

One-for-all cultures foster suicide bomber terrorism

September 12 2013, by Blaine Friedlander

To understand suicide bombers better – why people kill themselves and others for a cause – we need to look more closely at cultures that value a group over an individual, says new Cornell social sciences research.

"Suicide bombing is one of the most devastating terrorist tactics. Understanding what explains and predicts its adoption is very important for states facing threats from [terrorist organizations](#)," says Michael Genkin, a Cornell [doctoral candidate](#) in the field of sociology, who co-authored a study with Robert Braun, Cornell doctoral student in the field of government. Their paper was published online Aug. 19 in the Journal of Conflict Resolution.

Until 1981, there was virtually no use of [suicide attacks](#) among terrorist organizations. By 2006, about 25 percent of [terrorist groups](#) were using this tactic. Such attacks have killed some 16,000 people and wounded 35,000 others, explained Braun. Suicide bombers have assassinated heads of state and other high profile targets. In fact, the most devastating use of a suicide tactic was carried out against Americans on Sept. 11, 2001. "We establish that deeper cultural dimensions and spatial patterns should be taken into account if we want to improve our understanding of where suicide bombing spreads," says Braun.

Given that collectivism stresses self-sacrifice, it can be plausibly linked to suicide terrorism. Using case studies, survey data and diffusion models, the researchers discovered that collectivism lowers the cost of adopting these tactics by facilitating the recruitment of attackers and

reducing societal backlash against self-sacrifice. As a consequence, it tends to spread faster to collectivist groups.

"If the tactic is so effective, why haven't we seen a single terrorist organization based in Europe or North America adopt it?" asks Genkin. "Consider war. For armies in individualist cultures, like our own, risky operations – on behalf of the group – are appropriate. But ordering a soldier to sacrifice his own or her own life crosses a red line. Terror groups in individualist cultures subscribe to the same norm. Otherwise there would be a strong backlash by members, supporters and sympathizers."

The study, "Cultural Resonance and the Diffusion of Suicide Bombings: The Role of Collectivism," appeared in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

Provided by Cornell University

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