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Winning Counterterrorism's Version of Pascal's Wager, but Struggling To Open the Purse

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Commentary on Lankford [BBS 37(4), 2014] --

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Abstract: Lankford’s essential empirical argument, which is based on evidence such as psychological autopsies, is that suicide attacks are caused by suicidality. By operationalizing this causal claim in a hypothetical experiment, I show the claim to be provable, and I contend that its truth is supported by Lankford’s data. However, I question his ensuing arguments about beauty and goodness, and thereby the practical value of his work in counterterrorist propaganda.

Lankford (2013c) presents a thorough and often compelling empirical argument that suicide attackers are motivated by a drive to kill themselves, rather than by a drive to martyr themselves. Along with this argument about truth, however, are less explicit arguments about beauty and goodness, and all three must be recognized to understand the
theoretical and practical significance of the myth of martyrdom and Lankford’s debunking of it.

**Truth.** Lankford’s psychological autopsies offer fascinating glimpses into the lives and mental states of suicide attackers, and do paint a picture of troubled individuals at risk for suicide. But it is unclear whether such data show that suicidality is the underlying cause of suicide attackers’ behavior, with ideology affecting merely the form and targets of the attacks. Moreover, it is unclear whether, in a scientific sense, Lankford’s central causal claim is even provable.

A helpful approach to this problem is to operationalize the hypothesized cause-effect relation. If an “anti-suicidality” drug – perhaps soon to be actually available (Duval et al. 2013) – were surreptitiously administered to a random half of communities in a terrorist-prone region, the suicidal-terrorists prediction is that, over time, fewer suicide attackers would come from the treatment communities than from the control communities. Various analyses and control groups can be envisioned to address issues of necessity and multiple causation (see Lankford’s “requirements” and “facilitators,” p. 152), but this rudimentary hypothetical test alone shows that the causal link between suicidality and suicide attacks is provable. Furthermore, we can evaluate Lankford’s core empirical argument by asking a follow-up Bayesian question: Do his data make us expect that the described treatment effect would in fact be observed? I think they do, and by this standard, *The Myth of Martyrdom* succeeds as an argument for suicide attacks being caused by suicidality.
The veridicality of Lankford’s causal claim has important practical implications. Understanding the psychology of suicide terrorists should enable us to “explain, predict, and prevent their attacks better than ever before” (p. 152), and Lankford offers several excellent suggestions. A straightforward additional preventative measure to consider would be to encourage the prescribing of antidepressants in terrorism-prone populations. Remarkably, even dispensing analgesics might help (DeWall et al. 2010; Randles et al. 2013) – not a counterterrorism measure likely to be considered without Lankford’s revelation that suicidal terrorists typically fear life and desperately need “to escape unbearable pain” (p. 7).

Lankford suggests using Nock et al.’s (2010) implicit suicidality test to screen for suicide terrorists at airports, but this approach would be unnecessarily indirect. In the security context, suicidality is important because it sometimes portends an “attack,” “killing,” or “terrorism,” and the implicit association procedure could just as well test directly for associations between any of these concepts and the self (see Greenwald et al. 1998). Thus, although Nock et al.’s (2010) test might be interesting as a demonstration of the suicidal-terrorists hypothesis, it would not be the best application of the implicit association test in terms of safeguarding the public.

**Beauty and goodness.** Where *The Myth of Martyrdom* shifts from arguing that suicide attackers are suicidal, to arguing that they are therefore not heroes, the debate about truth subtly becomes a debate about beauty, and ultimately, goodness. The suicidal-
terrorists thesis showcases the ugliness of suicide attacks and the evilness of the terrorist organizations perpetrating them, and Lankford echoes Pascal in reasoning that even if his thesis were false, treating it as true would pay off in psychological-warfare terms (p. 172). However, the empirical validity of the suicidal-terrorists hypothesis does not establish the normative validity of Lankford’s judgment that, whereas Secret Service agents are laudable heroes, suicide terrorists are vile cowards. No matter how viscerally compelling we may find this judgment, it is essentially an aesthetic one, and Lankford’s attempt to substantiate its validity has several shortcomings.

First, heroes are not subjected to the same thorough psychological autopsies that proved so eye-opening in the case of suicide terrorists. If we can find suicidality beneath “terrorist ideology,” then perhaps we would find authoritarianism, or megalomania, or some other less-than-noble quality beneath “heroic sacrifice.”

Second, the trolley-problem data are not good evidence that taking lives is never heroic. The fact that moral intuitions about an action saving eight lives depend on whether it is described as “throwing a bomb on a person” or “throwing a person on a bomb” (p. 103) does not show that these intuitions are normatively valid. Rather, it shows that moral intuitions can be myopic (Waldmann & Dieterich 2007), and non-robust to framing manipulations.

Third, although Lankford’s analysis of sacrifice versus suicide is insightful – the decision-time point alone suggests several lines of research – it fails to demonstrate that
what appear to be qualitative motivational differences are not in fact differences of circumstance and opportunity. Becoming a Secret Service agent is, to be sure, a low-probability way of self-orchestrating one’s death, but taking a bullet for the president might be one of the few available and meaningful ways to indulge a death wish, given the agent’s situation and culture. Similarly, Lankford acknowledges the principle that “committing a suicide attack makes the most sense for those who are disabled and can no longer keep up with their comrades” (p. 86), and this would seem to doubly apply to those whose disability is suicidality. A suicide attack is a dubious and indirect way of “saving” one’s comrades, but it might be one of the few meaningful and available ways to do so in the suicidal terrorist’s situation and culture.

Fourth, Lankford’s illuminating argument that suicide attackers, unlike heroes, help themselves (to die) but do not really help their cause and comrades much, does not give enough weight to a crucial way in which suicide attackers do contribute. Like hunger strikers, self-immolators, and some pacifists, suicide terrorists provide their cause with a symbolic advantage, or in the case of “escapist suicides,” protect their cause from a symbolic disadvantage. As Lankford laments, killing oneself in the name of a cause seems to give the cause added gravitas in the eyes of the enemy, and terrorists recognize this: “Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood” (p. 54).


