## Introduction

From Hezbollah's bombings in the early 1980s to present-day attacks by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, suicide attacks seem to be a predominantly Islamic phenomenon. Over two-thirds of the approximately 6,600 suicide attacks between 1981 and 2017 were committed by jihadist groups in just four Muslim-majority countries: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan (START 2018; CPOST 2018). Since that period, the Islamic State alone has carried out more than one thousand suicide attacks in Iraq and Syria in defence of its self-proclaimed caliphate (Winter 2017). Suicide attacks by Islamic groups and organisations have become an almost daily occurrence in recent years. Moreover, the organisers and perpetrators of these attacks typically emphasise the Islamic nature of their operations. These men 'destroy themselves to make God's word supreme', Osama bin Laden claimed of al-Qaeda's suicide bombers (al-Sahab 2007a), while the Islamic State celebrates its attackers as men who are 'in love with this religion' and 'guided by the light that leads their way' towards the lands of eternity (Wilayat Ninawa 2017).[1]

This raises questions about the relationship between Islam and suicide attacks. Why have organisations in the Muslim world in particular embraced this mode of attack since the early 1980s? Why have thousands of individuals killed themselves amidst their enemies in the name of Islam? What is the role of Islamic traditions about martyrdom and self-sacrificial violence?

In public discourse, opinions about the role of Islam in suicide attacks have often been straightforward, either blaming Islam as a causal factor or exonerating Islam as an essentially peaceful religion that is being profaned

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[1] Due to the sensitive nature of the primary sources referred to in this Element, some of the files will be removed from the websites listed in the bibliography. The bibliography provides references to English subtitled or translated versions of the Arabic-language sources (if available). The author has adapted these translations for reasons of style and accuracy, so quotations in this Element regularly deviate from the translations offered in the referenced sources. The sources have all been downloaded by the author and can be accessed upon written request (p.g.t. nanninga@rug.nl).

by terrorists. In scholarly literature, opinions have been more nuanced. Yet academics, too, have disagreed. In the case of al-Qaeda (see Nanninga 2017), for example, Robert A. Pape considers the role of religion only to be secondary in explaining the group's suicide attacks. 'For al-Qaeda, religion matters', he claims, 'but mainly in the context of national resistance to foreign occupation' (Pape 2006: 104). Assaf Moghadam fundamentally disagrees, however, emphasising that al-Qaeda's long-term mission is 'fundamentally religious', as it aims 'to wage a cosmic struggle against an unholy alliance of Christians and Jews' (Moghadam 2006a: 718). Others have proposed variations on these arguments, for instance by distinguishing between al-Qaeda's 'almost purely political' immediate objectives and its 'distinctly Islamic' ultimate aims (Sedgwick 2004).

This Element further explores the disputed relationship between Islam and suicide attacks. By drawing from scholarship as well as primary source material, it argues that Islam as a generic category is not an explanatory factor. Rather, just like other religious traditions, Islam provides a rich repertoire of historical narratives, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices that lend themselves to multiple interpretations and uses – both peaceful and violent. Muslims, including organisers, perpetrators and supporters of suicide attacks, selectively draw from this repertoire to shape and give meaning to their lives and the world around them. This Element therefore argues that to understand the role of Islam in suicide attacks, we should acknowledge the agency of the actors involved. Rather than focusing on the role of Islam per se, we should ask how, why and under which concrete historical, political, social and cultural circumstances they select and assemble particular 'tools' from their inherited tradition to shape, justify and give meaning to their contested practices. Only then can we begin to understand the complex relationship between the Islamic tradition and the thousands of men and women who believed that sacrificing themselves for their cause was the right thing to do.

After introducing the topic of suicide attacks with a discussion of the relevant terminology and the history of the phenomenon, Section 1 will provide an overview of the most prominent explanations from the field of terrorism studies on both the organisational and individual levels. Section 2 will subsequently focus on the role of religion in suicide attacks. Based on

insights from the field of religious studies and related fields and disciplines, it will identify several challenges to current approaches to the topic and offer some suggestions for developing a more nuanced approach. These insights will be illustrated in Section 3 by examining a number of themes that are often associated with suicide attacks, such as early Islamic martyrdom traditions, perceptions on honour and purity, and ritualisation.

# 1 Suicide Attacks

Since the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, there has been a marked increase in the scholarly study of suicide attacks. This section introduces the main insights from these studies. After providing the necessary background by briefly discussing the relevant terminology and the history of suicide attacks, it will discuss current explanations of the phenomenon. The section will mainly focus on the Muslim world, after which the role of religion, and Islam in particular, will be explicitly examined in Sections 2 and 3.

## 1.1 Defining Suicide Attacks

Despite the increased prominence of suicide attacks in the twenty-first century, the term 'suicide attacks' and its meanings have remained ambiguous. First of all, it is important to acknowledge that suicide attacks are not a single unified method of violence (Crenshaw 2007: 162). The means as well as the targets of suicide attacks have varied widely since the early 1980s. Moreover, suicide attacks have often been used alongside other forms of violence, such as shooting sprees and hostage-taking. Hence, as Martha Crenshaw (2001) has rightly noted, suicide attacks are not a sui generis phenomenon, but should rather be conceived as part of the repertoire of action that is available to organisations and individuals.

The question of what exactly constitutes a 'suicide attack' is also contested (Moghadam 2006b; Crenshaw 2007: 135–40). Suicide attacks are traditionally defined as attacks in which self-aware individuals purposely cause their own deaths by killing themselves along with their chosen targets (Moghadam 2006b: 18). Many authors further refine this definition by claiming that suicide attacks

are attacks in which success is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator (Schweitzer 2000: 78; Moghadam 2006b: 18–19). This so-called narrow definition thus excludes high-risk operations in which the perpetrator is prepared to die and might even anticipate death but has a chance of surviving. Other scholars, however, argue that the perpetrator's *intent* to die is crucial and therefore adopt a broader definition that includes high-risk operations (Winter 2017: 4). These debates are important not only for collecting comparable data (Moghadam 2006b: 19–20), but also because they illustrate the ambiguity of the phenomenon under study in this Element.

In addition to the precise definition of the term 'suicide attacks', the term itself is controversial. Many authors have preferred alternatives, the most widespread of which is probably 'suicide terrorism'. In line with Crenshaw's observations above, this term emphasises that suicide attacks are a subset of terrorism. The term 'terrorism' itself is contested, however, not only because of the lack of an accepted definition (Hoffman 2017: 1–44), but also because it is considered as more biased than alternatives such as 'suicide attacks', 'suicide missions' and 'suicide operations'. Moreover, most definitions of 'terrorism' only include acts of violence against non-military targets. If employed strictly, the term therefore excludes the hundreds of suicide attacks executed against armed forces in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel.

Finally, the terms mentioned above are contested for an additional reason: their association with suicide. As will be further discussed in Section 1.3, research has convincingly demonstrated that suicide bombers cannot be compared to ordinary suicides who kill themselves in order to escape life (Moghadam 2008: 27). Moreover, the association with suicide is strongly resisted by the perpetrators themselves and their supporters. In the Muslim world, suicide (*intihar*) is highly controversial, also because several passages in the Qur'an and *hadith* (allegedly) reject the practice.[2] Muslim scholars have repeatedly invoked these traditions to renounce suicide attacks as un-Islamic. The perpetrators of suicide attacks and their supporters, however, argue that these operations should not be considered as acts

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[2] Although the Qur'an is not completely unambiguous, texts such as Q. 4:29 are interpreted as forbidding suicide. Moreover, according to several *hadith*s, the Prophet strongly condemned suicide (Rosenthal 2010).

of suicide. Rather, they typically refer to the concept of martyrdom (*istish-had*) to frame and give meaning to their actions (Hafez 2006a: 55). Accordingly, suicide attacks are often labelled as 'martyrdom-seeking operations' ('*amaliyyat istishhadiyya*) and their perpetrators as 'martyrs' (*shudada'*, sing. *shahid*) or 'martyrdom seekers' (*istishhadiyyun*). The insiders' labels thus have rather different connotations to the term 'suicide', as will be further discussed when focusing on the notion of martyrdom in Section 3.1. While I, for the purpose of this study, will stick to the term 'suicide attack', it is crucial to take this point into account when trying to understand why people kill themselves alongside their enemies.

## 1.2 Suicide Attacks: A Short History

The definition of 'suicide attack' one prefers also has consequences for discussing the history of the phenomenon. When adopting a broad definition of the term, one could include cases such as the biblical figure of Samson, who reportedly killed himself along with his Philistine enemies by pushing apart the central pillars of the temple in which he was set for their entertainment (Judges 16). Another case often referred to by scholars studying suicide attacks is the medieval sect of the Ismaili Assassins (*hashashin*), whose preferred tactic was to assassinate leaders of their Sunni and Christian opponents by means of a dagger. According to Bernard Lewis (2003), the Assassins were almost always caught and killed afterwards, usually not even attempting to escape.

Yet, whereas self-sacrificial violence is found in all periods of human history, suicide attacks according to the narrow definition are dependent on modern technologies and are therefore a modern phenomenon. One of the first evident cases of suicide bombings is provided by Russian anarchists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, several of whom killed themselves alongside their opponents by exploding dynamite. A more prominent case, albeit of a different nature and not falling under most definitions of (suicide) 'terrorism' because it concerned members of regular armed forces, is that of the Japanese kamikaze pilots, who carried out thousands of suicide missions during the final phase of World War II (Hill 2005).

Nevertheless, most scholars studying the phenomenon are interested in explaining the contemporary wave of suicide attacks, and therefore start their historical overviews in the early 1980s. Based on insights from these studies, we could roughly distinguish between two (overlapping) phases, the first of which was dominated by nationally oriented resistance groups adopting the method of suicide attacks from the early 1980s and the second by the so-called globalisation of the phenomenon that was instigated by al-Qaeda in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Khosrokhavar 2005; Schweitzer 2006; Moghadam 2008).

### First Phase: Local Conflicts

The first phase started on 15 December 1981, when a member of the Shia group al-Da'wa directed a car rigged with explosives into the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut. Suicide attacks against Israeli Defence Forces as well as Western targets in Lebanon soon followed, the most devastating of which were those against the US Embassy, US military barracks and a French compound in Beirut in 1983, which killed over 350 people in total. That it was Shia groups pioneering the tactic during the Lebanese Civil War comes as no surprise given their links to the recently born Islamic Republic of Iran. In the context of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and Iran-Iraq War that soon followed, martyrdom increasingly became an objective to be actively pursued by believers (see Section 3.1). This idea was adopted by prominent Lebanese clerics such as Musa al-Sadr and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and put into practice by Iranian-backed groups in the country. Soon to gain predominance among these groups was Hezbollah, to which the 1983 Beirut bombings would eventually also be attributed (Norton 2007). The results of these bombings in particular were significant for the further history of the phenomenon. Soon after these attacks, the USA and France decided to withdraw their troops from Lebanon. As a result, suicide attacks were considered a successful tactic from the outset (Pape 2006: 129–39; Pedahzur 2005: 45–54; Moghadam 2008: 17–22).

It was the (perceived) success of the tactic rather than its ideological legitimations that contributed to its spread, as is illustrated by the fact that secular groups in Lebanon also adopted it. Moreover, non-Muslim groups elsewhere also appropriated the tactic. In the late 1980s, the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) started using suicide attacks in their struggle against the Sri Lankan army. Drawing from Hindu traditions of self-sacrifice, the LTTE carried out more than 140 suicide attacks between 1987 and 2001, becoming infamous for the introduction of the suicide belt that was used to assassinate high-profile opponents. The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) embraced suicide attacks in its conflict with the Turkish state in 1996 and, some years later, Chechen rebels followed the same path against Russian armed forces during the Second Chechen War. In both cases, the majority of the bombers were women (Pape 2006: 208).

More eye-catching has been the case of the Palestinian suicide bombers, not least because the majority of them targeted civilians. Here, the tactic was pioneered by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the wake of the Oslo I Accord in 1993, only to become widely used during the al-Aqsa Intifada that started in September 2000. During this uprising, Palestinians widely supported suicide attacks against Israel[3] and the spread of the practice was accompanied by a cult surrounding the martyrs (Oliver and Steinberg 2005). As a result, Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) also resorted to suicide attacks when their popularity started to decline (Hafez 2006b).

### Second Phase: The Globalisation of Suicide Attacks

The above cases demonstrate that until the late 1990s suicide attacks had been predominantly used by religious and ethnonationalist groups engaged in local, asymmetrical conflicts evolving around independence and territorial claims. The late 1990s witnessed the rise of a new pattern of suicide attacks, however, which has been labelled the 'globalisation of martyrdom' (Moghadam 2008). This pattern has been characterised by an exceptional rise in the number of suicide attacks, as well as by their spread across the world. It was instigated by al-Qaeda and has been dominated by global jihadists.

Al-Qaeda adopted suicide attacks soon after it publicly announced its *jihad* against 'the Americans occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places'

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[3] According to polls conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center around 70 per cent of Palestinians supported suicide attacks against Israel in 2011 and early 2012 (JMCC 2002).

(i.e. Saudi Arabia) in its 1996 'Declaration of War' (Bin Laden 1996). Inspired by the alleged successes of its Lebanese and Palestinian predecessors, as well as by its members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad who had experimented with the tactic in the mid-1990s (Gerges 2005: 141–3), al-Qaeda's leaders became convinced of the tactical advantages of the method. 'Martyrdom operations', al-Zawahiri wrote in 2001, are 'the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the mujahidin in terms of casualties'. Moreover, he suggested, they have the capacity to instil fear in the enemy and communicate messages to the audience, referring to violence as a 'language' (*lugha*) that is understood by the West (al-Zawahiri 2001: 243).

Accordingly, al-Qaeda learned from its predecessors, but meanwhile employed the tactic in innovative ways. On 7 August 1998, al-Qaeda put itself on the map by destroying the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania by means of two Hezbollah–like truck bomb attacks. Two years later, it copied a method previously employed by the LTTE, using a small boat loaded with explosives to attack the destroyer USS *Cole* in the port of Aden, Yemen. On 9 September 2001, two suicide bombers assassinated the leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan by means of a bomb hidden in a camera – a strategic move that anticipated the consequences of the event planned for two days later: the 9/11 attacks.

Whereas the 9/11 attacks and the 'war on terror' that followed disrupted and further fragmented Osama bin Laden's network, it also inspired other organisations and groups to (at least partly) shift their attention to the global *jihad* and follow al-Qaeda's example. Accordingly, the years after 9/11 witnessed an increasing number of suicide attacks by groups and smaller cliques identifying with al-Qaeda. Suicide attacks were executed from Bali to London and from Riyadh to Casablanca, often against targets associated with the West. Yet it was in the conflict areas of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria that suicide bombers would strike hardest.

In Afghanistan, suicide attacks had not been used during the Soviet invasion in the 1980s or during the Civil War of the 1990s. Since the American invasion of 2001, and particularly since 2005, however, the country has witnessed hundreds of suicide attacks by the Taliban as well as transnational jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda. These attacks

primarily targeted coalition forces, Afghan military forces and policemen (Moghadam 2008: 152–8). The same development can be witnessed in neighbouring Pakistan, where both nationally oriented groups and transnational jihadist embraced the tactic against local authorities and military targets, as well as against the Shia Muslim community.

Nevertheless, it is Iraq that has become the main stage for suicide bombers. Suicide attacks were introduced in the country after the US-led invasion of 2003 and strongly increased in numbers in the years 2005–7, when resistance against the international forces and internal sectarian strife peaked. The large majority of suicide attacks in this period were carried out by transnational jihadists, most of whom belonged to al-Qaeda in Iraq (Hafez 2007: 106–9). They targeted both coalition forces and Iraqi military and policemen, as well as Shia Muslims. When resistance in Iraq diminished during the so-called Anbar Awakening, the numbers of suicide bombings also strongly declined. Yet they rose again to unprecedented heights when al-Qaeda in Iraq's successor, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (which changed its name into the Islamic State in 2014) started its conquests in the country in 2013. Combined with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and the role of jihadist groups therein, the rise of the Islamic State has caused unparalleled numbers of suicide attacks in the region (Joscelyn 2016; Winter 2017).

In sum, according to the Global Terrorism Database (START 2018), a total of 6,633 suicide attacks had been executed between 1981 and the end of 2017.[4] The large majority of these attacks (70.6 per cent) took place in Iraq (2,602 attacks), Afghanistan (1,228), Pakistan (511) and Syria (344). The main perpetrators were the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (1,314 attacks since 2013), the Afghan Taliban (716) and al-Qaeda and its official affiliates (356). Most targets were associated with military and police forces, governments and non-state militias (63.8 per cent), yet a significant number struck civilian targets.

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[4] The Global Terrorism Database by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) takes a broad definition of suicide attacks: it designates a terrorist attack as a suicide attack when there 'is evidence that the perpetrator did not intend to escape from the attack alive'. Plots involving multiple attacks are listed as multiple attacks (e.g. the 9/11 attacks count for four separate attacks).

Finally, the above overview clearly demonstrates the rise of suicide attacks after 9/11: from 216 attacks between 1981 and the 9/11 attacks to 6,417 in the period between 9/11 and the end of 2017 (START 2018). Moreover, the post–9/11 years witnessed a transformation of the phenomenon from a tactic employed by a restricted number of groups participating in local, predominantly ethnonationalist, asymmetric conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s to a transnational phenomenon used by a plethora of groups and cliques across the world that were often inspired by global jihadism. In this sense, we could indeed speak of a 'globalisation' of the suicide attack. This observation is also supported by the fact that relatively large numbers of suicide bombers in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were foreign fighters in these countries (Moghadam 2008: 156; Hafez 2007: 251–4). Nevertheless, the particular contexts that gave rise to the attacks, as well as the backgrounds, motivations and aims of the individual bombers and their organisations have remained highly diverse and are often still rooted in local political, social and cultural circumstances. This will be further explored in the next section by discussing how scholars have tried to make sense of the proliferation of suicide attacks in recent decades.

## 1.3 Explaining Suicide Attacks

Since the 9/11 attacks, the field of terrorism studies has witnessed exponential growth (Silke 2008). Not very surprisingly, this field has also dominated research on suicide attacks until now. As a result, most studies on the topic have been produced by scholars with backgrounds in terrorism studies, political science and, to a lesser extent, international relations, sociology and psychology. This becomes evident from current literature on the phenomenon, which typically approaches suicide attacks as a form of terrorism. To understand this form of terrorism, most scholars distinguish between three (interconnected) levels of analysis: organisations, individuals suicide bombers and the larger societies or communities of these actors (see Crenshaw 2007; Ward 2018). Nevertheless, they particularly emphasise the importance of organisations, generally agreeing with Martha Crenshaw's observation that 'the organization that recruits and directs the suicide bomber remains the most important agent' (2007: 157).