

Mia Bloom, a professor of Political Science at the University of Cincinnati, discussed her recent book (Dying to Kill: the Allure of Suicide Terrorism, c.2005) as well as suicide terrorism, more generally, in her talk entitled “Theorizing Suicide Terrorism: Some Preliminary Findings.”

Bloom explained that suicide terrorism is distinct from terrorism, more generally. She suggested that suicide terrorism constitutes a “second iteration tactic” to accomplish the goals of terrorism; that it is always used in conjunction with other tactics, but that it is usually the more successful variant; that there are individual and organizational motivations for suicide bombings, and these are distinct; that it is directed toward multiple audiences; and that the phenomenon is spreading across the Middle East region. Bloom noted that she has drawn many of these propositions from other scholars on the subject of suicide terrorism, such as Robert Pape at the University of Chicago. Bloom then discussed each proposition, in turn.

In discussing suicide terrorism as a second iteration strategy, Bloom noted that this variant of terrorism emerged in the Second Intifada but not the first, and in the second Chechen war but not the first. She said that suicide bombing has been an option since 1983, so it was clearly a conscious choice in the First Intifada, for example, not to put it to use. She suggested that the difference in strategy between first and second “waves” of conflict may be a result of the hardening of militancy, or the fact that counterterrorism may have been increasingly sophisticated.

Bloom then addressed the efficacy of suicide bombings. She said that it kills six times as many people as regular insurgent tactics, that it wounds twelve times as many, and that it gets six times the media attention. She described all terrorism, but particularly

suicide terrorism, as a form of political theatre, and she said that an evaluation of its efficacy must consider the bigger picture, as well.

Bloom emphasized that suicide terrorism must always be thought of as a competitive strategy, as individual terrorist organizations contend for the attention of various audiences and, consequently, resources (both money and members). She said that suicide terrorism first addresses the opposing government (e.g. the “occupiers”) by sending messages intended to redefine legitimacy or victimhood. Second, Bloom said that suicide terrorism sends signals to its own terrorist organization. The suicide element can guard against defection by demonstrating strength and dedication, which also provides a competitive edge against other terrorist groups vying for resources.

Third, Bloom said that acts of suicide terrorism address the constituent public, i.e. the larger groups from which members are drawn. She said suicide bombing will only be used if it resonates with the constituent population, because organizations do not want to alienate their sources of money and members. Last, Bloom discussed how much of the funding for terrorist organizations comes from foreign sources, making suicide bombings popular for the media attention that they attract.

Bloom then discussed the distinction between individual and organizational motivations for suicide bombing. She said that individuals may choose to volunteer for suicide bombing for a variety of secular and religious reasons, such as to oppose an occupier, out of dedication to a religious group, or to avenge a personal past grievance (such as the death of a relative). Explanations of individual motivations from psychological theories often lie with the environment in which people live. A generation

that came of age in a conflict zone, for example, may live with a deep sense of disorientation, as well as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Organizational motivations are starkly different from individual motivations. Bloom repeated that goals at the organizational level involve competition for money and popularity. For example, organizations that previously refused to permit women suicide bombers on religious grounds have now changed their views, in part because women suicide bombers attract more attention. This kind of “theological flexibility” in terrorist organizations indicates that these groups are acting strategically with particular audiences in mind.

Bloom concluded by saying that efforts to deter suicide bombing must originate within the Islamic context. She said that while the bomber cannot be deterred, once he or she has made the decision to act, communities can be discouraged from lauding that behavior, in the first place.