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Diego Gambetta (ed.), Making Sense of Suicide Missions. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 414 pp.

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Book reviews

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Making Sense of Suicide Missions, edited by Diego Gambetta, explores "the motivations of those who carry out suicide missions willingly and knowingly" [vii]. A suicide mission (SM) is defined as "a violent attack designed in such a way as to make the death of the perpetrators strictly essential for its success" [vi]. Based on contributions from internationally distinguished scholars, the book covers a wide range of case studies: from the Japanese Kamikaze to the Tamil Tigers to the Palestinians, Al-Qaeda, and various forms of self-immolations. It also includes important essays, mainly focused on theoretical and methodological issues, which analyze the most crucial puzzles surrounding a phenomenon that continuously makes headlines around the world, especially since the massive suicide bombing campaign conducted by Al-Qaeda and other insurgent organizations in Iraq following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion.

All the essays stress the complexity of the motivations and social mechanisms underlying SMs. The impressive variety of beliefs, sentiments, and social circumstances responsible for organizing and executing suicide attacks and self-immolations counters the temptation toward oversimplification. One important leitmotiv is the risk of overemphasizing religion as an explanation. Indeed, all cases, including those linked to Islamist armed groups, document that religious elements alone cannot account for such radical behavior. First, the case of the Kamikaze discussed by Peter Hill [Chapter 1] gives detailed descriptions of the military context of Japanese SMs during Word War II, their types, and effectiveness, as well as data on the participants. Then the author turns to a wide series of conditions: cultural factors, education, the Japanese traditions of voluntary death, and the ideals inculcated in military training. However, the manifest motivations of the attackers demonstrate the crucial role played by the hope of protecting the family and defending the homeland [pp. 17 and 24]. In fact, neither religion nor certain principles of Japanese education such as emperor loyalty were central to the motivations of those who served as Kamikaze pilots.

Pioneering the use of suicide attacks, the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Tamil Tigers, examined by Stephen Hopgood [Chapter 2], offers one of the most clear confutations of the "innate" link between religion and the use of SMs. Known as one of the most well-equipped armed organizations in the world, LTTE has conducted a fierce insurgency for a separatist campaign against the Sri Lankan government since the 1980s. According to the author, "religion is not a feature which can explain the emergence of SMs in the Tamil case. This means that no religion, let alone a specific one like Islam, is a necessary part of explanation for SMs. (...) The 'rewards' that Black Tigers receive appear to have little or nothing to do with their decision and are entirely posthumous (although there may be pleasure in anticipating something like the pride of their families). They do not believe they are going to the afterlife; and although Hinduism is the religion of most LTTE cadres, and the Hinduism does subscribe to the reincarnation of the soul, neither the language nor the symbolism of

reincarnation figures in LTTE or Black Tiger culture." [p. 76]. Rather, Hopgood points to the Tamils' experience of both intense and sustained trauma and war characterized by an unequal force as decisive motivating factors in joining the organization. Neither coerced recruitment nor a suicidal disposition were sufficiently proven to be factors.

The complexity of circumstances explaining SMs also emerges from the analysis by Luca Ricolfi in the Palestinian case [Chapter 3], based on a dataset of SMs in the Middle East area between January 1970 and December 2003, compiled by the author. As with the LTTE, Palestinian suicide bombers are far from the typical profile of a suicidal personality. Field research shows that manifest motivations include reference to Allah, a sense of humiliation, anger, and indignation about Israeli violence, the desire for revenge, a deep identification with the Palestinian cause, and the benefits to the martyr's family (such as prestige and compensations offered by the armed groups). What is underlined once again is that "religion too is not a necessary motive, if nothing else because – in Palestine as elsewhere – a significant number of martyrs are secular." [p. 114]. The conclusion is that none of the factors mentioned can alone account for SMs. Only their combination offers a convincing explanation.

The case of Al-Qaeda's most successful suicide attacks, that of September 11, 2001, is analyzed by Stephen Holmes [Chapter 4]. The author questions the centrality of religious beliefs in the ability to understand such an event: "If SMs are a consequence of Islamic fundamentalism, why did previous waves of Islamic fundamentalism not give rise to SMs? If the Kamikaze and the Black Tigers undertook SMs for secular reasons, how can we be confident that the 9/11 terrorists could have undertaken their suicide mission only if the religious reasons they allege were their deepest reasons?" [p. 135]. Attempts to profile the ringleader, Mohamed Atta, for example, document a secular rather than a purely religious style in criticizing the United States and the Muslim autocracies that the United States supports. The author contends that for Atta, as well as the other 9/11 commandos, joining an Islamist organization such as Al-Qaeda depended much more on its uncompromising bellicosity than on its doctrine. SMs also have communicative potential compared with other tactics. Indeed, the use of suicide bombers signals the skill and determination of the attackers. It also serves to demoralize the enemy and encourage new recruits.

Apart from the case of SMs involving killing others by killing oneself, a very important set of cases consists of self-immolations, which are examined by Michael Biggs [Chapter 5]. The author distinguishes two kinds of motivations. On the one hand, there are selfless motivations that stem from commitment to the collective cause. This commitment can assume instrumental forms, such as using self-immolations to appeal to others, incite potential sympathizers, or invoke a supernatural agency to intervene. A non-instrumental form is despair. On the other hand, egocentric motivations have also to be taken into account, such as cheating the adversary, attaining an exalted existence after death, vanity, and redemption from personal wrongdoings.

A more accurate understanding of SMs may certainly be gained by looking at negative cases and their causes, that is, circumstances and other factors explaining the absence of SMs. Stathis Kalyvas and Ignazio Sánchez-Cuenca [Chapter 6] use such analysis to explain why organizations may be unwilling to resort to SMs. Among the possible reasons are the simple fact of ignoring the tactic (cognitive accessibility), normative preferences

(moral and ideological constraints), counterproductive effects (negative consequences of indiscriminate violence on potential recruits and supporters or detrimental international repercussions), as well as constituency costs and technological costs. It is also possible that the real reason is the lack of individual volunteers. What, then, really motivates potential militants to volunteer as bombers? It is exactly in their attempts to investigate motives that the authors offer a new, fundamental contribution to a view of religion as an explanation. As they argue, "from the evidence presented in this book, it seems clear that a belief in the afterlife is neither a necessary nor sufficient motive to commit suicide: not necessary, because there have been cases of SMs in which such a belief was absent [Chapters 1 and 2, this volume], and not sufficient because Catholics in the IRA or in the ETA have not participated in SMs. Yet this does not mean that religious beliefs and values are irrelevant to motivating individuals to commit suicide for a collective cause. They can contribute to persuading individuals that they must fulfill some obligation, that sacrifice for the cause is a worthy deed. However, such religious beliefs or values do not have to refer to the afterlife. Indeed, the whole idea of martyrdom can be expressed in secular terms, as attested by the anarchist movement." [p. 226].

Three final essays present a comprehensive discussion of a series of theoretical and methodological implications of research on SMs. In the first, Jon Elster [Chapter 7] underlines the most important elements to be considered in approaching the issue of motivation. In line with the other contributions, Elster stresses that, generally, suicide bombers are not psycho-pathologically affected, recognizing that taking part in SMs is contingent on some form of personal conviction [p. 239]. At the same time, peer pressure is an important mechanism in influencing the motivations of attackers. Then, there are a series of "other-related motivations" such as defense of a homeland or the libration of a holy land, as well as certain material benefits for the family and, finally, prestige and desire for revenge. With respect to religion, as argued by the author, "rather than offering a positive motivation the religious and financial expectations might have the disinhibitory effect of lifting some of the normative constraints against SMs" [p. 243].

Finally, two important contributions by Diego Gambetta [Chapter 8, originally published in the first edition of 2005, and Chapter 9, the Epilogue to the Paperback Edition of 2006] discuss the most relevant questions and responses surrounding this analysis. In the first, Gambetta identifies a series of generalizations deduced from the contributing essays. Notably, these include: the central role of organizations in planning and supporting the execution of all SMs (with the exception of self-immolations); the compatibility of SMs with different forms of organizations; the recurrent combination of SMs with other tactics; the use of SMs by organizations whose constituency supports extreme tactics and by those who lack a community, such as Al-Qaeda; the use of SMs by actors who experience an imbalance of power with respect to their enemy; the crucial fact that "more than half of total world missions, even if one excludes the anarchists and the Kamikaze and counts only from 1981 to September 2003, were carried out by secular groups" [p. 261]; and the use of SMs to attack democracies exclusively.

The Epilogue [pp. 301-333] presents an extensive analysis of the more recent changes in the use of SMs – particularly since the Iraqi suicide campaign by Al-Qaeda and other insurgents – with significant data obtained from an impressive database on suicide

attacks between 1981 and January 2006, compiled by Gambetta and Marina Tzvetkova.[1] Underlining one of the decisive contributions of the book, the reader is invited to be aware that, as with the tendency to reduce SMs to one or another factor, it is "factually wrong to associate suicide missions with only one type of organization and goal. As means, suicide missions can serve any number of ends just like other kinds of weapons. The demands for suicide bombers can be political or religious or both at once. They can aim at driving out occupants, as Pape [2005] [author of the much-cited book *Dying to Win*, Random House] has argued, but growing portions of them follow a different logic, driven by the wish to achieve religious supremacy as in Pakistan and, recently, Bangladesh" [p. 320]. In this sense, overall the book is successful in providing a comprehensive description and analysis of the most important factors of SMs. It also makes a significant contribution to an understanding of recent tendencies and clarifies a series of theoretical and methodological elements that should be accounted in discussing SMs. It provides a very important base for future research to show how the factors identified by the contributors are precisely and empirically working to generate a suicide terrorism campaign as a collective phenomenon.

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[1] See Gambetta – Tzvetkova Suicide Attacks Dataset, Nuffield College, Oxford, URL: http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/datalibrary/holdings_datasets.aspx.