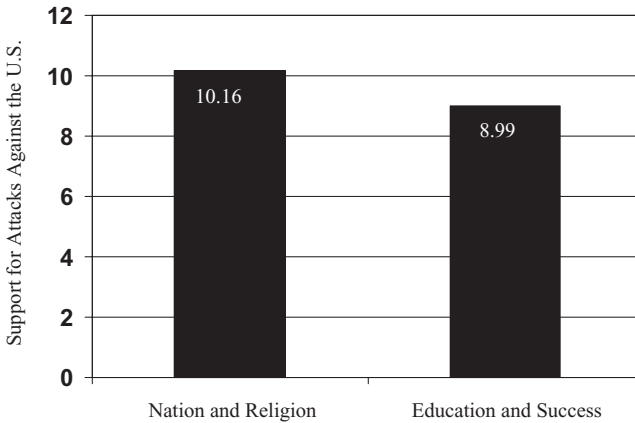
For instance, Wafa Idris, the first female suicide terrorist in Palestine, was infertile and wanted to show the community that she still had her pride (Pedahzur, 2004, pp. 138–139). Shifa Adnan Al-Qudsi, a 26-year-old from Tulkarm who was arrested before she was able to complete her suicidal mission, suffered a social stigma because of her divorce (Pedahzur, 2004, p. 139). Ayat Al Akhras was socially shunned because she was rumored to have had extramarital sex (Pedahzur, 2004, p. 140). A 16-year-old boy from Nablus who detonated an explosives belt when approached by Israeli police on 16 June 2002 was said to have been infected with the HIV virus (p. 138). In all these cases, and many others, a sense of personal loss of significance as a consequence of deviating from normative injunctions of a highly traditional society may well have introduced a strong quest for *significance restoration* believed to be served by sacrificing oneself for a cause.

### Relative Deprivation

Often a perceived loss of significance pertains to a sense of injustice dealt to a group with which one strongly identifies, hence constituting a principal aspect of one's social identity. Indeed, a major motivational analysis of terrorism and political violence (Gurr, 1970) is based on the concept of relative deprivation. This notion refers to the experience of being denied something to which one feels entitled (Olson, Herman, & Zanna, 1986; Runciman, 1966; Walker & Smith, 2001). Political scientists and sociologists invoked the relative deprivation of a social class or sector as an important underlying factor in social movements that in extreme cases may inspire violence expressed in rioting, terrorism, and civil wars (Gurr, 1970). According to this view, social movements may arise when people feel deprived of what in their eyes constitutes their "fair share" (Rose, 1982). Importantly, "relative deprivation" need not be real or objective, but rather represent a *subjective feeling* of injustice and a sense of *collective grievance*.

The emphasis on the experience of *relative* deprivation and its pertinence to terrorism casts an important light on the findings that poverty, poor education, or political oppression as defined by some *absolute* standards may not appear to constitute *root causes* of terrorism (Atran, 2003; Berrebi, 2003; Krueger & Maleckova, 2002) and that well-known perpetrators of suicidal terrorism (e.g., Muhammad Atta and his 9/11 co-conspirators) were neither destitute nor poorly educated. Despite their adequate personal resources, there are good reasons to believe that they felt either that they themselves or their group had less (e.g., freedom, respect) than they deserved, that they were denied their national (Pape, 2005) or religious (Hafez, 2007) rights, or that they were discriminated against by native citizens of their host countries (Sageman, 2004).

The psychological relevance of relative deprivation to the notion of significance loss is straightforward. A disparity between what one has and what one feels entitled to may readily induce a sense of disrespect and disparagement on part of the actor(s) deemed responsible for such derision. Should it be allowed to stand,



**Figure 1.** Support for Attacks Against Americans by Arab Respondents Subscribing to Collectivistic versus Individualistic Goals.

such a humiliation may betoken an acceptance of one's inferiority and hence a profound sense of significance loss relative to what seemed right and just.

### **Adoption of Collectivistic Goals and Support for Terrorism**

Where individuals perceive their group to confront enemies who deprive it of its entitlements, adoption of collectivistic goals, touted in an accessible ideology, may motivate support for terrorism. Such goals relate to removal of the apparent discrepancy between the group's current outcomes and what it subjectively deserves. In an electronic survey recently conducted in 12 Arab countries, as well as in Pakistan and Indonesia, we found that the endorsement of individualistic objectives such as education, professional success, and raising a family was associated with significantly lower support for attacks on Americans (whether military personnel or civilians) than endorsement of transcendental goals such as defending one's nation or one's religion (Figure 1; see Fishman, Orehek, Chen, Dechesne, & Kruglanski, 2006). Adoption of collectivistic goals may reflect the motivation to remove the group's perceived state of relative deprivation, and in this sense, it may represent a significance quest via militancy and terrorism.

### **Socialization into Suicide-Justifying Ideology and Significance Gain**

The quest for significance doesn't necessarily require acute *reminders of insignificance* (mortality salience) or the personal experience of *significance loss*. The notion of relative deprivation pertains to a *subjective* experience or a



belief that one's group's just deserts have been unfairly denied. It thus defines an opportunity for *significance gain*, inculcated early in the *socialization process*, or "bred in the bone" (Post, 2005). Recently, the Egyptian daily *Ruz al Yusuf* (of August 18, 2006) has published a report about the Hezbollah Shi'ite youth movement "Imam al-Mahdi Scouts." These children range in age from 8 to 16, number in the tens of thousands, and are indoctrinated with the ideology of radical Iranian Islam. According to *Ruz al Yusuf*, the objective is to train a high caliber Islamic generation of children who would be willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Allah (awlad istishhadiyyun). Psychologically then, the adoption of ideological goals can represent a quest for significance gain anchored in a *shared reality* (Hardin & Higgins, 1996) deliberately engineered by an organization.

It is also of interest to suggest that as individuals' baseline level of felt significance increases, a "just noticeable" increment in felt significance (marginal utility) would require a successful attack of a correspondingly higher level of importance. For instance, assuming that Osama bin Laden's baseline level of subjective significance is relatively high, one would expect his selected targets of attacks to be proportionately high in significance as well (as assessed in terms of their symbolic value to the targeted population). In this vein, Sprinzak (2001) discussed the "megalomaniacal hyperterrorists" whose sense of personal grandeur may drive them to undertake particularly spectacular acts of devastation. In his words, "They perceive themselves in historical terms and dream of individually devastating the hated system" (p. 73). For example, in 1995 "Ramzi Yousef . . . openly discussed his dream of seeing the World Trade Center towers fall into one another, causing 250,000 casualties. While hiding in the Philippines . . . he planned to destroy 12 U.S. air craft in midair. Yousef also entertained ideas about using chemical weapons on a large scale."

Consistent with these notions are recent data reported by Benmelech and Berrebi (2007). These investigators find that in the Palestinian context older and better-educated individuals are assigned more important missions (indexed by the size of the population centers attacked and the civilian [vs. military] nature of the targets) than younger and less-educated individuals. Specifically, age of the suicide bomber is significantly associated with the attack being carried out in a big city, and education of the suicide bomber is significantly associated with the attack being carried out against a civilian (vs. a military) target.

Whereas Benmelech and Berrebi (2007) interpret these findings in terms of a rational choice model whereby organizations assign abler operatives to more important targets, it is also plausible that the abler (older, better educated) operatives are more likely to volunteer for missions commensurate with their ability, promising to bestow upon the actors the appropriate degree of felt and reflected significance. Indeed, as Benmelech and Berrebi (2007) note, "on the supply side terrorism may offer greater benefits for those with more education" (p. 5).

### Suicidal Attack as the Prevention of Significance Loss

At times, *preventing a significance loss* could constitute a powerful, motivating force in suicidal terrorism. Relevant here is Ohnuki-Tierney's (2006) analysis of World War II Japanese Kamikaze pilots' letters and personal diaries. It appears that many of them highly valued life and were reluctant to die, but were actually pressured into "volunteering." Their sense of shame, had they refused the mission, as well as honor and solidarity with fallen comrades made it psychologically unacceptable for them to avoid their tragic assignment.

Hayashi Ichizo, a tokkotai pilot (Kamikaze) who died on his mission on February 22, 1945, wrote in a letter to his mother two days before his final flight "I find it so hard to leave you behind . . . I want to be held in your arms and sleep . . . [yet] All men born in Japan are destined to die fighting for the country. You have done a splendid job raising me to become a honorable man" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006, p. 173).

### Traumas, Ideologies, and Duties: Suicidal Terrorism as Significance Quest

The notion of significance quest affords an integration of seemingly disparate motivational contexts of suicidal terrorism involving personal traumas, ideological reasons, and social pressures. In different ways these may relate to the constant human yearning for significance (Frankl, 2000) arguably born of awareness of our temporality (Becker, 1962; Greenberg et al., 2004).

Personal traumas, and frustrations, represent a *significance loss*, motivating the quest for *significance restoration*. Often, however, it is beyond the power of the individual to restore her or his lost sense of personal significance. It is impossible to bring back to life the loved ones lost to enemy violence. Nor is it easy to undo the deeds that brought one ostracism from one's community or to convince members of an indigenous majority to accept a minority immigrant as equal. Where the direct restoration of one's lost sense of personal significance seems impossible, the individual may seek to do so indirectly through alternative means, including an identification with a collective loss (or one's group's relative deprivation) that affords a clear path to renewed significance via participation in militancy and terrorism. Thus, through a kind of "collectivistic shift," individual powerlessness may be overcome by an empowering collectivistic ideology in which name terrorist acts are carried out.

Commenting on Palestinian suicide bombers, Hafez (2006) noted in this vein that " Hamas deliberately framed suicide attacks in terms of a culture of martyrdom that was previously unfamiliar to Palestinian society. [Consequently] Palestinians came to venerate martyrdom because of a 'confluence of perceived threats and a sense of victimization' " (p. 152).

In more general terms, adoption of ideologically based *means* (terrorism in this instance) may constitute a *substitute* vehicle for significance restoration, if

individual means for doing so were thwarted (Kruglanski et al., 2002). The ideologies elucidate what a *significance gain* according to one's group consists of and afford a way of preventing a *significance loss* involving adherence to these ideological dictates.

At times of a severe danger to one's group, an ideology may call for the ultimate sacrifice from its members, to be repaid by the group's veneration. *Promoting* one's sense of significance or *preventing* its loss thus seems to constitute the common motivational denominator in numerous instances of suicidal terrorism. This analysis is supported by a variety of data referred to earlier including the prevalence of ideological narratives in suicide bombers' farewell video-clips, audio recordings, interviews, and other materials (Hafez, 2007), by findings that personal traumas seemed to prompt an embracement of such narratives (Spekhard & Akhmedova, 2005), and by a psychological analysis and supportive data identifying the quest for personal meaning and significance as a major motivating force in human affairs (Becker, 1962; Frankl, 2000; Greenberg et al., 2004).

*Beyond the "fatal cocktail" model.* Our analysis goes beyond what journalist Barbara Victor called the "fatal cocktail: religious doctrine that promises eternal life, deprivation that offers no hope, nationalism, and the hardships of living under a military occupation" (Crenshaw, 2007, p. 155). Though personal hardships, humiliation, and hopelessness may well instill a sense of *significance loss* and prompt the quest for significance restoration, hardship, hopelessness, and military occupation seem to be neither sufficient nor necessary for motivating suicidal terrorism. Often, such terrorism may arise, instead, from a perceived opportunity for a *significance gain* that offers individuals a rare shot at immense "stardom."<sup>5</sup> Finally, suicidal attacks may arise from the desire to avert a *future significance loss*, as amply illustrated by the Kamikaze case of World War II.

The mainstay of our conception is the *significance bestowing ideology* that portrays suicidal terrorism as a way of acquiring vast personal importance. It is embracement of such an ideology and the adoption of personal goals it identifies (i.e., the commission of suicidal attacks) that seem crucial in explaining suicidal terrorism. In other words, adoption of such ideological goals is seen as a necessary and sufficient condition for the commission of suicidal attacks. From a psychological perspective, an ideology that glorifies suicidal terrorism need not be of any particular kind or content. It could be religious, ethnonationalist (as the LTTE case clearly demonstrates), or socialist as long as it portrayed suicide on behalf of the collective as means to the end of significance. According to this analysis, the importance of the remaining factors identified in the literature on suicidal

<sup>5</sup> As noted earlier, Mohammad Atta and the 9/11/01 attackers or the perpetrators of the 7/7/05 attack on the London transit system were neither particularly hopeless, destitute, or oppressed, yet they embarked on suicidal terrorism presumably because of the attendant glory that they hoped would befall them as a reward for their sacrifice.

terrorism (humiliation, shame, anger, etc.) lies in their facilitating the adoption of the ideological goals.

More specifically, adoption of a terrorism-justifying ideology, as the adoption of any belief system, may be facilitated *either* by *motivational factors* (e.g., dire personal circumstances, great personal ambition, and Sprinzak's (2001) notion of terrorist megalomania, among others), *and/or* by *cognitive factors* (compelling arguments by revered "epistemic authorities," [charismatic leaders, revered clerics], and a shared in-group reality in support of given ends and means, such as suicidal terrorism). Thus, rather than explaining suicidal terrorism by a "fatal mix" of motives that does not distinguish between the different ingredients of the "cocktail," our analysis draws the functional distinction between (1) the crucial motivational nucleus of the phenomenon, ideologically based adoption of the goal of suicide for a cause, and (2) various motivational and cognitive factors that may drive persons toward adoption of such a goal.

### Research Implications

Though generally consistent with prior data, the present analysis poses a number of questions for further, more specific, research. Thus, it would seem important to ascertain whether the presently postulated "collectivistic shift" occurs automatically in response to individualistic frustrations or is particularly likely where one's group membership is made salient. It would also seem of interest to inquire whether the type of group to which one belongs moderates the tendency to shift to collectivistic goals in response to one's sense of significance loss. For instance, it might be the case that groups characterized by considerable cohesion, and hence considerable potential for collective action, might be more likely to prompt a collectivistic shift than groups characterized by a heterogeneity of opinions and torn by internal strife. One could inquire whether the "collectivistic shift" may be more likely for individuals under a heightened need for cognitive closure known for their proclivity for *group centrism* (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & DeGrada, 2006). It would also seem of interest to investigate whether the propensity for a "collectivistic shift" is particularly likely where the group's degree of perceived relative deprivation is particularly striking or where the actions geared toward deprivation removal (e.g., militancy, terrorism) are particularly clear cut and well defined. The evolutionary versus acquired nature of the "collectivistic shift" could be also profitably explored in further psychological research.

A different direction of research could address the kind of circumstances that induce a sense of significance loss and inquire how these vary across different dimensions. For instance, individuals whose social reality represents a "culture of honor" (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) might experience a greater degree of significance loss upon a humiliating experience than ones who have been socialized in a different culture. In this connection, research by Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and

Schwarz (1996) showed that southern White males (vs. their Northern counterparts) exhibited significantly stronger reactions to an insult by a confederate. They were more likely to think that their masculine reputation was challenged, they showed a greater rise in cortisol levels attesting to stress, and they were more primed for aggression on physiological, cognitive, and behavioral levels.

More generally speaking, cultures differ in the importance they assign to honor. So called *shame* cultures (e.g., the Arab or the Japanese cultures) assign to it considerably greater importance than do so called *guilt* cultures (the Jewish or the Protestant cultures; Benedict, 1967; Dodds, 1951), hence it seems plausible that members of the former cultures would experience a more profound significance loss upon humiliation than members of the latter cultures.

Differences in the value assigned to honor are likely to obtain for individuals within cultures as well. In this vein, Fischer, Rodriguez, Van Vianen, and Manstead (2004) find gender differences within cultures, the men being more likely to subscribe to a "culture of honor" than the women. More generally, it seems plausible that the experience of significance loss will be partially determined by individuals' hierarchy of values and the degree to which a given occurrence threatened a value placed high in that hierarchy (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). For instance, cultures or individuals for whom human life represents a supreme value might experience a more profound sense of significance loss upon an encounter with death than cultures or individuals for whom human life represents less of a moral concern, or for whom death is less negatively valenced. These possibilities could be profitably probed in further research.

### Implications for Counterterrorism

As implied above, we regard suicidal terrorism as merely one (albeit an extreme) form of terrorist violence employed in the service of an ideological cause. In this sense, implications of our motivational analysis for counterterrorism are meant to apply broadly to both suicidal and nonsuicidal terrorist tactics. But what might such implications consist of? First off, dealing with terrorists' *motivation* appears of key importance. Without undermining motivation, reducing terrorists' *ability* to launch a given terrorist tactic may often have a temporary effect, lasting until the terrorists discovered a way to restore their constrained ability or found a new terrorist tactic free from prior limitations. For instance, building a fence to prevent infiltrations of a territory by terrorist operatives may prompt them to opt for the use of rockets circumventing that particular obstacle (as in the example of Hezbollah and Hamas recent missile attacks on Israeli targets). In empirical work relevant to these notions Brophy-Baermann and Conybeare (1994) used quarterly data on terrorist attacks on Israel during the period January 1968 to December 1989 (selected from the databases ITERATE 2 and ITERATE 3) to look at the effects of Israeli retaliations policy on the incidence of subsequent

terrorist attacks. Based on a time-series intervention model, the authors concluded that a retaliation of an unexpectedly large magnitude, disrupting and hence reducing the terrorists' ability to operate, may cause a temporary dip in terrorist activity. Yet, the terrorists may adjust their expectations and prepare for the retaliatory actions, so if the terrorists' motivation for attacks persists, "Retaliation has no long term deterrent . . . effect" (p. 196).

Granting its pivotal importance, how may the terrorists' motivation be addressed in counterterrorism campaigns? The present emphasis on the ideological warrants for suicidal terrorism suggests the possibility of undermining them through credible communication efforts. As Post (2006) put it in reference to Islamist terrorism, "This will require active leadership by moderate Muslim clerics and . . . political leaders countering the extremists in their midst" (p. 15). Recently, the Religious Rehabilitation Group of Singapore has launched just such an effort aimed at members of the Jamaah Islamiyah and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front detained in Singapore prisons. So did the Saudi Interior Ministry in the past two years. The Saudi effort has included two large-scale projects, one involving an outreach to Saudi security prisoners (carried out by a team of Muslim clerics and jurists [ulama and fuqaha] as well as psychiatrists and psychologists,<sup>6</sup> the second involving an online dialogue with extremists, supported by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs.<sup>7</sup> This effort too relied on assistance from psychological and sociological experts. Though the success of the Saudi and other similar efforts (in Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Indonesia) needs careful evaluation, they represent a potentially important first step in an attempt to counter the extremist ideology through the use of "epistemic authorities" credible to the relevant audiences (Kruglanski et al., 2005).

But communicative attempts may fall on deaf ears if not accompanied by a reduction in potential recruits' readiness to buy into terrorism-justifying ideologies. This may require an alleviation of significance loss prompting circumstances that instill the motivation to accept suicide (and other) missions as means to desirable ends. Some such circumstances may be highly idiosyncratic and personal (e.g., infractions by an individual with respect to norms of her or his community). Yet other circumstances may be widespread and amenable to general policy initiatives. On the military level, this may mean the minimization of violent responses to terrorist attacks, especially as regards the use of excessive (disproportionate) force likely to cause massive "collateral" damage likely to push over

<sup>6</sup> The Saudi Interior Ministry reports having released more than 400 security prisoners after becoming convinced that they had renounced their extremist views (January 23, 2006, Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies).

<sup>7</sup> Some 40 ulema and propagators of Islam who have internet skills enter extremist Web sites and forums and converse with the participants in order to bring them to renounce their extremist ideas. As of recently, such conversations have been conducted with 972 individuals with extremist views for a total of 53,760 hours. According to the campaign information director of Khaled Al-Mushawwah, this initiative has caused "decline of the takfir ideology on the websites that disseminate it."

the brink those who may have suffered or witnessed the consequences of such violence. In a recent monograph on lessons of the Israel-Hezbollah war, Anthony Cordesman (2006) stated that the United States “needs to give avoiding unnecessary civilian casualties and collateral damage the same priority as directly destroying the enemy” (p. 15).

On the political level, it may require foreign policy undertakings, immigration programs, and educational campaigns aimed to reduce the alienation and embitterment of Diaspora youths and enhance their sense of acceptance by their host societies. Creation of positive intergroup contact (e.g., in the European Diasporas; Victoroff, in press), effective antidiscrimination policies (arguably including affirmative action programs), and strong antidiscrimination norms may reduce intergroup tensions and the readiness of disaffected youth to regain their lost sense of significance by making the leap to terrorism. As Kepel (2004) recently remarked, “The most important battle in the war for Muslim minds during the next decade will be fought not in Palestine or Iraq but in these communities on the outskirts of London, Paris, and other European cities, where Islam is already a growing part of the West” (p. 9).

### Recapitulation and Conclusions

Recent analyses of the motivations for suicidal terrorism have identified a broad variety of motives (the “fatal cocktail”) having to do with potential perpetrators’ (1) personal traumas and frustrations, (2) ideological reasons, and (3) social pressures to which they may be subjected. In the present paper we introduced the notion of *significance quest* as an integrative concept tying these motivational categories together: Personal traumas and frustrations could encourage a “collectivistic switch” to a terrorism-justifying ideology because the latter may afford a means for restoring the lost significance occasioned by various unsettling events. Besides, terrorism-justifying ideologies may afford a relatively simple means of substantial *significance gain* and attainment of a hero or a martyr status in the eyes of one’s community. Thus, whereas prior authors juxtaposed personal traumas and frustrations to ideological motivations and/or viewed suicidal violence due to social pressures (e.g., as in the Kamikaze case) as distinct from both, we offer a general model grounded in the psychology of human needs (Becker, 1962; Frankl, 2000; Greenberg et al., 2004; Maslow, 1943, 1965) that views all three motivational categories as functionally fitting within an overarching framework of human quest for personal significance. Our analysis is consistent with prior data, and it offers implications for discouraging terrorism via communication initiatives designed to undermine its significance-lending warrants, as well as via policies designed to reduce potential recruits’ sense of significance-loss, affecting their readiness to embrace such warrants.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was prepared as target article for *Political Psychology*. The work was supported by DHS grant N000140510629 to NC START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Arie W. Kruglanski, University of Maryland, College Park. Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. E-mail: Kruglanski@gmail.com

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