Humiliation, Helplessness Propel Outbreak of Suicide Bomber Attacks

By Ronald S. Kraybill

 "Al-Qaida Cannot Succeed Without Our Help"

 The reports of suicide bombers have been so frequent and widespread in recent weeks that the dates, places and casualty counts begin to blur. Here is a brief recap:

Aug. 24: Chechen women are the suspected suicide bombers in two plane crashes in Russia that kill 90 people;
Aug. 31: 10 people are killed in a suicide bombing near a Moscow subway station;
Aug. 31: 16 people are killed in simultaneous car bombings in southern Israel;
Sept. 14: a Palestinian suicide bomber attacks an Israeli army patrol near a West Bank checkpoint wounding two people;
Sept. 17: a suicide car bomber kills three people and wounds 23 in Baghdad;
Sept. 18: a suicide car bomber kills 23 people in Kirkuk, Iraq.

Whether the attackers are described as Chechen rebels, Hamas militants or Iraqi insurgents, there are commonalities among the people who deliberately sacrifice their lives for a cause, said Ronald S. Kraybill, professor of conflict studies at Eastern Mennonite University, in Harrisonburg, Va.

Kraybill formerly served as training director at the Centre for Conflict Resolution in South Africa and as director of Mennonite Conciliation Service in the United States. He has developed training programs at conflict resolution centers throughout Africa and North America and has led training seminars in Europe and Asia.

Terrorism is a phenomenon that is here to stay, he said, and people feeling humiliation and helplessness that result in irrational rage cause suicide bombings.

He likens the quest to understand suicide bombers with medicine's struggle to differentiate between the symptoms and causes of malaria. While early efforts focused on treating headaches or fever, neither treatment helped reduce outbreaks of malaria. Over centuries, however, medical researchers began to figure out the underlying causes and to start to treat them.

"Suicide bombers are a symptom of an underlying disease," said Kraybill. "Unfortunately, our ability to understand conflicts at this moment in history is probably as limited as our ability to understand disease was a century or two ago. We have leadership and broad populations investing enormous energy responding at the level of the symptoms who are totally clueless about the causes."

The war on terrorism is an example of responding to symptoms rather than causes, he said.

"Responding to symptoms while ignoring causes prolongs the suffering. But if we get to an understanding of what the problem is that drives suicide bombers," he said, "then we have a chance, at least, to avoid escalating the problems. We can actually contribute to the healing of our world."

Suicide bombers are not people who one day decide to hate President Bush or President Clinton or whoever is in power, he said. They develop when humiliation and desperation fester over time.

Humiliation can result from a number of causes, including severe poverty, abuses of human rights, or a sense that one's community is being blocked and defeated.

"It's not just because one person feels he's not rich enough or that he's having a hard time in life," said Kraybill. "It's rather that all the things that give people meaning and a sense of coherency in the world are bound up in this. When people have that huge sense that their core community is under threat, then the notion of taking one's own life is not so ridiculous as it may seem. There is the sense that the giving up of their own life is actually contributing to the giving of true life to many, many others and to a whole community through the cause that they're connected to."

Another contributing factor is a sense of helplessness. People who chronically feel humiliation may believe there is nothing they can do to improve their situation, he said.

The combination of humiliation and helplessness can result in a profound sense of rage that supersedes what others might consider rational thinking, he said. Suicide bombers believe that their humanity and values are so diminished that they will do anything to strike back.

Security measures are important, but the doctrine of security that has emerged from the American experience is focused on eliminating enemies, he said. That approach worked well when two oceans protected the country, when international travel was limited and when the most powerful weapons were monopolized by nation states.

But the world has changed and the doctrine of security held by U.S. leaders and most of the population is half a century out of date, he said.

Guerrilla warriors know they cannot militarily defeat a powerful enemy, but that's not what they are trying to do. Instead, they are trying to provoke an attack against them that will, in turn, anger a larger population they hope to mobilize.

"So we see al-Qaida, which is seeking to stir up angry retaliation by the United States in order to bring backlash at the level of the Muslim masses," said Kraybill. "Al-Qaida cannot succeed at that strategy without our help."

Until recently, terrorist groups lived at the margins of their communities, but "we have played into their hands at every step of the way by giving them exactly what they want, namely overwhelming, invasive, military response. The thousands, and probably millions (of people), that we've driven into their arms is the real danger for our long-term security. And the danger is probably more to our children and our grandchildren than to us in the immediate moment."

Kraybill believes that technical advances in bio-weaponry during the next couple of decades will put the power to destroy all humanity within the hands of a few individuals.

The only chance for humanity to survive is to "drain the swamps of human misery that breed the crocodiles of terror," he said. "Right now, we're all worried about killing crocodiles. The strategies that we're using are going to multiply the crocodiles over the long term. There's no way we can destroy all the people who resent us enough at this point to act as terrorists against us."

Many of the swamp-draining steps Kraybill proposes are highly conventional. They include economic development, health care, education, employment and housing.

He does not advise against protective measures, but he estimates that 99 percent of current U.S. strategies are for protection and 1 percent are for rooting out the causes of terrorism. A plan that brings those strategies into balance is a reasonable goal, he said.

While some of the 9/11 terrorists were not particularly devout Muslims, it is possible to see a spiritual aspect to their acts when spirituality is defined as the structures that give meaning to life. Some may have been motivated by extremist views of religion, said Kraybill, but for others there was simply a religious community with which they identified.

Kraybill is currently working in Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers, a separatist group, have been responsible for 60,000 deaths over 30 years, including 200 suicide bombings. The Tigers think of themselves as a clearly defined ethnic group and most are followers of Hinduism, but religion does not play a strong role in their identity.

The notion that the teachings of Islam command Iraqi insurgents to commit violence reflects a limited understanding, said Kraybill.

There are Islamic imams who speak in the name of religion and issue fatwas that instruct certain followers to engage in suicide missions, he said, but that's the equivalent of Christian pastors endorsing certain wars. Individual leaders who may be Muslims or Christians choose to use their religion on behalf of projects they think are important, but that does not mean that the religion itself does.

Islam emphasizes conformity to authority, he said, so followers of extremist leaders may be vulnerable to excesses.

Kraybill acknowledges a dark side in all religions. "There are passages in the scriptures of Jews and Christians that are blood curdling. Great numbers of been killed with the support of leaders in both religions," he said.

But all religions, including Islam, also have texts that encourage justice, mercy and care for enemies.

"We need to look at both the light and the darkness that's present in all religions," he said, "and we bear a responsibility to function in the here and now with a deep and thoughtful ethical analysis that asks what response to our current situation is appropriate in light of the guidance we receive from tradition."

In addition, the United States' exclusive backing of Israel in its complex dispute with Palestine has angered and humiliated many nations in the Middle East, he said. An evenhanded approach would go a long way toward restoring the confidence of other nations.

"Israeli handling of the Palestinians is a towering factor aggravating many Islamic extremists," he said. "Huge errors have been made on both sides. I'm not sure that most American Christians have any clue about this."

Cozy ties with other Middle East governments that are noted for human rights abuses have forced the U.S. to look the other way when violations occur, he said. His prescription calls for the United States to forcefully condemn human rights abuses wherever they occur.

"My Arabic students over the last couple of years just roll their eyes about all the fuss that was made about Saddam Hussein," he said. "They say, yes, of course he's a dictator and a bad guy, but so are the governments of many of the other regimes in the region."

Hollywood also has played a major role in the humiliation of the Muslim world by invading their communities with displays of sex and infidelity that are offensive to believers, he said.

American soap operas play on television in virtually all the major cities of the world. These shows present a daily fantasy that the global community takes to be the reality of

American life, he said, and this perception exists even among sophisticated, well-educated Muslims.

"If someone had set out to devise a strategy to totally discredit a nation in the global community, they could not come up with anything better than what is pumped abroad from Hollywood every day of the year," said Kraybill. Because the Muslim community is extremely conservative with regard to the human body and sexuality, "they think that this is a land of perfidy and sin," he said.

"Many Americans see that TV erodes traditional values," he said, "but almost no one seems to recognize that it is also a massive force in eroding our security because it destroys our credibility in the eyes of the world."

While international relations are often laid at the feet of government officials, there are many things that religious communities can do to help, said Kraybill.

"The Bible is explicit in its rejection of trust in weapons as a source of security. From a biblical perspective, there's no room for fear as the primary motivator of our response to the world. The prophets say again and again, the worship God wants from us is to feed the poor, pay just wages, respect the stranger, care for those in need. When we do this, the prophets say, God will enable us to flourish. So we need to hear from our leaders that draining the swamps of misery is the first requirement of faith, the most elementary strategy for survival. The connection between generous care for the world and worship of God often seems to be ignored in churches," he said. "The consequence is that we go along quietly as our nation invests almost exclusively in weapons for security, and we trust in something that has no values other than self-protection."

Churches also need to build human understandings between Christianity and Muslims.

"There is something powerful when people sit in each other's living rooms or when people get to know each other as human beings," he said. "That's a huge task that we've barely begun between Christianity and Islam."

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