A Sociological Understanding of Suicide Attacks

Domenico Tosini

University of Trento (Italy), domenico.tosini@unitn.it

Abstract

Over the last 25 years, suicide attacks have become an alarming threat. They are a political tool which has been adopted by several organizations in Sri Lanka, Palestine and the Occupied Territories, Turkey, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan and, in particular, by the Al-Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq in its struggle against the US and its allies. Recent analyses have traced back the use of suicide terrorism to its 'strategic logic': organizations and their militants resort to suicide attacks mainly because they view this form of violence as an efficient weapon for their revolutionary and nationalist campaigns. An explanation based on the paradigm of rational choice theory or instrumental rationality alone is, however, insufficient. This article suggests the importance of combining the paradigm of instrumental rationality with that of axiological rationality. Only this kind of explanation is able to clarify the crucial role played by those cultural and symbolic elements which justify and encourage the martyrdom of suicide attackers. Moreover, by adopting a multi-causal analysis of the armed organizations, their constituencies and the attackers, as well as of their interaction, the article outlines a theoretical model of the most important social mechanisms underlying the use of suicide tactics.

axiological rationality  culture of martyrdom  instrumental rationality
radicalization  social mechanisms  social networks  suicide attacks