

# Suicide bombing likely to increase as more militant groups adopt tactic, research shows

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“Many state and international counter-terrorism initiatives are based on misconceptions of the underlying reasons behind terrorism and suicide bombing,” says Dr. Paul Gill, who has been selected to receive the ECPR Jean Blondel Prize for the best political science thesis in Europe.

In his work, *The Dynamics of Suicide Bombing in Campaigns of Political Violence*, which he completed for his PhD at University College Dublin, Ireland, Dr. Gills shows that suicide bombings have become the ultimate smart bomb in the militant group’s repertoire.

“They typically cause more human and structural damage than conventional bombings,” explains Dr. Gill, who is now a postdoctoral research fellow at the International Center for the Study of Terrorism (ICST) at Pennsylvania State University in the United States.

“And a successful suicide bombing may also increase the membership of a militant organisation or increase wider constituent support for the organisations campaign.”

According to Dr. Gill, the worldwide diffusion of suicide bombing to conflict zones is largely due to the success of the first sustained campaign of suicide bombings in Lebanon through the 1980s, when foreign troops were forced out of the country.

“The IRA possessed many of the organisational resources necessary to sustain a campaign of suicide bombings,” says Dr. Gill, “but from

1982-1992 the IRA was decreasing its campaign of violence and turning towards electoral politics. The timing of this shift in strategy is likely to be one of the key reasons why the IRA never engaged in suicide bombings.”

After turning to electoral politics, the political wing of the IRA (Sinn Fein) had to mobilise passive support into active support at the polls. They also needed to build a mass movement encapsulating support from both sides of the border. “And any act of indiscriminate violence would impact upon this new political strategy,” says Dr. Gill.

“Similar processes have occurred with Hamas and Hezbollah,” he explains. “As they became involved in elections, they decreased their number of violent attacks.”

In his research, Dr. Gill acknowledges that the majority of suicide bombers experienced by the Western World, in its own territory or in Afghanistan or Iraq, are male Muslims under 35.

But, he says, “on a worldwide basis, suicide bombers have ranged from 15 to 70 years old, been very well educated and uneducated, male and female, from all socio-economic classes, Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim, religious and secular, single and married, white and black.”

“Counter-terrorism measures should move away from profiling suicide bombers,” says Dr. Gill. “And rather move towards a model of the structural and situational processes that facilitate and encourage the recruitment of suicide bombers.”

“Anti terrorism policies should focus on reducing the fear induced by militant attacks rather than reducing the limited chances of further attacks, and not just be aimed at domestic audiences but at all potential constituencies of militant groups.”

“Reducing the levels of ‘threat perception’ may go a long way toward keeping these militant groups on the fringes,” he explains.

“One potential source of decreasing levels of threat, other than refraining from over the top military action, is through peaceful negotiation with all the relevant insurgent groups. Excluding some from the process is likely to increase their levels of violence,” he says.

“From the opinion polls in Palestine, we can see that when there was a peace plan on the table, optimism for the future increased and support for suicide bombings decreased.”

“The prevailing political situation directly impacts on the support for suicide bombing,” he says. “If people feel that there is a viable alternative to protracted violence, they may be more willing to denounce acts of suicide bombing.”

The ECPR Jean Blondel Prize is awarded by the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), an independent, scholarly association which encourages the training, research and cross-national co-operation of political scientists throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

Provided by University College Dublin

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