Suicide Bombings: Homicidal Killing or a Weapon of War?

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In his influential work on war the eminent American political theorist Michael Walzer describes suicide bombings and terrorism homicidal killing and morally worse than killing in war: “Terrorists are killers on a rampage, except that rampage is not just expressive of rage or madness: the rage is purposeful and programmatic… the peculiar evil of terrorism is not only the killing of innocent people but also intrusion of fear into everyday life, the violation of private purposes, the insecurity of public spaces, the endless coerciveness of precaution”¹. Walzer’s writings have been very influential in shaping the debate of the suicide bombings and bombers in the media. Walzer, however, is not alone in labelling suicide bombings as murderous killing².

In this lecture I shall examine whether suicide bombings are homicidal killing, as argued by Walzer, or a weapon of war? This examination would involve exploration of several interrelated questions: Is suicidal bombing a form of suicidal behaviour? If not, then should it be viewed as an act of murder or a weapon of war? To establish this we must also ascertain the nature of war and killing in war, and distinguish war killing from murder. The answers to these questions would help to answering the question, whether suicide bombing is homicidal killing or a weapon of war. These questions are explored in the following discussion.

Suicide and Suicide Bombing

There is an emerging consensus among scholars that suicide attacks are qualitatively different from suicides. After a comprehensive review of relevant literature on the phenomenon of suicide bombing Grimland, Apter and Kerkhof conclude that social processes such as group dynamic, indoctrination and political factors are decisive in analysing this problem. They assert that in suicidal bombing, suicide is instrumental...
in the context of war, not in the context of psychopathology. The act of killing in warfare is more important to understanding suicidal terrorism than the act of suicide. In another comprehensive review of the topic, Townsend concludes that suicide terrorism has a range of characteristics which, on close examination, are shown to be different from other suicidal behaviour. “Suicide terrorists are not truly suicidal and that attempting to find commonalities between suicide terrorists and others who die by suicide is likely to be an unhelpful path for any discipline wishing to further understanding of suicidal behaviour. Equating actions and motivations of suicide terrorists with those of other suicides perhaps does something of a disservice to those individuals who die quietly; alone and with no murderous intent”.

The British-Palestinian psychiatrist Nadia Dabbagh in her study of suicide in Palestine shows that suicidal behaviour in Palestinian society, like suicide in other societies, is caused by the relative degree of social integration, regulation and isolation, as well as social and cultural control and oppression of individuals in society. But suicide bombings by organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are targeted acts of resistance and weapons of the weak against an unjust and hated occupier of what the Palestinians regarded as their homeland.

Unlike suicide which evokes feelings of pity and sadness for the victims, suicide attacks evoke emotions of repulsion, fear, anger and total disbelief that a human being can kill, in such a cold-blooded manner, innocent people who have done no harm to the perpetrator. The main difference between suicide bombing attacks and suicides is that in suicide bombing the primary intention of the act is murder, whereas the primary characteristic of suicide is the absence of murderous intent. In fact the terrorist’s suicide can be viewed as a by-product of the attack. Typically suicide attacks involve victims who are unknown to the killer. Moreover most suicide attacks are carefully planned well in advance with the explicit intention of killing others who have no prior relationship with the suicide bomber. Suicide bombing attacks are also different from homicide-suicide because of the temporal spacing of the acts of homicide and suicide. In suicide bombing the acts are simultaneous.
War and War Killing

According to ethnographic evidence war, as organised lethal violence involving spatially and socially distinct groups, is caused by economic factors (land, resources and plunder), social factors (prestige, honour), revenge (for sufferings) and defence. The order of motives from most inclusive to least inclusive are: political control, economic gain, social status and defence. The motives for going to war appear to differ according to the nature of the political system. Centralised political systems (states and chiefdoms) go to war for the purposes of achieving political control, conquering and dominating a territory and its inhabitants to extract economic benefits. In contrast, tribes, bands and non-state groups do not make war to attain political control but for some combination of purposes which include revenge, defence, land, honour and prestige.

In modern political theory war is organised violence and an instrument of the state. It is a legal activity when it fulfils certain conditions such as self-defence, fulfilling a treaty obligation toward a state that is being attacked or a humanitarian intervention to safeguard the existence of a political community threatened with either the elimination of the people or the coercive transformation of their way of life. Neither of these actions is morally acceptable. Under these conditions war is legal and justifiable but only as a method of last resort after all alternatives have been exhausted. Additionally, the conduct of war is always subject to moral criticism and must not directly target civilians and economic infrastructures and must be proportional.

These criteria give legitimacy to certain types of violence and stigmatise other types under the international law. But, as Talal Asad has argued, the irony of the liberal West’s culture of war is: on the one hand, the state’s need to legitimise organised violence against a collective enemy (including civilians) and, on the other hand, the humanitarian desire to save human lives. While both war and terrorism are very explicit forms of death dealing, this criterion makes killing in war legitimate and killing by terrorism illegal.
Much of the criticism of terrorism follows from these fundamental precepts of war in political theory. In war and terrorism innocents are killed but what liberal political theory condemns in war is *excess* and in terrorism its *essence*. But whether state armies kill only those who are legitimately killable is partly what the rules of war address\(^\text{13}\). While war, according to Walzer, is the method of last resort, the militants carrying out acts of terrorism against civilians have not been through the necessary steps to justify their actions as being a last resort and are thus not coerced into that action. In his eyes, it is not so easy to reach the last resort. To get there one must indeed try everything and not just once but repeatedly; politics after all is an art of repetition\(^\text{14}\).

In short, war, an organised violence in which death of the ‘other’ is encoded in the planning, is the legitimate and legal prerogative of the state under certain conditions. Its legitimacy is grounded in the exclusive power of the state to impose punishments internally and externally. The violence is embedded in the very concept of liberty which is at the heart of liberal doctrine about the foundation of the political community which the state is empowered to defend. The concept presupposes that the morally independent individual’s natural right to violent self-defence is yielded to the state and that the state becomes the sole protector of individual liberties denying to any agents other than the states the right to kill at home and abroad\(^\text{15}\). The right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways against citizens who break the original covenant and the uncivilised ‘others’ who pose a threat to the existence of civilised order and their killing provides security. This is done in the name of self-defence. The justifications of pre-emptive and preventive wars (like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan) practiced by the modern state are embedded in this doctrine.

The doctrine of moral legitimacy and legality of war also stipulates that the state is coerced into taking this action as the method of last resort after all alternatives have been exhausted. Furthermore, the state armies engaged in war do not target civilian non-combatants. Does this logic of war also apply to terrorists insurgencies involved in suicide bombings? The following two case studies, one from the Palestinian and the other from Sri Lankan terrorist organizations may help us to answer this question.
Palestine: In the case of Palestine, terrorist organizations employing suicide bombings claim to be involved in retaliatory violence to defend their ‘political community’ whose very survival is being threatened by Israeli occupation and expansion. If this continues it would inevitably lead to the dispossession of the Palestinian homeland amounting to their elimination as people and their way of life. The Palestinian terrorist organizations claim they are engaged in organised violence through suicide bombings only as the last resort and under absolute necessity.

For most Palestinians violence is the only option to achieve the goal of an independent state. A Palestinian recruiter and trainer of suicide bombers is quoted as saying, “Jihad and resistance begin with the word, then with sword, then with the stone, then with the gun, then with planting bombs, then transforming bodies into human bombs”\(^\text{16}\). The pervasive sense of powerlessness among the Palestinians has made violence an all powerful symbol of honour. At a profoundly symbolic level, martyrdom is the final and irrefutable statement of the group worth and dignity against, as seen by the Palestinians, an oppressive Israeli occupation. According to the late Hamas leader Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, a casualty of Israel’s policy of targeted killing of Palestinian terrorist leaders, Hamas and Palestinian society in general believe, “becoming a martyr through suicide bombing is among the highest if not the highest, honour”\(^\text{17}\). As regards to civilian death from Palestinian suicide bombings, there appears to be little concern over civilian immunity. For most Palestinians, there is no civilian immunity in Israel due to the universal conscription of men and women. Any civilian is either a current, past, or the future soldier. From this perspective, all Israelis are complicit in the immoral and illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza\(^\text{18}\).

Finally, suicide bombing is only one of the weapons used by the three Palestinian organizations engaged in suicide bombings against Israel, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Al’Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. These organizations have deep rooted mass support in Palestinian society. Their violent confrontations with Israeli occupying forces are well organised and this especially applies to their suicide bombing operations which are well planned before they are executed. From this account it would appear that Palestinian violence against Israel meets most if not all the attributes of war except one, that it is not carried out on behalf of a state but on behalf
of a ‘political community’ which perceives its very existence and way of life under threat from Israeli occupation. Using Walzer’s terminology, the Palestinian leaders confronted with a potential evil respond by doing evil for the protection of their political community\(^{19}\).

Two most common explanations of Palestinian suicide bombings are: 1. They are acts of religiously motivated sacrifice in the form of a martyrdom operation, and, 2. They are acts of secular immortality. They represent opposite ends of the sacred-profane continuum. An eloquent exposition of the first explanation is to be found in the work of Ivan Strenski. Drawing on the work of the Durkheimian school he proposes that the phenomenon of suicide bombings is better understood through religious concepts of sacrifice and gift than through theories seeking to explain it as suicide. Sacrifice is not just a social deed but has a potent religious resonance that transforms it into something holy. In suicide bombing, Strenski argues, sacrifice of oneself is made as a gift to and for the nation or political community that sanctifies it. All Palestinian suicide bombers believe they are giving their lives for the Palestinian nation. Strenski’s analysis thus implies that since sacrifice is the essence of religious subjectivity, violence is integral to it\(^{20}\).

One can take at least two issues with Strenski’s description of suicide bombing. Firstly, his argument is contrary to Durkheim’s position. He was the first theorist to identify the social determinants of suicide and he would most certainly have classified suicide bombing within the category of altruistic suicide. Secondly, his description of the motive in terms of sacrifice offers a religious model by means of which suicide bombings can be identified as “religious terrorism”. That appellation defines the bomber as morally underdeveloped-and therefore pre-modern-when compared with peoples whose civilized status is partly indicated by their secular politics and their private religion and whose violence is therefore in principle *disciplined, reasonable, and just*\(^{21}\).

The second explanation describing Palestinian suicide bombings as acts of secular immortality, has been offered by May Jayyusi in which she links different types of violent acts as manifestations of different kinds of subjectivities. Jayyusi links Palestinian suicide bombing to a particular type of political subjectivity formed in the
context of their relationship to particular power structures. Drawing from Carl Schmitt’s idea of “the state of exception” and Georgio Agamen’s Homo Sacer, she concentrates on developing a larger politico-ideological field which includes Israeli policies of occupation and settlements, the Palestinian resistance and international development such as the Iranian Revolution and the Oslo accord.

Jayyusi argues that the Oslo accord was an attempt to institute a local authority over the Palestinians on behalf of the occupying Israeli state. Under the Oslo accord the entire Palestinian population was held as a hostage to the policing performance of the Palestinian Authority. As the overarching state power Israel was at once beyond the Palestinian zones and yet sovereign over them, the Palestinian Authority under these conditions was caught in an irresolvable contradiction. On the one hand it was seeking national sovereignty and on the other, conceding it indefinitely to the occupying power by agreeing unconditionally to carry out its policing function. In this power arrangement, something new emerged with the Oslo Accord for the Palestinian population; something Jayyusi calls “an imaginary of freedom”.

This “imaginary of freedom” made the Oslo Accord acceptable to the Palestinians in spite of the misgivings of many and resulted in the significant decline in support for militant Islamic movements. In 1999 over 70 per cent of Palestinians supported the Palestinian Authority led peace process and the support for suicide bombings declined to 20 per cent. By 2003-2004 as it became clear that the inherent contradictions of Oslo would not produce conditions of Palestinian liberation from Israeli occupation and paradoxically increased their daily humiliation at the Israeli army check points, and did not stop expansion of the Jewish settlements, the attitudes towards the Palestinian Authority shifted dramatically. The Palestinian Authority was seen as unable to stand up to Israeli power and its support among Palestinians plummeted to 22 per cent and support for suicide bombings increased to 75 per cent.

The consequence was a sense of outrage because Oslo had created the hope that conditions would change but they never did. The Palestinian rage was the consequence of this blocking of the legal, political means of their liberation. As Hannah Arendt has pointed out, when legal political means are blocked, the possibility of acting politically which is part of what makes men individual and
therefore human, is also blocked. That rage led to an action which offers them a secular form of immortality. The phenomenon of Palestinian suicide bombing is thus an expression of that secular immortality and not of religious zealotry.

**Sri Lanka:** The ethnic antagonisms, which arose over the Sri Lankan Tamil minority’s agitation for economic, social and cultural equality gradually gave rise to Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil ethnic chauvinism soon after the independence when the Sinhalese nationalists denied the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Sri Lankan society and refused to accept the collective rights of minority groups. The discrimination became institutionalised in the new Constitution in 1960s which excluded Tamils from government and other positions of authority, reducing their recruitment in government jobs from 41 per cent in 1949 to 7 per cent in 1963 while increasing Sinhalese proportions in the same period from 54 to 92. A quota system was imposed on Tamil students entering the universities.

The Tamils responded politically through the Federal Party and through non-violent protests called Satyagraha but these efforts failed to meet their demands. By the 1970s, Tamils had started to agitate for a separate homeland and their protestations became increasingly violent. In the 1980s they won some concessions and political rights but discrimination remained palpable. Among the organizations which emerged in this period was a radical group called Tamil National Tigers under the leadership of Vellupillai Prabhakaran, later renamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The main aim of LTTE was the establishment of a Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government responded to increasing Tamil militancy by promulgating the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979. Instead of mitigating violence, the PTA escalated Tamil violence in the 1980s. The government responded with additional repressive counter measures that led to a spiral of increasing brutality and tit for tat violence. In response to the murder of one their commanders the LTTE operatives ambushed an army convoy killing 13 Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna that triggered wide spread mob violence killing hundreds of Tamils. New emergency regulations gave wide powers to security forces to kill and bury suspected terrorists without any judicial inquiries. The LTTE called these developments a pogrom against
Tamils. After the riots the government banned the main Tamil political party, pushing Tamils to the LTTE as their main voice.

The Tamil insurgency arose after the failure of other forms of political struggle. The powerful Sri Lankan state dominated by the Sinhalese majority employed the army to oppress the Tamil community. Gradually the traditional ‘homelands’ of the Tamil minority became the ‘war zones’ in which life became increasingly harsh, unbearable and violent. This gave rise to a wide spread perception among the Tamils that their very existence as distinct ethnic and cultural community was being threatened. The LTTE began to employ suicide bombings effectively from 1987 in response to these developments and as a method of last resort. Although the LTTE was finally defeated in early 2009 by the Sri Lankan army but its defeat has not discredited the ideology which gave rise to the Tamil insurgency. Until the legitimate demands of the Sri Lankan Tamils for economic, social and cultural equality are satisfied there is every possibility that the ethnic violence will not disappear.

These case studies demonstrate that the violence of suicide bombings was the method of last resort in both cases. Using indicators of what constitutes war from the above two case studies we can infer that the LTTE and Palestinian terrorists organizations using suicide bombings in their violent conflicts with the Sri Lankan and Israeli states respectively are engaged in organised violence akin to war. The objective in both cases is the protection of a political community and its way of life facing mortal threat from their adversary. In both cases the violence is organised and planned in which the death of the enemy is encoded. Suicide bombings in these organised violent conflicts are employed as a weapon of war by the militarily challenged and thus the resulting deaths of the combatants and civilians are akin to the casualties of war.

Surprisingly, in the case of war, Walzer does not apply the same stringent conditions to the state which he imposes on terrorists. Modern states have far greater capacity and capability to kill and destroy human lives than any terrorist organisation in the world. For example the aerial bombing of German civilians by the allied air force during World War 11 was legitimate but suicide bombing is terrorism. And as terrorism, it is an evil in need not of analysis and understanding but of moral condemnation and firm practical response.
Walzer believes that suicide bombings in Israel are immoral and evil because they are part of the Palestinian mission to destroy a sovereign political community. The assaults of the Israeli army and air force in the West Bank and Gaza are, therefore, pre-emptive self-defence and thus legitimate and justifiable. (And by this logic the Sri Lankan army’s attacks on the Tamils are legitimate and justifiable). The construction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in these terms is a typical example of how the liberal intellectuals conceive of the difference between war and terrorism. The century-long history of the conflict, involving expansion on the one side and dispossession on the other, is set aside, and attention is directed instead at present feelings. For all their military strength, Israelis are portrayed as vulnerable and for the Palestinians the years of occupation have been years of disgrace. The Jewish settler movement may be the functional equivalent of the Palestinian terror organizations but not their moral equivalent27.

This construction also invests the Israeli and Sri Lankan armies with the aura of defenders engaged in a just war against Palestinian and Sri Lankan suicide bombers. The principle that a political community experiencing fatal attacks and facing “the coercive transformation of their way of life” has the right to defend itself does not appear to apply to the Palestinian and Tamil responses. Their resistance is perceived as engaging in morally unacceptable violence presumably because even after fifty years (and in the case of Palestinians even longer,) of unequal struggle they are not judged to have reached the state of the “last resort”28.

**Killing in War and Terrorism**

As mentioned earlier the difference between war killing and suicide bombing is that war is a legally sanctioned act which confers legitimacy on the ensuing killing but the killing perpetrated by unlicensed illegal terrorists is not legitimate. But what about the soldiers who are also taught to hate the enemy they are required to kill? The fact of killing being legally sanctioned is an abstract irrelevance. There are in fact remarkable similarities between war killing and terrorism.
Every war requires making the human killing machine efficient and effective. According to historian Joanne Bourke, basic military training is aimed at making soldiers extremely brutal.

The most notorious training regimes were those conducted by the U.S. Marine Corps, but even in the other branches of the armed forces, violence was a common component of military training. In all these training programmes, the fundamental process was the same: individuals had to be broken down to be rebuilt into efficient fighting men. The basic tenets included depersonalization, uniforms, lack of privacy, forced social relationships, tight schedules, lack of sleep, disorientation followed by rites or reorganization according to military codes, arbitrary rules, and strict punishment. These methods of brutalization were similar to those carried out in regimes where men were taught to torture prisoners: the difference resided in the degree of violence involved, not its nature.

Another account provided by Nordstrom describes the atrocities inflicted on civilians by the Sri Lankan soldiers in the war with the Tamil Tigers. A Sri Lankan army commander told Nordstrom:

> It is crazy, it’s completely crazy. I can’t control my troops. It is awful up there. One of the soldiers (government, largely Sinhalese) is shot by a guerrilla (Tamil), or they run over a land mine, or a bomb explodes, and they go nuts. It’s been building up and building up, and they just go wild. The guerrillas have long since melted away, and the soldiers turn their fury on the first available target. Of course, the only people around are civilians. They open fire on everyone, they destroy everything in sight, they rape, and torture people they catch on the street or in their homes, they lob bombs into homes and schools, markets and city streets. I’ve tried to stop them; I try to control the situation. I can’t. None of us commanders can - though god knows some don’t try. The troops just take off like this and there’s no stopping them. We can’t discipline them. We can’t prosecute them. We can’t dismiss them. We’d have no army left if we did. The situation up north is completely out of control, and there isn’t a damn thing we can do about it.
One of the purposes of war is to wreck destruction on the enemy. Writing in 1927 about colonial warfare, U.S. Army Captain Elbridge Colby noted: “The real essence of the matter is that devastation and annihilation is the principal method of warfare that savage tribes know. Excessive humanitarian ideas should not prevent harshness against those who use harsh methods, for in being over-kind to one’s enemies, a commander is simply being unkind to his own people”31.

The napalm bombing of Vietnam in the Vietnam War was devastating and the humiliation and torture committed in Abu Graib prison in Iraq were anything but humanitarian acts. The aim of the increasingly sophisticated warfare technology now used by the U.S. and its allies in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is to identify its targets more accurately to minimise collateral damage and above all to minimise its own casualties. “This humanitarian concern means that soldiers need no longer go to war expecting to die but only to kill”32.

The difference between war killing and terrorism has also been distinguished by the motives of the combatants. The terrorist makes his point by killing the innocents intentionally thus forcing his opponent to slaughter the innocent unintentionally33 But the facts of the political theory of war do not fit the facts of history. The World War 11, with over 35 million, mostly civilian casualties, is generally regarded as a just war for all the reasons which have been mentioned. But recent historical evidence casts dark shadows on the motives of its main architects. In Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War 11, the End of Civilization, the American author Nicholson Baker asserts that the version we are carrying around in our heads of this war is a false one. Using first person accounts from diaries, newspapers and letters he shows that in October 1939 and in August 1940 negotiations could have changed the course of history. The book argues that the motivations of the allied leaders were hardly pure. It is often mistakenly believed in the U.S. that that the country entered the war to save the Jews at risk34.

The facts Baker reveals about the Western leaders Roosevelt and Churchill (and of Hitler and Stalin) are very telling. The book shows that on several occasions Roosevelt stymied legislation to lift quotas for Jewish refugees. There were Jews escaping to England right up to the moment England declared war, but the effect of
declaring war, Baker says, was to “to trap them where they were most at risk, when they were most vulnerable”. This belief that war sealed the fate of Jews remains a contentious one, but Baker is not alone arguing it. The British historian Tony Judt in his essay in the May 2007 issue of the New York Review of Books argues that, “Without World War II, there would have been no Holocaust”.

Baker goes on to quote the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies as saying about Churchill, “In every conversation he ultimately reaches the point where he positively enjoys war”. Baker believes that Churchill really did feel blood-lust but his main point is that violence begets more violence, which encourages vengeance, which encourages more killing, and much of it reflects the way a population is brainwashed by the media and war propaganda.

In short, war and terrorism both kill civilians and combatants. The difference between war killing and terrorism is that under the international law war is legally and morally sanctioned while acts of terrorism are not. Soldiers too are trained to kill and to demonise the enemy through military training and they go to war primarily to kill. War and terrorism are constituted according to different logical criteria, one taking its primary sense from the question of legality and the other from feelings of vulnerability and fear and they are not, therefore, mutually exclusive. It is not true to say that terrorism is singularly evil because it kills civilians and inserts fear in the daily rhythm of life which imposes “endless coerciveness precaution” because war, whether just or unjust, does that too.

## War Killing and Murder

To understand the nature of the act which, as noted earlier, invariably involves deaths of non-combatant civilians, one has to ask whether the resulting deaths are truly homicidal killings or casualties of war. Homicide is the killing of another person, either intentionally or unintentionally. In human societies the act of homicide is universally regarded as a crime and in many cases accorded capital punishment. The logic behind the capital punishment is to dispose of individuals who have committed the act which is regarded by members of the group to be harmful or threatening to
them and to their society. War, on the other hand, is organised lethal violence between spatially different groups in which the deaths of other persons are envisioned in advance. In war, therefore, killing of the members of the other group regarded as the enemy is viewed as a justified or justifiable act of killing and consequently is not regarded as murder deserving capital punishment.

To determine whether a suicide attack and the resulting deaths of non-combatants are murderous killing or casualties of war requires delineating the boundaries between war and murder. While participants in some forms of altercations and disputes may employ deadly weapons to kill others, war is the only activity which entails lethal violence that is collectively organised and carried out. Another key, and possibly the unique feature of war is “that the deaths of other persons are envisioned in advance and this envisioning is encoded in the purposeful act of taking up lethal weapons.”

As organised violence, war requires advance planning and involves a complex division of labour based on specialization of different types of activities that contribute to warfare. The rational calculations, planning and organization makes war instrumentally different from other related forms of violence such as brawls and riots which derive their nature from their affective spontaneity. War also differs from murder and other related forms of violence in that the use of deadly weapons and force is seen as entirely legitimate by the collectivity that resorts to war.

The moral appropriateness is integral to the activity of making war. Group members are explicitly recruited to the project of causing deaths of other persons on the grounds that it is legitimate and proper to do so. Because war is always collectively sanctioned, participation in war is regarded as an act of national pride and highly laudable. Men and women potential or actual “killers” who die in war are recognised as national heroes and martyrs. Such characterisations of the fallen in war contrast sharply with murder which is negatively valued by the social collectivity that constitutes the killer’s reference group. It is consequently regarded as an illegitimate and criminal act warranting retribution not social recognition. Murder is culturally disapproved, stigmatising rather than prestigious, and falls somewhere along an evaluative scale that extends from regrettable to heinous.
Killing in war and murder are similar in several ways. Both involve deadly violence and bring grief to the affected parties. The punishment for murder and the punishment enacted on the enemy in war killing are regarded as morally appropriate, justified and legitimate actions constituting fulfilment of civic duty. But there is one very critical difference between punishment for murder and punishment of the enemy in war. The death penalty, a universal punishment norm for murder, is only applicable to a specific individual, the murderer, whose death expunges the wrong doer from society. War does not excise killers from society but instead targets other individuals who are innocent of direct responsibility for prior killing. In war the killing of any member of the enemy group is considered legitimate.

War is grounded in the application of the principle of social substitutability and is thus governed by a distinctive logic that is entirely foreign to murder. In war, the killing of an individual is perceived as an injury to his or her group because the logic of war is predicated on group responsibility thus making any member of the killer’s collectivity a legitimate target for retaliation. In war the anger generated by a prior killing or prior action is redirected to an entirely different individual sufficiently peripheral to be unsuspecting. The principle that one group member is substitutable for another in the context of war underwrites the interrelated concepts of injury to the group, group responsibility for the infliction of injury, and group liability with respect to retribution. War is thus cognitively, conceptually and behaviourally conducted between groups. Murder on the other hand is always conceptualised as deadly violence between individual members of the same collectivity.

The universal consequence for murder is capital punishment (and now life imprisonment in some countries) which is socially sanctioned and morally justified by the participants’ community. It is also carried out after a socially sanctioned and organised process of adjudication by especially appointed members of the community. It can be concluded from the above that there are remarkable similarities between killing in war and murder and one crucial difference. In war killing is directed against any member of the offending party but in murder the action must be directed only against the actual offender.
Table 8.1: Distinguishing Attributes of Capital Punishment and War

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<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>War</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Collectively sanctioned by participants’ community</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>2. Morally justified in participants’ viewpoint</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>3. Participants esteemed by their community</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>4. Entails organised, planned and premeditated attack(s)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>5. Serves identifiable instrumental objectives (e.g. defence, revenge, excision, approbation)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Social substitution governs the targeting of individuals for lethal violence</td>
<td>No</td>
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Are the casualties from suicide bombing attacks murders or war killing? The preceding discussion and observations would suggest that sociologically suicide bombing attacks can be classified as a weapon of war and the resulting deaths as war casualties. The groups involved in organising and sponsoring suicide attacks in the modern world enjoy varying levels of support from their collectivity. They are engaged in conflict over the occupation of their homeland by a foreign army, as a result of which they feel socially and economically dispossessed and humiliated; the occupation of the homeland is seen as sacrilege and as a mortal threat to their political community and its sacred values and way of life. Like war, the suicide bombing attack is planned and its execution envisions in advance the deaths of other persons. Like fallen soldiers in war, suicide bombers are regarded by their groups as martyred heroes who have sacrificed their lives for the nation.

**Good Death Bad Death**

Why are some types of deaths received with moral revulsion, yet others are accepted as normal or heroic? Suicide bombings universally evoke a multiplicity of emotions ranging from disbelief, horror, anger, revulsion and condemnation. This is most likely
the reason why characterization of these acts as immoral, murderous killings by scholars like Michael Walzer are widely accepted and endorsed by the media, politicians and the general public. Are such emotional and moral reactions to the death of innocent people 'natural' human responses? If this is so, then why do equally horrifying deaths caused by natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and accidents (air and car crashes) or death dealing by the national armies fighting wars and terrorism, evoke sadness but generally no moral revulsion? Human attitudes towards death - the physical end of the body - cover a wide spectrum of emotions ranging for example from sadness, pain, anger, denial, approval and moral revulsion.

According to the liberal doctrine, one of the fundamental conditions for the foundation of political community is the monopolistic control of violence by the state. This presupposes that the morally autonomous individual’s natural right to violent self-defence is yielded to the state, making the state sole protector of life and liberty. In other words for a viable society to exist, individuals must be disempowered from killing or murdering others and themselves. The society then empowers certain specific institutions to cause death of others at home and abroad making these institutions death brokers and managers of the trajectories of death and dying in society. As mentioned earlier the right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways against citizens who break the original covenant and the uncivilised ‘others’ who pose a threat to the existence of political community and the maintenance of social order and their killing provides security. This is the main justification for wars as well as judicial killing in modern societies.

Death brokering refers to the activities of authorities which render death normatively and culturally appropriate. In human societies, medical and religious institutions perform the primary death brokering functions. They control the death and dying process through their expertise by managing how people die and when. Medicine provides curative and therapeutic knowledge and a monopoly over determining the cause of death which legitimises its authority over how and when death might occur. Religion invokes the authority of the divine covenants pertaining to ‘good’ (religiouisly sanctioned) death. These two institutions are central in negotiating meanings and the cultural appropriateness of death and dying between the individual and the society.
Good death invariably involves management of the dying process through symptom alleviation, and attention to the religious, social and cultural needs of the dying and their loved ones to achieve the normative goal of impending death. A good death, in other words, involves ‘disempowering’ the dying person in respect of all decisions over death and the dying process. The ‘bad’ death by the same logic is when these characteristics are absent and the individual has control over how and when to die or kill. For example, a death that is negotiated through therapeutic procedures administered by authorised medical personnel is a culturally appropriate death and thus a ‘good’ death, although the dying person more or less had no power over the dying process. I call this ‘disempowered death’. Death that occurs under circumstances in which the dying person has some control over the dying process and the timing of death, a kind of ‘empowered death’, is socially and culturally inappropriate death or ‘bad’ death. Good death is ‘normal’ and evokes appropriate human emotional responses mostly of grief and sadness. Bad death on the other hand is ‘abnormal’ and, therefore, stigmatised and evokes a variety of emotional responses ranging from disbelief, anger and revulsion.

These responses are products of the normative structure of society which positively or negatively rewards acts depending on whether they conform to the accepted and permissible social and cultural norms or deviate from them. These perceptions together with their emotional contents are then internalised by individuals in the process of their socialization and become part of social consciousness. When confronted with specific stimuli they automatically evoke the appropriate emotional responses. Thus a death occurring under medical supervision is seen as ‘normal’ and a ‘good’ death and evokes emotional responses primarily of sadness, grief and acceptance. Suicide bombing on the other hand involves not only a type of stigmatised or ‘bad’ death i.e. suicide, but also murder of innocent individuals and evokes corresponding emotional responses which may include moral repulsion, disbelief and anger. However, within the suicide bomber’s own community, their and their victims’ deaths may be accepted, because of the particular cultural norms in play. They are the martyred heroes.
Figure 1 offers a typology of death and dying using the two variables I have mentioned above, namely the ‘control’ over the dying process and the timing of death, in other words how death occurs and when. The vertical axis indicates the relative presence of the key brokering institutions (medicine and religion) in managing and controlling the dying process and the horizontal axis refers to the degree of control over the timing of death and the dying process. The resultant typology provides a framework to locate various types of deaths and dying processes in modern society.

The reason why suicidal bombing is stigmatised and evokes the type of emotional responses which lie behind its characterization as homicidal and immoral killing, is that it combines two types of stigmatised (bad) deaths, suicide and murder.

Other types of death can be placed in the appropriate place in this typology depending on the relative external control over the dying process and the control over the timing.
of death. This is only a preliminary schema and subject to further refinement depending on its critical evaluation based on its efficacy in explaining the emotional responses to various types of death.

One conclusion that appears self evident from this typology is that suicide bombing is a type of death and dying process which threatens the very survival of the political community because it violates a fundamental tenet of the community’s foundation and continued existence, that individuals must surrender their natural right to violence to the state, giving the state monopoly over violence. Because of this suicide bombing carries a social stigma and evokes emotional responses ranging from disbelief and anger to moral repugnance. These responses would act as a kind of natural check on its occurrence, prevalence and survival in society. By the same logic it would always provoke the state’s strong retaliation against its perpetrators. This typology offers a plausible sociologically grounded explanation of the universal approval and disapproval of various types of death in human society.

Concluding Remarks

Is suicide bombing homicidal killing or a weapon of war? In light of the above discussion we can say that suicide bombing is not suicide. There appears to be a consensus among scholars that suicide bombing is a different order of behaviour than suicide. Universally suicide carries a stigma whereas suicide bombings, like war, carry strong approval of the reference group.

What about the difference between war killing and suicide bombing? In political theory war is legally sanctioned, organised violence which confers legitimacy on the ensuing killing. But the killing perpetrated by suicide bombers is regarded as illegal because of its peculiar evil of targeting innocent civilians and worse because it inserts fear and insecurity into everyday life, undermining the social order and subjecting society to the ‘endless coerciveness of precaution’. It is also regarded as illegal because unlike war, militants carrying out terrorism against civilians are not deemed to have reached the last resort and, therefore, are not coerced into action. I have argued that civilians too die in war. In fact, the state armies are more capable and
efficient killing machines than any terrorist organization; that war too injects profound insecurities into the private and public spheres; soldiers too are taught to hate and kill enemy combatants and civilians. The fact of killing being legally sanctioned is an abstract irrelevance. There are in fact remarkable similarities between war killing and terrorism.

The case studies of Palestine and Sri Lanka provide evidence that the strategy of targeted suicide bombings was the method of last resort in both cases. Commenting on the rationality of terrorist organizations Martha Crenshaw points out that efficacy is the primary standard by which terrorism is compared with other methods of achieving political goals. Suicide terror is rarely, if ever, the strategy of first choice but tends to follow other strategies deemed less effective through the process of trial and error. “Organizations arrive at collective judgements about the relative effectiveness of different strategies…on the basis of observation and experience, as much as on the basis of abstract strategic conceptions derived from ideological assumptions-allowing for social learning”50.

When all legal means of seeking redress are blocked, human beings react with rage and resort to violence. As Hannah Arendt has observed to resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness in order to set the scales of justice right again51. What drives suicide bombings in Palestine and Sri Lanka and elsewhere are unbearable sufferings and reaching out to immortality for the sake of the political community. As in the case of fallen soldiers, the death constitutes a triumph and a victory. In this respect the genealogy of the act is profoundly modern and ‘this worldly’ and not ‘other worldly’.

The claim of liberal democracies that they have the right to defend themselves with nuclear weapons which appears to be accepted by the international community is in effect an affirmation that suicidal war can be legitimate. In this way the suicide bomber belongs in an important sense to a modern Western tradition of armed conflict for the defence of a free political community. In order to save the nation (or to found its state) by confronting a dangerous enemy, it may be necessary to act without being bound by ordinary moral constraints. Or as Walzer puts it,, “A morally strong leader
is someone who understands why it is wrong to kill the innocent and refuses to do so, refuses again and again, until the heavens are about to fall. And then he becomes a moral criminal who knows that he can’t do what he has to do—and finally does.”52. By this reasoning, can the killing of innocents by taking one’s own life be the final gesture of a morally strong leader?53

As regard to war killing and murder it is argued that suicide bombing attacks are an act and a weapon of war because of the principle of substitutability which characterises war killing. However, under the International Laws of War, the attacks could most likely be classified as ‘war crimes’. Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention defines war crimes as: “Wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, including….wilfully causing great suffering or serious injuries to body or health, unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement of a protected person, compelling a protected person to serve in the forces of hostile powers, or wilfully depriving a protected person of the rights of fair and regular trial….taking of hostages and extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly”. But this, of course, would apply not only to the groups organising and sponsoring suicide bombing but also to the actions of the occupying armies and their military and political leaders.

Finally, death is nature’s assertion over culture. In nature death and dying are totally amoral events meaning no more than the physical end of a biological organism. But in human cultures, death is embedded with symbols and meanings and classified as good and bad largely on the basis of the role of socially sanctioned death brokers in its occurrence. In human society death occurring from acts such as suicide bombing may well be altruistically driven but paradoxically remains stigmatised because it violates one of the fundamental social imperatives for the existence and survival of human society: that individuals are not empowered to take their or someone else’s life. This stigma is a natural check that will restrain the diffusion of suicide bombings. From time to time certain historical conditions may be instrumental in giving rise to phenomena like suicide bombings and may even confer some form of community support, but like other forms of stigmatised deaths, suicide bombings will remain a rare event. Furthermore, it would always provoke the state’s strong retaliation against
its perpetrators for violating the imperative norms which also act as a strong check on its occurrence, prevalence and diffusion.

Suicide bombings, by their very nature, are not only public acts but also acts of public performance in which bodies and ideologies become texts produced between author and audience. Exploration of the meanings of these texts requires critical theoretical, conceptual and hermeneutical tools which do not distort their meanings. This lecture is a modest contribution towards that goal.

2 In a recent study based on interviews with failed suicide bombers incarcerated in Israeli prisons psychologist Anat Berko repeatedly argues that casualties of suicide bombers are deliberate murder victims. This study purports to offer an original, authoritative and empirically grounded account of the inner worlds of suicide bombers but the interpretation of the interview data is highly problematic. The intellectual stance, that casualties of suicide bombers are deliberate murder victims, is repeated through out the book. Time and again the jailed Palestinians suicide bombers and their dispatchers tell her that the brutal, oppressive and illegal occupation of their homeland was the springboard of their actions but their voices appear not to carry much weight in her analysis and interpretations. Berko, Anat. 2007. The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and their Dispatchers, Westport, Praeger Security International.


4 Townsend, E. 2007. ‘Suicide Terrorists: Are They Suicidal?’ Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour, 37:1, p. 47


6 Dabbagh, Suicide in Palestine, op cit; Townsend, ‘Suicide Terrorists’, op cit.


10 Walzer, Arguing About War, op cit p. 45


12 Walzer, Arguing about War, op cit. p. 51

13 Asad, On Suicide Bombing, op cit. p. 16

14 Walzer, Arguing about War, op cit. p. 53
18 Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, op cit. p. 40
21 Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, op cit. p.45
23 ibid
24 Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, op cit
26 Bloon, *Dying to Kill*, op cit p. 52; also see chapter 7.
27 Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, op cit p 22-25
28 ibid
32 Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, op cit. p.35
understand that there is no Just War, there is just war….” (Kurlansky, Mark. 2008 ‘Review of Human Smoke’, The Los Angeles Times March 9.

37 Asad, On Suicide Bombing, op cit
39 Kelly, Warless Societies and the Origin of War, op cit. p.4; also see Bourke, An Intimate History of Killing, op cit.
40 Otterbein, The Ultimate Coercive Sanction op cit. p 1-47; Kelly, Warless Societies and the Origin of War, op cit. p 1-10; Walzer Arguing about War, op cit.
41 Walzer, Arguing about War op cit; O’Donovan, The Just War Revisited, op cit.
42 Kelly, Warless Societies and the Origin of War, p.5.
43 Kelly, ibid; Otterbein, op cit

Timmermans, Death brokering, op cit; Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, op cit


Arendt, On Violence, op cit. p63-64

Walzer, Arguing about War, op cit. p. 45.

Asad, On Suicide Bombing, op cit. p.63