

Suicide Attacks
in
Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Abstract

The campaigns of suicide attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan are some of the largest on record, surpassing, for instance, those in Palestine and Sri Lanka. Despite this, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. This thesis redresses this omission through a systematic analysis of suicide attacks in both countries. It utilises the evidence from Afghanistan and Pakistan to critically question many widely accepted arguments and propositions in the existing literature on suicide attacks. The study employs a multi-disciplinary approach to consider a number of inter-linked aspects of the phenomena, both from the point of view of the individual “martyrs,” and the organisations who employ them as weapons.

One of the thesis’ most notable contributions is that it draws attention to the atypical nature of the suicide bombers in these countries and the similarly unusual nature of their recruitment and training. The thesis provides a theoretical explanation for these facts by analysing the recruitment of suicide bombers as a type of labour market. Drawing upon a variety of behavioural science findings, the thesis also explains the means by which individuals’ normal motivational and cognitive mechanisms are exploited in their indoctrination as martyrs. Finally, it also demonstrates how the typical characteristics of suicide bombers in these countries make them particularly vulnerable to such indoctrination.

In addition to these contributions to the understanding of individual participation, the thesis also presents a number of novel findings regarding organisations’ decision to adopt the tactic and the ways in which they use it. In particular, through the use of quantitative data, the thesis demonstrates that a number of influential theories about the adoption of the tactic are implausible in these countries; alternative mechanisms which are consistent with the evidence from these cases are then presented in their stead. With regards to the use of suicide attacks, the thesis critiques existing theory and subjects it to extensive quantitative testing. By drawing upon theoretical literature from the study of irregular warfare, the thesis also provides a novel explanation for the victimisation of civilians by suicide attacks. The thesis concludes by suggesting that in order to progress, the study of suicide attacks should be integrated with the broader study of political violence.

Declaration of Originality

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