



## Human Bombing - A Religious Act

by Mohammed Ilyas



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The issue of human bombing, which is popularly known as suicide bombing has become important in the Western world since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. Since then the issue of human bombing has become important to academia, the media, and security experts. This interest has resulted in much literature attempting to explain why human bombings take place and what motivates the bombers; for instance, the works of Gambetta (2006); Pape (2006); Merari (2010); Hafez (2006, 2007); Wright (2007); Bloom (2005, 2010); Friedman (2005); and Khosrokhavar (2005).

In this short paper I do not discuss why [1] and how human bombing occurs, and instead argue three points. Firstly, that human bomber cannot be acting with sacred intention (in the path of God) because this intention is unknown to them and the groups that advocate such attacks; secondly, that the standard for sacred intention is impossible to uphold by the bombers; finally that, the bombers could be suffering from secondary trauma, therefore falling outside the criteria that legitimates human bombing because of the individuals illness. I contend that these points serve to dissolve the religious criteria and justification for human bombing.

### *Human bombing: In the path of God*

In their martyrdom videos human bombers state that they are acting in the path of God. According to Abu Qatada al-filistini [2] (from here on will use Abu Qatada) what makes the intention sacred are the benefits the act will bring to the community (Hafez 2007: 129-131). Sacred intention is very important, such that any behavior or motivation other than the sacred can serve to dissolve religious legitimization. Abu Qatada contends that intentionality is anchored in the notion of Muslim interests, and gives many examples of hadiths that he relates to the justification for human bombing (Abu Qatada al-Falastini, 1995). Abu Qatada notes:

*Plunging into enemy ranks cannot be done for its own sake. It must contain a benefit for Islam and Muslims. In other words, martyrdom is never simply for its sake; its goal must be to raise God's word on earth and advance the cause of Muslims (Hafez 2007: 131).*

However, even if the act, as Abu Qatada contends becomes sacred because of the benefits it brings to Muslims, it does not mean that the motivations of the bomber were sacred. In the many hadiths that Abu Qatada quotes and the commentary he gives on them, there is no mention of how one is to verify if the intentions of the bomber are sacred. From the criteria detailed by Abu Qatada it seems that one has to accept the word of the bomber and the group that the individual has volunteered for the mission, he or she had no psychological problems and was entirely motivated to act in the path of God. At face value it may seem feasible to accept what the bomber and the group contend because both enclose the motivations in Islamic terminology. However, once the motivations and the terminology are interrogated a different picture emerges, one that cannot be upheld by the prerequisite criteria that legitimizes a human bombing as sacred.



Academics such as Merari (2006), Pape (2006) and Hafez (2007) argue that human bombers are motivated by nationalistic ideas and redemption for themselves, their family, friends, community or religion. This suggests that human bombers are motivated by reasons other than Islamic ones, even though they may strike fear into the enemy and bring benefits to Muslims. However, there are also other motivations, which are more important to the argument of this paper, and these concern the personal reasons for becoming a human bomber in both conflict and non-conflict zones.

Bloom, in her 2002 book titled *Bombshell*, notes that personal problems stemming from being involved in activities that have brought shame on to their families leave some Chechen females feeling that they have no choice but to become human bombers. The act, as Bloom (2011: 30-31) argues, allows the women to reinvent themselves and become a source of pride for their families, removing the stigma of shame. Khosrokhavar (2005) makes a similar point with reference to the Palestinian human bombers, stating that death 'allows martyrs to recover their spiritual virginity, to wash away their sins, thanks to an enchanted martyrdom that opens the gates of paradise... A beautifying death releases them from their everyday humiliation' (Khosrokhavar 2005: 133). It seems, then that human bombers are escaping from their socio-political conditions and in doing so are taking control over their bodies, their fate, and their future representation because these are denied to them in their everyday life. If we accept that the motivations of the bombers are personal, this means that their acts were not carried out in the interests of the Muslim community, even though the outcome may prove to bring benefit to some Muslims. This undermines the criteria as set out by Abu Qatada and therefore the intentions are not sacred.

Devji makes a similar observation to Khosrokhavar (2005):

*Martyrdom constitutes the moment of absolute humanity, responsibility and freedom as a self-contained act shorn of off all teleology. Martyrdom, then, might well constitute the purest and therefore the most ethical of acts, because in destroying himself its soldier becomes fully human by assuming complete responsibility for his fate beyond the reach of any need, interest or idea (Devji 2005: 120).*

Devji alludes to the idea that martyrdom frees the bomber from the shackles of Islamic proofs and defers responsibility and justification from the bomber; meaning that the act becomes self-referential and there is no need for a sacred text to act as a motivation. Devji (2005: 122) makes another interesting point concerning the monotheistic figures of Ibrahim and Ishmael, with both acting upon uncertainty, and obeying out of trust, rather than evidence of God, which makes God's existence possible. Devji here is pointing out the importance of acting out of belief rather than evidence. The same explanation can be used to understand human bombers. The death of the bomber is an expression of absolute uncertainty because it is based on trust rather than absolute evidence of God's path, the beneficial outcomes of the act or the possibility of afterlife. The bomber can only know and be certain of their sociopolitical circumstances and the need to act.

Aside from the issues concerning uncertainty there is also a problem with the groups claiming that they know the intention of the human bomber, and it being entirely sacred. For example Merari (2010: 128) notes in the case of Palestinian and Israeli conflict that religion is a relatively unimportant factor in the motivation of human bombers. However, for Al Zawahiri human bombings appear to be legitimate and Islamically justified:

*A generation of mujahedeen that has decided to sacrifice itself and its property in the cause of God. That is because the way of death and martyrdom is a weapon that tyrants and their helpers, who worship their salaries instead of God, do not have (Wright 2007: 219).*



In the above quote Al Zawahiri seems to be claiming two things. Firstly, that the intention of the bombers to sacrifice themselves is in the path of God. Secondly, that he has absolute knowledge of the intentions of the bombers and the path of God. In stating this, he and groups that advocate and use human bombings as a weapon are arguing that they know the mind of God, thus they elevate their knowledge to the level of God. By logical extension, this means that they are God. In claiming such knowledge they have committed a blasphemous act, which places them outside the fold of Islam.

The groups attempt to resolve these issues, place themselves back into the fold of Islam, and convert intention into sacred intention in an interesting way. I contend that the groups have reconstructed 'God' into one that will justify human bombings. In order to do this, the groups convert the various acts that inform phrases, such as 'acting in the path of God', and the benefits of such acts to Muslims, into symbolical representations of God through projective identification and cast this into the future. Consequently, the symbolic God then provides the sacred intention, justifications and ways to pursue the 'path of God'.

The key features of human bombing seem to be everything but sacred. The motivations appear to be personal and arguments for their sacredness are full of uncertainty. As Asad (2007) argues, the best explanation for the motivations of human bombers is the assertion that the bombers may not even be certain of his or her motivations. The other entail issues concerning the groups that they claim to know the intentions of the bomber and the path of God are central in determining whether the act of human bombing can be authenticated as Islamically permissible. As I have detailed above these intentions are un-knowable by the groups, yet they claim to know both, taking them outside Islam. The groups overcome both problems by using a rhetorical device that reconstructs 'God' to justify the bombing and provide the sacred intention.

### *The standard for acting in God's path is too high to reach*

As we have seen in the previous section it is difficult to ascertain if the bombers intentions are sacred. In this section I contend that even if we accept that the bomber has sacred intention it is impossible to uphold. I base my argument on an incident that took place during the battle of the 'Ditch' involving the fourth Caliph, which clearly demonstrates that intention derived from anger and revenge nullify sacredness. I use extracts from the 2006 Transatlantic Airline plotters martyrdom videos to support this argument.

The incident outlined above was a fight, between Ali the fourth Caliph and Amr bin Abdu Wud, the champion from the Quraish tribe. At one point Amr bin Abdu Wud found himself in precarious position with Ali sitting on his chest, from which position Ali asked him to embrace Islam, however Amr bin Abdu Wud refused and spat on Ali. In response to this, Ali 'rose calmly from Amr's chest, wiped his face, and stood a few paces away, he gazed solemnly at his adversary, and responded by saying, 'O' Amr, I only kill in the way of Allah and not for any private motive. Since you spat in my face, my killing you now may be from a desire for personal vengeance. So I spare your life. Rise and return to your people' (Grande Strategy 2012).

If we consider the motivations of the foiled 2006 Transatlantic Airline plotters we see that they were motivated by their anger and the necessity to gain revenge, and redemption and gain the rewards of the afterlife. For example perpetrator, Umar Islam stated in his martyrdom video that, 'this is revenge for the actions of the USA in the Muslim lands and their accomplices such as the British and the Jews. As you kill, you will be killed. And if you want to kill our women and children then the same thing will happen to you... We are doing this in order to gain the pleasure of our Lord and Allah loves us to die and kill in his path' (BBC 4 April 2008). Tanvir Hussain, another member of the plot, stated in his video, 'I only wish I could do this again, you know come back and do this again, and just do it again and again until people come to their senses



and realise, you know, don't mess with the Muslims' (BBC 4 April 2008). In the cases of Umar Islam and Tanvir Hussain, anger, revenge and redemption for Muslims play a big role in their motivations.

Comparing the incident involving the fourth Caliph to the 2006 Transatlantic Airline plotters, we see that the Caliph decided not to kill Amr bin Abdu Wud because the act would have been carried out during a moment of anger; by contrast, the intentions of the plotters seem to be determined by anger and the need to seek revenge. For the Caliph acting out of anger is incompatible with acting in the path of God, thus emotions such as anger cannot play a role in sacred intention. If emotions such as anger and revenge become part of the bombers intention, I contend this nullifies the sacredness of them.

### ***Vicarious trauma and human bombers***

In the previous sections I have argued that the intention of human bombers cannot be considered as sacred, and acting with sacred intention is such that sacredness is impossible to uphold. In this final section I make a tentative claim that both successful and foiled human bombers that lived in the UK could have been suffering from secondary trauma, as a consequence of visiting conflict zones and from watching videos detailing Muslims enduring violence. Secondary trauma, as Speckhard (2012) notes, is traumatization occurring vicariously through empathetic engagement with a victim of trauma by visiting conflict-zones or watching videos detailing violence and suffering. Aid workers and therapists, for example experience secondary trauma because they start to identify with the victims of traumatic events (Pulido 2012).

By forwarding secondary trauma as an explanation I am discussing two things. Firstly, if we accept that human bombers were suffering from secondary trauma, and it is a clinical condition, they are fulfilling the criteria of sacred intention as set out by Abu Qatada. Secondly, that the emotional conditions generated by trauma may act as mechanisms for one to acquire and act upon extreme ideas as an antidote to the trauma. This leads to two further questions, which are possibly more important but difficult to answer, at least in this paper. The first is more general to Muslims: are there a specific constellation of experiences that we can argue produce 'Muslim trauma' and how does this manifest itself in the lives of Muslims that experience the trauma? The second is specific to terrorism and especially human bombing in non-conflict zones: to what severity does one have to experience secondary trauma in order to propel them to become a human bomber.

From Abu Qatada's criteria for what constitutes a legitimate martyrdom operation it is clear that someone suffering from any form psychological illness cannot take part or be considered a martyr (Abu Qatada, 1995). From the work of Speckhard (2012) and the various media reports documenting the journeys that successful and foiled human bombers took makes it appear that the bombers had experienced secondary trauma. However, in the case of the UK human bombers, we see that they experienced secondary trauma through the combination of contact with victims of traumatic events and by watching videos detailing Muslims enduring traumatic events. Speckhard (2007) notes that:

*We find that in nonconflict zones the traumas that are occurring in conflict zones are used to motivate potential recruits. This tactic makes use of the concept of secondary traumatization in which witnessing film clips or photos of real or misconstrued injustices are used to create a traumatic state in the one witnessing it so much so that the outrage and trauma can motivate them to take action on behalf of the victim(s) of such injustice(s).*

In the cases of the 7/7 bombers and the foiled 2006 Transatlantic plot we see that they not only visited conflict zones but also watched videos displaying the suffering of their brethren. This combination fostered secondary



identification with the victims such that, it not only compelled them to acquire extreme ideas but also act upon them. In the transcription (see below) of the martyrdom video of Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the 7/7 bombers, we see that he strongly identified with, and seems to have been deeply affected by the suffering of his Muslim brethren:

*Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people and your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our target. Until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people, we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation (The Sunday Times 2 September 2005)*

Although Khan has not been a victim of any traumatic event, enduring the suffering of others vicariously seems to have played a significant role in him deciding to become a human bomber. Khan's vicarious experience not only made him feel humiliated and angry but also fomented a desire in him to gain revenge. In the martyrdom video of Shehzad Tanweer, another of the 7/7 bombers, he states:

I know they've killed and maimed civilians in their strikes because I've seen it with my own eyes, my brothers have seen it, I've carried the victims in my arms; women, children, toddlers, babies in their mother's wombs.

Like Khan, Tanweer's video transcript clearly indicates his identification with his Muslim brethren and that he has been intensely affected by the suffering he has witnessed. His experiences suggest that he could have been suffering from secondary trauma similar to that which Speckhard (2012) details in discussing what leads a person to become a human bomber in conflict-zones.

The cases of the 2006 Transatlantic Plot members follow a similar trajectory. Abdulla Ahmed Ali, the ringleader of the plot, stated during his trial that in 2002 he went to a refugee camp in Pakistan to help refugees fleeing from the US attacks. He recalls his experience and details the harrowing effect that it had on him:

*There were lots of deaths in the camps daily. We had to go to a lot of funerals daily. It was mostly kids that were dying, children, young children. He had been interested in politics since he was a teenager. When I was about 15 or 16 I remember the Bosnian war going on and I remember images of concentration camps, of people looking like skeletons and things like that. I was aware they were Muslims' (Guardian 8 September 2009).*

Ali clearly indicates the impact of working in a refugee camp and watching videos of the Bosnian war that detailed Muslim suffering. Two significant issues emerge from Ali's trial: the suffering of children and the images from the Bosnian concentration camps. The impact of the camps on Muslims in the UK has been grossly underestimated. Islamists that I have interviewed noted that the Bosnian war and the consequent suffering of Muslims was a watershed moment regarding their thinking on what it means to be a Muslim in Europe. The camps were Muslim where held during the war also reminded the interviewees of the WWII holocaust.

Although the members of the foiled 2004 Crevice plot were not human bombers, their trial reveals how secondary trauma imparted through visiting conflict-zones and by watching videos that detailed Muslim suffering fomented a desire in them to engage in violence to gain revenge. For example, during his trial, Anthony Garcia recalled watching videos that displaying the atrocities perpetrated by Indian forces in Kashmir. The impact of these videos had on him is demonstrated by Garcia stating that:



*It was the worst thing anyone could have seen. Little children sexually abused and women... and I still remember it quite clearly. The effect of these videos, as Garcia recalls made him cry while watching the videos and as a consequence he decided to do something to help his fellow Muslims in Kashmir (BBC 30 April 2007).*

While Garcia experienced secondary trauma through watching videos, and identified with the victims through the register of Islam and violence, Salahuddin Amin another member of the plot embraced extreme ideas after his experiences in a refugee camp in Pakistan:

*There were a lot of stalls on the main road—on the Mall Road,” he said. “The stalls were set up by the Mujahadeen, the fighters fighting in Kashmir. I was walking up and down at one point I heard a lady making an emotional speech about the atrocities that were happening in Kashmir that was under Indian rule—how women were raped and kidnapped all the time and they had to move from there to Pakistani Kashmir and were in difficulties. She made a very emotional speech and that affected me. (BBC 30 April 2007).*

For Amin the effect of hearing about the violence experienced by Pakistani Muslim women at the hands of Indian soldiers captivated him such that he decided to donate money, in addition to attending meetings held by Islamists in his hometown of Luton (BBC 30 April 2007). He identified with the woman speaker and the victims through the registers of ethnicity, Islam and violence.

The experiences of the above individuals highlight how violence experienced, especially by women and children, that can be identified with can foster a state of trauma. If we accept that the individuals were traumatised by their secondary experiences, this means that they have not fulfilled the prerequisite criterion that legitimates human bombing as documented by Abu Qatada.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that it is impossible to consider human bomber to be motivated by sacred intention, even if bombers and groups claim as such, on the basis of three issues that I consider to undermine the religious criteria outlined by Abu Qatada.

The first issue is one of identifying the motivations of the bomber. It is clear that the bombers have multiple motivations, including, escapism, family honour and politics of representation. Moreover, the human bomber is not acting from absolute knowledge of God's path and certainty of the outcomes that will be beneficial to Muslims, but on trust and uncertainty of the outcomes. Even, if we accept that the bomber may have sacred intention, the standard is such that Ali, the fourth Caliph found it difficult to uphold, as the story documenting the battle of Ditch highlights.

The second issue is the groups assuming that they know the 'real' motivations of the bomber and these motivations are in the path of God. In declaring knowledge of both, the groups are assuming that they know the mind of God and thus elevate themselves to the God's status. This places the groups in a precarious position because and outside the fold of Islam.

The final issue is the possibility of the bombers suffering from secondary trauma. Speckhard (2012) argues that secondary trauma played a big part in compelling individuals to engage in human bombing missions as I have outlined. She contends that secondary trauma can occur in people that live in conflict-zones, as well as those who live outside them. I have argued that the 7/7 bombers and the members of the foiled 2006 Transatlantic plot not only visited conflict-zones and witnessed violence first, they also watched videos that



detailed Muslim suffering; thus they were suffering from secondary trauma and did not fulfill Qatad's criteria. If we accept that the occurrence of either one or all of the aforementioned issues, then this ensures that no scared intention can exist, which means that human bombings falls outside the fold of Islam and can only be explained by non-religious arguments.

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## Notes

[1] There are a number of explanations used for the act of human bombing and the bombers themselves. Although Merari notes four types of explanations, I place them into two categories. The first category focuses on the individual, looking at religious fanaticism, poverty, personal trauma, revenge, and psychopathology. The second category tends to focus on political grievances, utilitarian concerns, and cultural reasons (Merari 2010: 125).

[2] Abu Qatada al-filistini was an extremist preacher who operated out of Finsbury Park Mosque, London until his detention under anti-terrorism act in 2002. In July 2013 he was extradited to Jordan to face terrorism charges.

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