

# The Economics of Peace and Security Journal

© www.epsjournal.org.uk, ISSN 1749-852X

## Book Review

**Hafez, Mohammed. 2006. *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press. xvi + 125 pp. ISBN 1-929223-72-2 (pb). Price: \$12.50.**

**Hafez, Mohammed. 2007. *Suicide Bombers in Iraq. The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press. xviii + 287 pp. ISBN 1-60127-004-6 (pb). Price: \$17.50.**

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [26 September 2007]

The author has written no less than two books on the topic of suicide bombers, using basically the same methodology – the first deals with the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, the second with the struggle of Iraqi Sunni Muslims against both the U.S.-led coalition and the Shi'ites. In both works, the analysis is subdivided into three levels: the individual suicide bombers, the terrorist organizations, and the societies from which they originate and in which they operate (in most cases the same). This subdivision works quite well. The analysis on the level of individuals takes into account psychological factors, including the role of religious beliefs that allow “martyrdom” to appear as an entirely rational choice in view of the expected rewards in the afterlife. At the level of organizations, suicide bombing is merely one of several possible tactics among which the organizations – as rational strategic actors – have to choose, taking into account anticipated gains and losses not only in their struggle against the adversary, but also in the competition with other groups and organizations. What may recommend “martyrdom operations” are factors such as the relatively modest costs of such operations (even though there are usually indirect costs in the form of “pensions” for the families) and the greater average number of kills per attack. At the societal level, the general acceptability of martyrdom operations plays a central role as the organizations are almost inevitably seeking support for their cause – even though this is less the case for an organization such as al Qaeda in Iraq (consisting to a large extent of foreigners) than for the various Palestinian groups.

This general methodology works well in both books, and for both the author has assembled an impressive amount of empirical material. Contrary to many other writers on terrorism, he has generally avoided the use of classified material and anonymous sources and used only open sources, thus making his analysis entirely replicable. The books are generally well-written and accessible for nonspecialists. They are also very balanced in their approach to the problem, seeking to understand the terrorists on their own terms, but without in any way condoning their actions, which is also reflected in the policy recommendations derived from the analyses.

In the book on Palestinian “human bombs” Hafez points out that the punitive as well as defensive Israeli reactions – the former exemplified by targeted assassinations and the latter by the protective fence/wall – have been counterproductive as they have “fostered feelings of victimization and given legitimacy to violent militants who attack civilians.” As an alternative for the Israeli authorities he recommends a “carrots and sticks” strategy as well as engagement with religious and national Palestinian authorities while also warning against a paternalistic attitude likely to cause resentment. “Attempts to directly influence cultural developments, especially ones bound to religious notions, will undoubtedly be perceived as Western arrogance and meddling in the affairs of others” (p. 74).

The situation in Iraq is more complicated, partly reflected in the fact that this book is twice the length of that on Palestine. The main complication is that this conflict is not nearly as binary as the other, featuring several different, yet interlinked and interlocking, conflicts over national liberation from foreign occupation, the establishment of a theocratic caliphate, and national separatism or even secessionism. The various actors also have different goals and strategies, some seeking a more equitable and fair distribution of power in the state (which includes both former moderate Baathists and religious fundamentalists), others such as ideological Baathists and al Qaeda aiming for nothing less than a complete state collapse, e.g., by fomenting sectarian violence. Unfortunately, the latter seem to have prevailed, in part because of a number of mistakes made by the coalition/occupation forces. One of the most monumental of these, according to the author, was the disbandment of all the Iraqi security forces without anything resembling a DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) program, followed by a sacking of all public employees who belonged to the outlawed Baath party, regardless of the merits or track records of the individuals. Whereas some had surely been guilty of unpardonable crimes, the vast majority simply acquired their party membership as an admission ticket into public office, i.e., out of opportunism. Having been deprived of their jobs a large share of these victims of misguided policies opted in favor of rebellion, albeit mainly its more moderate wing, whereas the ideological Baathists have, rather paradoxically, joined the more extremist wing, dominated by the so-called jihadist salafis, with whom they have little ideological affinity but whose vindictiveness and desire for systemic collapse they share.

Both books are among the very best in their respective geographical fields as well as within the rapidly growing field of terrorism studies and are thus highly recommended.

**Bjørn Møller** is Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies.