

Hezbollah's

Employment of Suicide Bombing During the 1980s: The Theological, Political, and Operational Development of a New Tactic

Captain Daniel Helmer, U.S. Army

The shahid (martyr) can be compared to a candle whose job it is to burn out and get extinguished in order to shed light for the benefit of others. The shahada (martyrs) are the candles of society. They burn themselves out and illuminate society. If they do not shed their light, no organization can shine.

—Iranian Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari¹

Civilization does not mean that you face a rocket with a stick or a jet-fighter with a kite, or a warship with a sailboat. . . .

One must face force with equal or superior force. If it is legitimate to defend self and land and destiny, then all means of self-defense are legitimate.

—Lebanese Ayatollah Hussein Fadlallah²

Captain Daniel Helmer, U.S. Army, is a Rhodes Scholar studying for a Masters of Philosophy degree at Oxford University. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy in 2003, and has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States and while deployed to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

THE POST-9/11 Western world seems to regard suicide bombing as a traditional Islamic phenomenon in which repressed, underprivileged Muslims act out their frustrations by exploding themselves in the midst of civilians. This is, however, a misperception. The shahada are not merely frustrated human bombs embracing a time-honored tradition. Use of the tactic by Hamas and other Palestinian groups, by Jemmah Islamiyah in the Philippines, and most recently by members of the Fedayeen Saddam, might seem to suggest that suicide bombing is somehow embedded in Arab and Islamic culture, but it isn't. When Hezbollah adopted the tactic in 1983, it was the uniqueness of the method that in many ways directed the world's attention toward the newly formed group.³

Hezbollah's initial suicide bombings had little precedent in Arab, Islamic, and even world history. In 1983, an attack in which the attacker killed himself while killing others was simply extraordinary. According to Jeffrey Goldberg, "The organization [Hezbollah] virtually invented the multipronged terror attack when, early on the morning of 23 October 1983, it synchronized the suicide bombing, in Beirut, of the United States Marine barracks and an apartment building housing a contingent of French peacekeepers. Those attacks occurred just 20 seconds apart."⁴ Three hundred Multi-National Force (MNF) soldiers perished in the twin attacks. This use of suicide bombing as a military, highly organized, effective tactic set Hezbollah apart from other extremist organizations, both Islamic and non-Islamic.

Had Hezbollah's bombing missions been simply its signature method of attack (as other terrorist groups in the 1980s had signature attacks), the tactic would be worthy of historical exploration only as an anomaly. Indeed, many authors do not view Hezbollah's suicide attacks as noteworthy. Ann Mayer, for example, claims that other Islamic organizations and terrorist groups throughout the world used similar tactics to secure similar political goals.⁵ If the Western press gives Hezbollah any thought at all, it is only to consider it a Shi'ite terrorist group with ties to Iran, and part of a highly irrational and dangerous pan-Islamic threat. When Hezbollah actually carried out its suicide attacks, Western reporters saw little more than the "villainy" of the perpetrators.⁶ But other Islamic groups before Hezbollah did not use suicide bombing in the 1980s, so the supposedly inherent villainy of the Islamic threat does not sufficiently explain Hezbollah's move to suicide bombing.

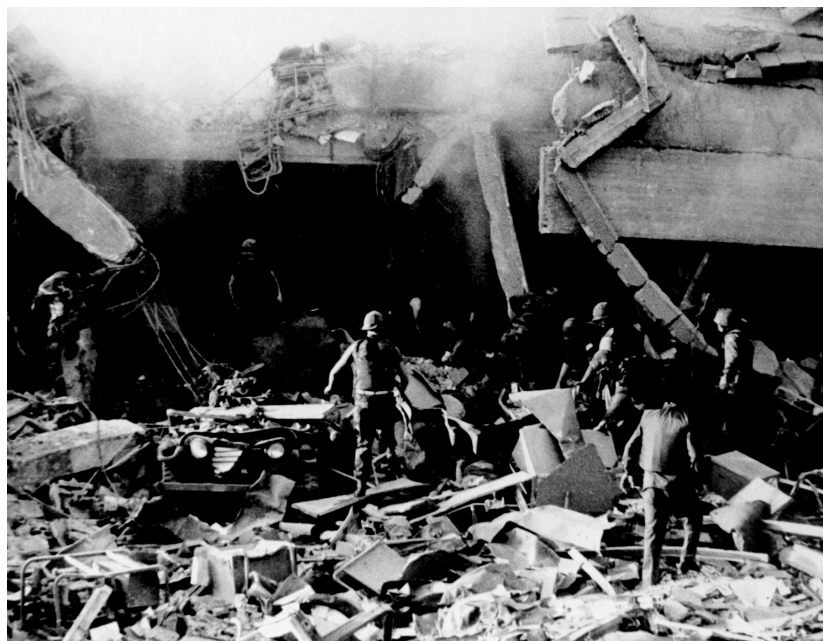
Any theological dimension that might give suicide bombing a veneer of legitimacy also tended to be discounted. Even many Arab writers dismissed the Islamic rationale behind Muslim extremism and labeled groups such as

Hezbollah “misguided” in their proclamations of jihad.⁷ The Lebanese writer Saad-Ghorayeb is one of those skeptics. He believes Hezbollah’s claims to Islamic inspiration result from a complicated moral utilitarianism in which all actions can be justified in an Islamic framework.⁸ However, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hezbollah’s spiritual guide (and a supporter of its suicide bombings), took a resolute stand against the organization’s use of kidnapping. This suggests that Hezbollah did not use Shi’a Islam to justify just any action and that its theological justification of suicide bombing was well thought-out and truly believed.⁹

None of these explanations suffice to explain Hezbollah’s employment of suicide bombing. The specific, rational choice of suicide bombing as a militarily effective, theologically justified means to achieve political ends distinguished Hezbollah from any other group in the 1980s. For that reason, Hezbollah’s suicide bombing warrants systematic historical study.

Theological Underpinnings of Self-Destruction

As a result of the Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, the suicide bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon, and Hezbollah’s seizure and execution of Western hostages, the Western world regards Islam as an extreme and irrational religion and sees Shi’ite Islam as even more extreme than Sunni Islam. However, for many centuries the Shi’ites concerned themselves mostly with survival in a Sunni-dominated world: “For centuries it [Shi’ism] cultivated the ideal of suffering and endurance. The Shi’ite prototype was that of the quietly enduring martyr (*shahid*) and not the insurgent revolutionary.”¹⁰ The suicide bomber, “chaperoned by a cleric and operationally supplied and directed by a Hizbullah agent,” was a far cry from the passive sufferer that marked most of Shi’ite history.¹¹



U.S. Marines search through tons of rubble for their missing comrades after their barracks were destroyed by a Hezbollah suicide bomber, 23 October 1983. 239 Marines were killed in the blast.

AFP

The most important religious event on the Shi’ite calendar occurs during the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, when Shi’ites celebrate the lives and mourn the deaths of their greatest martyrs. On Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, Shi’ites march through the streets of their cities, many flagellating themselves and weeping to mourn the death of Imam Hussein, whom they regard as the third legitimate successor to Muhammad. The crowds bemoan Hussein’s death and Shi’ite oppression.¹² Shi’ites believe Hussein died a martyr to uphold “justice against oppression.”¹³

In the past, Shi’ites respected and mourned Hussein, but did not feel compelled to emulate his martyrdom. Believing that rightful rule vanished from earth with the “occultation” (disappearance from view) of the Hidden Imam in 874, they awaited the day when the Imam would return to liberate them and establish God’s rule on earth. Until then, they employed *taqiyya* (dissimulation), practicing as Sunnis in public and hiding their Shi’ite identity so the Hidden Imam would have a cadre of followers to help establish God’s rule on earth.

In a sense, *taqiyya* represented the imams’ desires to achieve an ideal Islamic polity, if not by launching the revolution contingent upon the appearance of the Hidden Imam as the leader of the

community, then at least by preparing the way for such an insurrection in the future. In the meantime, Shi'ites avoided enmity by not publicly expressing their opinions about the shortcomings of Muslim governments.¹⁴

For Shi'ites, religion and politics remained separate. True political power belonged only to God and the Hidden Imam; all temporal power was usurped and false. Shi'ite imams accommodated political rulers out of necessity, but remained mostly outside of politics. They and their followers mistrusted politics as a human endeavor and rarely used war as a political tool. As author John Kelsay explains, "The idea that wars should be fought for 'secular' purposes—for example, the defense of a nation-state (as opposed to a state defined in Islamic terms)—is viewed with some suspicion, as opening the door to indiscriminate resort to and conduct of war."¹⁵ Any military activity to attain political goals, let alone suicide bombing, was outside the canon of accepted Shi'ite thought.

Although their Sunni enemies persecuted them after the occultation, the Shi'ites had a traditional abhorrence of suicide. A Shi'ite story relates how one group of persecuted Shi'ites discussed mass suicide as a way out of their predicament, but rejected the idea. One of them was quoted as saying: "By God, if I knew that my suicide would free me of my sin and reconcile me with my Lord, then I would kill myself! But," he continued, "what was permitted of the Israelites was—regrettably—denied the Muslims."¹⁶

New Shi'ite thought that emerged from Iraq's Najaf seminaries and from Iran in the 1960s challenged Shi'ite quietism and political disengagement. Contemporary thinkers asserted that remembering the sacrifices of martyrs was not enough; only by achieving martyrdom oneself could one help bring about the coming of the Hidden Imam.¹⁷ This claim effectively politicized Shi'ism, ending its quietism. Inspired by clerics such as Sayyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini of Iran and Musa al Sadr of Lebanon, a people that had thrived on their own afflictions now espoused a revolutionary ideology of activism. Other leaders soon used Khomeini's and Sadr's ideas to justify suicide bombing as well.

The ideology that led to the Iranian Revolution de-emphasized taqiyya and politicized *shahadat* (martyrdom). According to Khomeini, "stating the right is obligatory," even when doing so put

a believer in danger and was unlikely to effect change.¹⁸ In fact, the entire focus of Shi'ism changed with these revolutionary thinkers. No longer was one to protect oneself through taqiyya; now, one was obliged to die a martyr unless Islam would gain nothing through one's death.

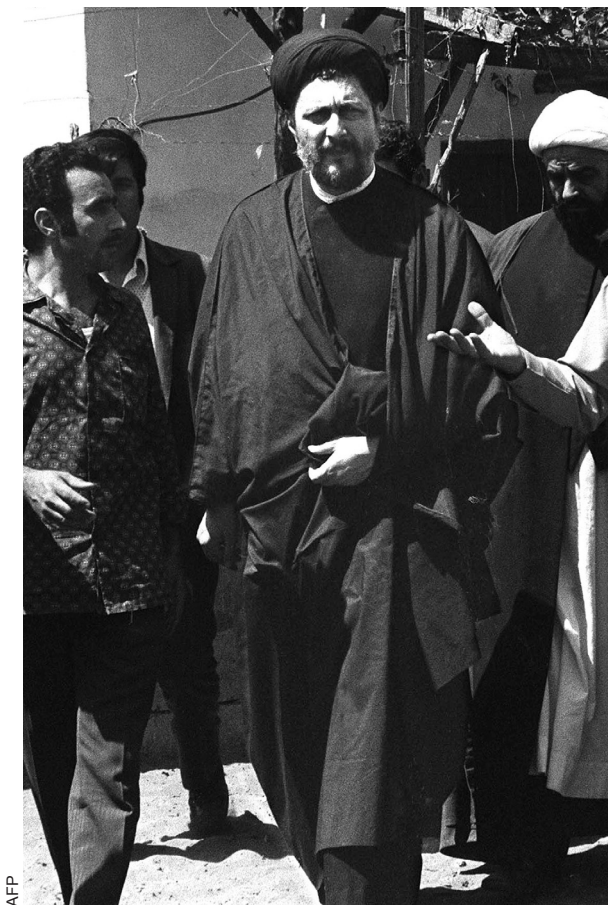
This was a paradigm shift. The new Shi'ite doctrine said: "[D]issimulation is a personal affair, and [it] pertains to individuals placed in a position of weakness in the face of powerful enemies; they dissimulate insofar as they consider that if dissimulation is not made, not only do they lose their lives, but also *no positive advantage is derived from their being killed* [*italics added*]."¹⁹

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After the Iranian Revolution, the defense of political Shi'ism became paramount. Shi'ites put protection of the ideals of the Iranian Revolution ahead of self-protection. Khomeini believed that protecting the ideals of the revolution would bring about the Hidden Imam's arrival.

Formerly, Shi'ites had looked upon the call to jihad with skepticism. War for self-defense was always permitted, but more traditional Shi'ite thinkers preferred to look at such a war as *defaa* (defense), not jihad.²⁰ Only the Hidden Imam could declare jihad when he came out from occultation.²¹ Khomeini agreed that defensive wars are *defaa*, not jihad; however, he lowered the threshold for such military actions and said participation in them was mandatory for true believers:

- "If the enemy invades the cities of Moslems and their borders, it is obligatory for all Moslems to defend those by any means possible, forsaking life and belongings. And in this case the permission of the religious ruler is not needed.



AFP

Musa al-Sadr with members of his community in Beirut. Sadr established the Amal movement, which played a major role in Lebanon's 1975–90 civil war before the creation of Hezbollah.

- If the Moslems fear that the foreigners have a plot to subjugate their cities, either directly or through their agents, from outside or inside, it is obligatory that they defend the Islamic countries by any means possible.

- If, within the Islamic countries, plots have been laid by foreigners, with the fear that they may dominate Islamic countries, it is obligatory for Moslems to foil their plot by any means possible and to obstruct the spread of their influence."²²

The mere premonition that foreigners *might* overly influence, let alone attack, an Islamic state justified using "any means possible" to fight them. Shi'ism had once been a religion of private belief, but in the hands of Khomeini, it became a religion with political goals. According to Khomeini, clerics should run all government functions and there should be no separation of religion and politics.²³

In Lebanon, Musa al Sadr also politicized Shi'ism

in an effort to mobilize Shi'ites to seek greater political power and fairer treatment. Sadr's followers did not subscribe to the radical ideas espoused by Khomeini; they "wanted improved material conditions, government protection, equal opportunity, and a better future for their children."²⁴ However, by including political and religious goals in a single sphere of action, Sadr, like Khomeini, declared that a theologically legitimate defense by "any means possible" was a political affair, and acceptable. Fighting for justice now instead of waiting for justice later, when the Hidden Imam reappeared, became a Shi'a mantra in Lebanon.²⁵ According to Gilles Kepel, an expert on the modern Middle East, "[Sadr] turned Hussein's martyrdom into the doctrinal template for a general mobilization against social injustice, which for the first time raised the despised Shi'ites of Lebanon to the level of a real political force by giving them a sense of personal dignity."²⁶ Sadr created a politicized Shi'ite movement in Lebanon before the Iranian Revolution occurred. Then, in 1978, he disappeared.

Sadr's disappearance, like Hussein's martyrdom, sowed the seeds of resistance against occupation and control of Lebanon by foreign powers. The charged political atmosphere he had created and the political vacuum left by his disappearance became a fertile breeding ground for Khomeini's revolutionary ideas. A new group of Shi'ite activists formed Hezbollah, the "Party of God." They developed a doctrine in which self-martyrdom through suicide bombing for the sake of political gain became the ultimate expression of piety. Khomeini had politicized martyrdom, but the leap from political martyrdom to self-martyrdom required considerable theological development by Hezbollah's clerics.²⁷

Hezbollah developed a doctrine of suicide bombing and put it to great use militarily and politically in defeating what it perceived to be foreign invaders of Lebanon. But while the need that gave rise to the tactic was clearly political, Hezbollah developed the doctrine of self-martyrdom within the framework of the highly politicized Shi'ite jurisprudence emanating from Iran. Hezbollah's connection to the Iranian revolutionary clerics and in particular Khomeini is evident in its Open Letter of 1985: "We, the sons of Hizb Allah's nation, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic state, abide by

the orders of a single wise and just command currently embodied in the supreme Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini”²⁸

Even so, a doctrine of suicide bombing required a significant leap from the Iranian culture of martyrdom. Ayatollah Morteza Mutaharri, who helped inspire the Iranian Revolution, has explained the difficulty in developing a theological rationale for suicide bombing. In defining suicide and shahadat in an Islamic treatise, Mutaharri illuminates the oxymoronic nature of suicide bombing: “Self-murder: In this case, the death itself constitutes a crime, and hence, *it is the worst kind of death* [italics added]. Suicidal deaths and the deaths of those who are killed in motor accidents because of their own fault come under this category. The same is the case of the death of those who are killed while committing a crime. But shahadat is the death of a person who, in spite of being fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly faces them for the sake of a sacred cause, or, as the Qur’an says, *fi sabil Allah* (in the way of God).”²⁹

According to Mutaharri, suicide was the worst kind of death and martyrdom the best. This assertion posed a quandary for Hezbollah’s theologians, so Fadlallah developed a theological argument based on the politicization of martyrdom that overcame Shi’ite prohibitions against suicide.

During the Lebanese Civil War, Fadlallah underwent a profound religious transformation when the town in which he worked was shelled for days by the Maronites. In his 1976 *Al Islam wa Mantaq al Quwa* (Islam and the Logic of Force), Fadlallah argues for strength and force to establish justice. He says that without power, Shi’ites could neither spread the words of God nor uplift His people; therefore, God loved all who used violence to fight for His sake. This use of violence in the name of Islam did not, however, include suicide bombing.³⁰ Fadlallah’s understanding was more in line with that of Khomeini, Sadr, and the other revolutionary clerics of the time. He would need other sources of inspiration to develop a sound theological argument to permit suicide bombing.

Shi’ism recognizes reason as a source of Islamic jurisprudence.³¹ This tradition paved the way for Fadlallah’s theological justification of suicide bombing. As did Khomeini, Fadlallah subscribed to the notion that any means was justified when fight-

ing in defense. This was an extraordinary notion, but one shared by many. According to Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, “When unbelief threatens the existence of faith . . . even customary rules of warfare may be suspended.”³² Fadlallah asserted that this belief was not so different than one held by many in the West. According to Fadlallah, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with their vast tolls of human life, were examples of the belief by many that desperation justifies the use of weapons not customarily accepted as normal in warfare.³³

Fadlallah proclaimed that Lebanon’s occupation by foreign powers, most importantly the MNF and the Israelis, and the attempt by those foreigners to preserve a Christian-dominated government in Lebanon, created a defensive situation in which all means of warfare were legitimate. Hezbollah went even further than Khomeini. In its Open Letter it called the resistance a jihad instead of just a defaa.³⁴ As a result, it was mandatory for believers to participate in the resistance, and they were to use any means necessary. Martyrdom was the highest form of death, and circumstances required believers to commit acts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice.

Another argument held that because Imam Hussein had known of his impending martyrdom at Karbala but still chose to fight there, suicide bombing was acceptable.³⁵ Just as Hussein had known of his impending martyrdom, so, too, would the suicide bomber, and because his suicide was a means of jihad against foreign dominance, it was theologically acceptable. It was not really suicide but warfare in God’s name: “Suicide,” Fadlallah said, “is not an absolute value. It is an option left to a people who are without options, and so the act is no longer considered suicide but martyrdom in the name of self-defense. This is part of the logic of war.”³⁶

According to Fadlallah, it was the self-sacrifice, not the suicide, that mattered. Fadlallah used Hussein’s death at Karbala, as well as Sadr’s disappearance, to provide historical models of emulation to justify the sacrifice of the young men who would blow themselves up.³⁷ As an added incentive, martyrs who died in a legitimate act of jihad would go to heaven without their other deeds on earth being scrutinized by God.³⁸

It was the Iranian clerics who finally cemented a doctrine of self-sacrifice and martyrdom into

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Shi'ism. Ali Shariati, whose ideas helped form the basis of the Iranian Revolution and who was assassinated by the Shah's secret police in 1977, wrote, "*Shahadat* is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die."³⁹ In 1983, Khomeini called for Shi'ites around the world to continue to engage in acts of self-sacrifice to ensure the export of his Revolution.⁴⁰

From all of this, Fadlallah assembled what he thought was a rational argument for suicide bombing based on—

- The belief that extraordinary challenges to Islam authorized the use of extraordinary measures to combat threats to the faith.
- The belief that Imam Hussein had prior knowledge of his martyrdom.
- The politicization of martyrdom.
- Khomeini's call for self-sacrifice in order to export the Revolution.

Thus, the theological justification of suicide bombing was based on rational thought within the scope of radical Shi'ite jurisprudence. This justification was in place before Hezbollah sent out its first suicide bombers. Even so, Fadlallah's justification of suicide bombing was not reason enough to use this new method; it simply made the weapon available. The decision to use suicide bombing was a direct result of Hezbollah's understanding of the weapon's military value and the belief that such bombings could effect political change.

A Practical Tactic

In October 1983, when Islamic Jihad (one of the pseudonyms used by the then-relatively unknown Hezbollah) used suicide bombers to blow up the Marine barracks and the French peacekeepers' compound in Beirut, most Westerners deplored the bombings as pointless acts of violence carried out

by Muslims intent on little more than killing. This first impression was a long lasting one, and even as Hezbollah turned the focus of its suicide bombings toward other targets after the MNF left Lebanon, Westerners continued to view such events as evidence of senseless Islamist fanaticism. However, Hezbollah's decision to use suicide bombing was anything but irrational. After justifying the practice theologically, the group carefully weighed the military and political consequences of the tactic as compared to other tactics they could employ. With a thoughtful understanding of the capabilities of this weapon and the political goals it might help attain, Hezbollah carefully timed suicide-bombing operations to make their enemies pay significant military and political costs.

Hezbollah's leaders identified early on the political goals they hoped to achieve in Lebanon. Abbas Mussawi, the founder and leader of Hezbollah until the Israelis assassinated him, emphasized these goals. Hezbollah, he said, aimed to "boot colonialism out of Lebanon, repulse Israel (from southern Lebanon) and set up an Islamic republic" through armed struggle and social action.⁴¹

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, an early Hezbollah leader who became the group's secretary general after Mussawi's assassination, also identified the political goals of the movement. In a 1984 sermon he announced: "We oppose the programs and platform of the illegal and non-canonical government of Amin al-Jumayyil [Lebanon's president from 1982 to 1988] or any other military individual dependent on the superpowers. We shall continue our struggle until the Al-Jumayyil government is toppled. America, France, and Israel are enemies of Islam. We declare here that we follow the path of the Islamic Revolution and do not accept any other government in Lebanon."⁴²

Clearly, the goals of removing the government and kicking out foreign powers, though couched in the language of Islam, were predominantly political. To achieve them, Hezbollah decided to resort to arms. According to Fadlallah, the goal of armed conflict was to lift the yoke of oppression from the Shi'ites of Lebanon; it was a "revolt for their freedom."⁴³ Fadlallah declared that armed conflict would continue "until [Israel] leaves the last border strip."⁴⁴ Thus, Hezbollah's decision to use suicide bombing was a practical one: The group believed the tactic

would be useful in achieving its political goals.

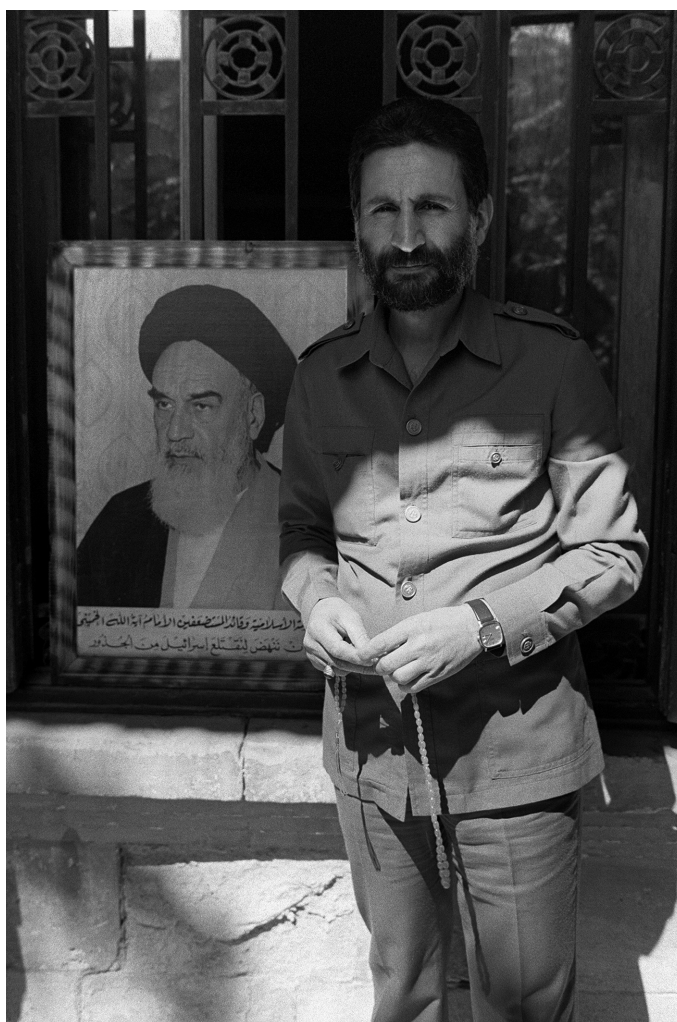
Hezbollah demonstrated military pragmatism by using what worked and discarding what did not. Even though it could not take on the Israelis in conventional fighting, the organization determined to “face force with equal or superior force.”⁴⁵ This entailed the use of unconventional, asymmetric tactics—specifically, the suicide bomber. When Israel used new tactics or weapons to counter Hezbollah’s tactics, Hezbollah developed new, sometimes more successful tactics of its own.⁴⁶ According to a political spokesman for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, Hezbollah was the only one of the many militias in Lebanon that reviewed its military actions to determine what it could do better the next time around: “These guys learn from their mistakes.”⁴⁷ Hezbollah’s constant review of the results of its military actions underlines the practicality of their military decisionmaking. In short, they conducted operations for their military value. Their decision to use suicide bombing was a practical one based on the military capabilities of this form of attack.

Hezbollah was certainly able and willing to carry out other forms of attack. In 3 hours in December 1983, in locations from Tyre to Sidon in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah (this time calling itself the Lebanese National Resistance) attacked the Israelis with rockets, machine guns, grenades, and remotely controlled roadside bombs.⁴⁸ Clearly, suicide bombing was not the only weapon or tactic Hezbollah had at its disposal; rather, the group favored suicide bombing because it provided a number of military advantages over more conventional tactics, such as ambushes and grenade attacks. David Benjamin and Steven Simon provide some key insights into these advantages: “[Using a suicide truck bomb] meant that if the driver stayed with the truck bomb, moving it as close to the target as possible, the attack would maximize the number of casualties. The driver himself would not be around afterward to name accomplices, minimizing the damage to the organization.”⁴⁹

The determined suicide bomber could almost always do some damage to the

enemy in his attack. Dressed as a civilian, not fearing death, and determined to take as many of the enemy with him as possible, the suicide attacker was tremendously effective. One Israeli general in southern Lebanon described it best when he said simply that suicide bombing “is a phenomenon which is hard to fight.”⁵⁰

Hezbollah was careful in how it employed suicide bombing. Although the tactic meant that the attacker could not be captured and give information to the enemy, the attack diminished the combat power of the organization through the bomber’s death. Too many suicide attacks that did not cause significant enemy casualties would erode Hezbollah’s already small numbers while providing little military advantage. Furthermore, the tactic was one of diminishing



Sheikh Abbas al-Mussawi, founder and leader of the Hezbollah (the Party of God) movement, poses 10 July 1985 in front of a portrait of Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini, in Baalbeck, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah stronghold in Bekaa Valley.

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returns. If Hezbollah used it too often, the Israelis would adapt to it, and if the attacks stopped causing casualties and yielding political benefits, it was less likely that there would be a corps of suicide bombers willing to participate. Fadlallah understood this: "We believe that suicide operations should only be carried out if they can bring about a political or military change in proportion to the passions that incite a person to make of his body an explosive bomb. As such, the operations launched by Muslims against Israeli intelligence centers in Tyre or Metulla were successful in that they significantly harmed the Israelis. But the present circumstances do not favor such operations anymore, and attacks that only inflict limited casualties (on the enemy) and destroy the building should not be encouraged, if the price is the death of the person who carries them out."⁵¹

Hezbollah used suicide bombings in a limited set of circumstances where it could hope to make serious gains. Often, Hezbollah's judicious use of the tactic clearly resulted in the successful accomplishment of political-military goals. The clarity with which one can infer the intended political-military objectives from the timing and success of individual attacks testifies to Hezbollah's understanding of the political situation, and its knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of the suicide attack.

By April 1983, the United States and Israel had moved to establish Maronite dominance in Lebanon and to secure a Lebanese-Israeli peace treaty.⁵² The signing of such a treaty was antithetical to all that Hezbollah stood for. It gave Israel permanent political influence in Lebanon, allowed its forces to remain in south Lebanon, and gave the Maronites international legitimacy as Lebanon's political rulers. Hezbollah had to act.

The organization's first suicide attack came during the afternoon of 18 April 1983, when a suicide bomber from "Islamic Jihad" blew himself up in a car near the U.S. Embassy, killing and wounding a number of Lebanese Army soldiers and Americans (including Robert Ames, the CIA station chief) and collapsing a portion of the embassy compound.⁵³ The bombing was a tactical success because it succeeded in killing Americans and severely damaging the embassy. It also resulted in some strategic benefits for Hezbollah: It so disrupted the peace talks that both the Israelis and the

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Americans felt the need to declare that the talks were still ongoing despite the bombing.⁵⁴ According to an American source quoted by Beirut Voice of Lebanon radio, the Americans quickly understood that the bombing had been "specifically aimed at frustrating President Reagan's initiative on Lebanon and the Middle East."⁵⁵

Of course, the centerpiece of this initiative was the Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty. Hezbollah achieved a moderate success with this first attack. A treaty that many thought would be signed quickly took another full month to negotiate, and it took even longer to get the Lebanese Parliament to approve it. This was an omen of things to come.

On 23 October 1983, Hezbollah seized the world stage with the Marine barracks and French compound bombings.⁵⁶ It revealed the intended outcomes of this double suicide bombing a month later, in a radio broadcast justifying the attacks and threatening more to come: "It has become certain to us that our enemies will not leave our country unless we fight them. . . . At-Tufayli made an oath by God that death will reach them at the hands of the believers [al-mu'minin] even if they are in lofty fortresses."⁵⁷ By establishing a clear political objective, Hezbollah was letting the allies know it sought specific goals through the use of this weapon. The violence was not just random; Hezbollah wanted the members of the MNF to know that. It gave the MNF a choice: Leave Lebanon, or die.

Hezbollah continued to use threats to pressure the MNF to leave. By March of the next year, Hezbollah was warning Lebanese citizens to stay clear of French positions because the positions would be targets until the French left Lebanon.⁵⁸ The organization wanted the foreigners to know it had the means and the will to kill soldiers, and nowhere would be safe. Such messages were meant

to undermine public support in the United States and elsewhere by making the mission seem too risky. The tactic worked: “Hezbollah calculated correctly that the United States could be prompted to act in a certain way if the costs of its current policy were too high.”⁵⁹ Hezbollah’s political message—with the exclamation point of the double suicide bombings—was heard loud and clear. The MNF pulled out of Lebanon.

Within a few days of the October bombings, on 4 November, Hezbollah used the suicide attack again. This time the target was the Israeli Security Services (Shin Bet) base in Tyre. The bombing injured and killed a number of Israelis even though the Israelis had been alerted to the threat by the barracks attacks. Hezbollah’s political goal quickly became clear. Once again identifying itself as Islamic Jihad, the organization announced that its operation had abrogated the Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty and that suicide attacks would continue until the treaty was done away with.⁶⁰

The Tyre attack also achieved military gains. When Hezbollah succeeded in bombing a major Israeli target despite the Israeli Defense Force’s (IDF’s) knowing that such attacks were likely, it unsettled the Israelis, forcing them to question their ability to protect themselves from an enemy who seemed to have an unstoppable weapon. The bombing also forced the Israelis to move out of population centers, with the result that Hezbollah could move freely among the populace and limit collateral damage to civilian bystanders when they carried out attacks against the Israelis.⁶¹ Hezbollah had learned from earlier Palestinian-Israeli battles that collateral damage could turn a civilian populace against the cause of liberation, as it seemed to have done not only for the Palestinians but also for the Israelis. Therefore, driving the Israelis to outposts where they could have little influence over the civilian populace, and where Hezbollah could attack them without hurting civilians, was a major military success.

Operations after 1983 demonstrated the sophistication of Hezbollah’s suicide attacks and their harmonization with political and military goals. A suicide car-bomb attack against the British Embassy on 20 September 1984 almost succeeded in killing both the American and British ambassadors to Lebanon.⁶² The attack demonstrated that not

even the ambassadors of foreign powers seeking to influence Lebanon could operate with impunity. Hezbollah also showed it could develop and execute such attacks quickly. On 8 March 1985, a bomb, likely planted by the CIA but at the time believed to have been planted by the Israelis, blew up outside Fadlallah’s residence in Beirut, killing numerous people but leaving Fadlallah unharmed. Just two days later, on 10 March, Hezbollah responded with a suicide bomber who attacked an IDF convoy, killing 10 soldiers.⁶³ Hezbollah sought to demonstrate that no military act against them would go unanswered, and that its answer would always entail the deaths of its enemies.

By the end of 1985, Hezbollah had succeeded in driving out the MNF and in forcing the IDF to withdraw from Beirut and a large portion of southern Lebanon to a small sliver of land in the south. Trying to hasten Israel’s pull-back and eject it altogether from Lebanese soil, Hezbollah staged at least 12 suicide bombings from the middle of the year until November. Several of the attacks were carried out by bombers on donkeys.⁶⁴ These bombings were unambiguous political and military messages that Israeli soldiers would continue to die until their withdrawal from Lebanon was complete.

In 1986 and beyond, as suicide bombings began to yield fewer enemy casualties, Hezbollah used them less frequently, although they remained a potent threat. One suicide bomber blew himself up in October 1988, killing eight IDF soldiers. Knowing that this would provoke an Israeli counterattack, Hezbollah threatened to execute two Israeli soldiers captured in February 1986 if the Israelis mounted a ground attack against them.⁶⁵ These asymmetric tactics—a suicide bombing followed by a threat to execute prisoners—demonstrated Hezbollah’s ability to adapt and innovate in pursuit of its military and political objectives.

Legitimacy via Suicide Bombing

The political landscape during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) was utterly chaotic. Not only were warring factions almost too numerous to count, but for almost 2 decades Syria, Israel, the United States, France, Italy, Great Britain, and a handful of Iranians took part in military action in Lebanon. Israel and Syria sought to dominate the country (only Syria succeeded). Within this landscape, people

naturally became cynical, viewing most militias as groups of thugs, one group not much different from the other. In this environment, Hezbollah rose above the crowd as a pious defender of a true ideal. On top of its religious and military implications, Hezbollah's use of suicide bombing was the avenue through which it pursued legitimacy both within the country and abroad. Hezbollah claimed to be the protector of Lebanon, intent on ending factionalism and driving out foreigners—at least non-Syrian ones—who sought to dominate Lebanon. Suicide bombing would be their proof.

According to Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "Religious fundamentalism thrives on a sense of embattlement..."⁶⁶ Hezbollah did not have to do anything to create that sense of embattlement among disenfranchised Shi'ites in southern Lebanon and the slums of Beirut. These Shi'ites lived in war zones where warring parties wreaked havoc on their homes and places of work and where the government sought to deprive them of the power that their majority status should have yielded. A sense of embattlement had caused earlier generations of Shi'ites to join the ranks of Musa al Sadr's Amal. After al Sadr died, Amal lost much of its popular appeal and seemed to be little different from the other groups vying for dominance. When Mussawi sought to swing Amal to an Islamic path in line with the Iranian Revolution, he was booted out of the organization. In response, he created Islamic Amal in 1982, the precursor to Hezbollah.⁶⁷ Islamic Amal sought legitimacy through resistance to the Israeli occupation and through Islam.

But for an incident that took place in Nabatiya on 16 October 1983, Mussawi's new group might have remained just another face in the crowd of thugs that dominated the country. But on that day, an Israeli convoy in Nabatiya drove into the middle of a Shi'ite procession marking Ashura. The Shi'ites responded by overturning several Israeli vehicles and throwing rocks at the soldiers, who then fired into the crowd, killing and wounding several Shi'ites. The Shi'ites saw this as a sacrilege, and the entire community turned against Israel and the MNF, which it perceived to be Israel's lackey.⁶⁸ Amal and other Shi'ite organizations responded mostly with words. Shams al-Din, the head Shi'ite in Lebanon, responded to the incident by calling for civil disobedience against the Israelis, forbidding

cooperation of any sort with Israeli troops, demanding an end to factionalism, asking that the government pay attention to the plight of the Shi'ites, and calling for the unity of Lebanon.⁶⁹

While Amal and Shams al-Din responded with words, Hezbollah responded with action: the bombings of the Marine and French quarters and the Shin Bet building in Tyre. Shams al-Din asked the population to employ civil disobedience and wait "years before we achieve our final objective."⁷⁰ Hezbollah sought to achieve that final objective as quickly as possible through military action.

Suicide bombers represented altruistic resistance to foreign occupation in the eyes of many Lebanese, not just Shi'ites. In a country torn by corrupt, greedy factions, the selflessness of the suicide bomber gave Hezbollah the moral high ground and, thus, a measure of legitimacy. That legitimacy was increased by bombings undertaken after Hezbollah's 1985 Open Letter. The sincerity of the letter, which espoused piety and dedication to the cause of freeing Lebanon from foreign domination and factionalism, was proven to the eyes of a once-skeptical public by the selfless actions of Hezbollah's martyrs.⁷¹

Hezbollah's bid for legitimacy proved extremely successful. Augustus Richard Norton writes that by 1985, "[Amal] was profoundly challenged by the more radical Hizballah.... Hizballah supplanted Amal in the environs of Beirut..."⁷² Hezbollah's success in legitimizing its cause through suicide bombing was underlined by the rush of its competitors, especially the Syrians, to use the tactic. In response to the growing popularity of Hezbollah, other groups began to advertise the number of suicide attacks and guerrilla operations in which they were involved, often inflating the number to give themselves more credibility as resistance fighters. Various groups called international and local news organizations to claim as many suicide bombings as they could.⁷³ Clearly, other groups thought that suicide bombing and claims of attacking Israelis and other foreigners was an effective path to legitimacy.

Hezbollah's suicide bombers served as models, inspiring others to join the fight. Martyrs had long been a source of inspiration, if not emulation, for pious Shi'ites, and the suicide bombers seemed to have lived and died deaths worthy of the 12 Imams and the other great heroes of Shi'ism.⁷⁴ Pious

Shi'ites extolled the bombers' sacrifices and sought to inspire other young men to emulate them. Indeed, young children "play[ed] martyr" under the eyes of approving teachers.⁷⁵ Throughout the south Lebanon countryside, signs commemorated the heroism of the suicide bomber. One such sign read: "On October 19, 1988 at 1:25 p.m. a martyr car that was body-trapped with 500 kilogram of highly exploding materials transformed two Israeli troops into masses of fire and limbs, in one of the severe kicks that the Israeli army had received in Lebanon."⁷⁶

Hezbollah turned suicide bombing into the paradigm of resistance. Others, inspired by the group's dedication, sought to resist on their own. Several women who were not Hezbollah members conducted suicide bombings, as did a would-be suicide bomber from Mali (who was foiled in his attempt).⁷⁷ Accolades showered on Hezbollah's self-martyrs caused others to follow in their footsteps and inspired international recognition of Hezbollah as the legitimate resistance in Lebanon. Writers as far away as Tripoli extolled the virtues of Hezbollah and the suicide attack.⁷⁸ The attack developed into an effective propaganda tool, became the symbol that defined a movement, and to many who supported its goals, legitimized Hezbollah members as the bearers of the resistance.

Last Words

Although Westerners, at least initially, viewed suicide bombing as pointless violence done in the name of Islam, they were mistaken. Hezbollah thought deeply about the theological implications of the weapon, its capabilities and limitations, the political and military goals that it could help

achieve, and its propaganda value. Hezbollah's favored tactic was far from being illogical; in fact, given the political situation and the culture, it was quite rational and perhaps even moral.

Had suicide bombing been the work of an irrational, irresponsible organization, the goals the organization sought to achieve would not have been so clear, nor would the organization have achieved as much militarily or politically as Hezbollah did in the 1980s. Combining suicide bombing with other guerrilla tactics, Hezbollah achieved the greatest possible military effect. The organization also understood that suicide bombing could function domestically as an effective propaganda tool, one that could legitimize Hezbollah within the Lebanese political scene.

In a world that now abounds with human bombs, from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to the war in Chechnya, to Afghanistan and Iraq, understanding suicide bombing as a multifaceted phenomenon is vital to developing counter-tactics. Although some will not use suicide bombing as wisely or judiciously as Hezbollah, suicide bombing has become an omnipresent threat on the modern battlefield and a threat that, to be countered, must be understood for what it really is: an effective, time-tested tactic that in competent hands can be used to achieve political-military objectives. Further study will determine whether the framework of analysis used here to explain Hezbollah's use of suicide bombing in the 1980s applies equally to other groups who employ the tactic. If this analysis is applicable, then counterterrorist organizations must develop tactics that seek to undermine the religious, military, and political logic of the weapon. **MR**

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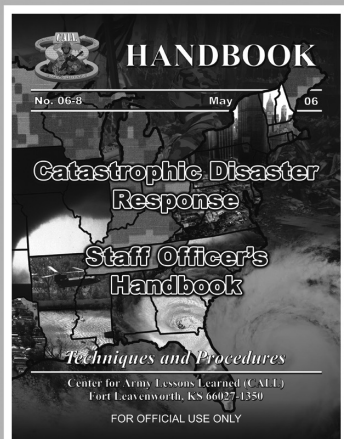
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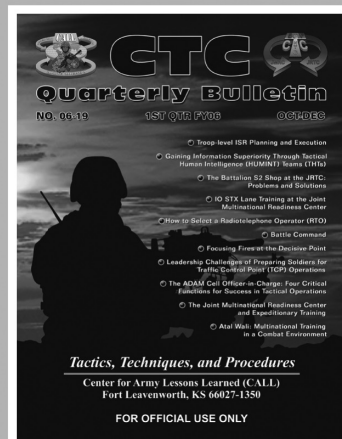
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