

Middle East Dialogue...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

SUICIDE TERRORISM: COMPETING EXPLANATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

Ivan Sascha Sheehan, PhD
College of Public Affairs
University of Baltimore

David V. Sheehan, PhD
Professor Emeritus
College of Medicine
University of South Florida

Panel Overview:

This panel will examine competing cross-disciplinary explanations for suicide terrorism and promote discussion of these explanations in a Middle East context.

Individuals who commit acts of suicide terrorism are believed to do so for religious, cultural, strategic, political, or sociological reasons, or because they are driven by hopelessness, revenge, love, hate, despair, or a desire for attention. Whether suicide terrorists suffer from psychopathology, exhibit clinical signs of suicidality/homicidality, or are otherwise without mental illness and motivated by purely strategic, religious, or political agendas is a matter of contention. Panelists will present papers recently published in a special issue of the journal *Clinical Innovations in Neuroscience* on suicide terrorism¹ and discuss the need for better data collection to more accurately frame the problem of suicide violence.

Presentation Title: Suicide Terrorism: A Critical Assessment of Evidence

Presenter: Ivan Sascha Sheehan, Ph.D.

Presentation Abstract:

The literature on suicide terrorism, the most lethal form of terrorist violence, is largely dominated by the fields of Political Science and International Relations where the prevailing wisdom is that suicide terrorists are without mental illness. But how good is the evidence to support this contention? Knowing whether suicide terrorists are in fact suicidal has policy implications for prevention, rehabilitation, and the “softer” side of counterterrorism designed to win hearts and minds. This presentation will examine the history of suicide terrorism in a Middle East context and examine the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence for and against the possibility that suicide terrorists may be suicidal with the goal of placing these arguments in the context of a broader range of explanations for suicide violence.

¹ *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* is the official peer-reviewed journal of The International Society for Clinical Trials Methodology (ISCTM).

Presentation Title: Suicide Terrorism and Psychopathology: The Case for Better Data Collection

Presenter: David V. Sheehan, M.D. M.B.A.

Presentation Abstract:

This presentation will critically assess the prevailing wisdom, largely based on anecdotal evidence, that suicide terrorists are normal and without psychopathology. The presentation will also review current rates of suicide terrorist incidents and address the empirical evidence and limitations of evidence suggesting low rates of psychiatric disorders among suicide terrorists. The presentation will outline a systematic evidence-based approach to collecting reproducible data on the contribution of mental illness and suicidality to suicide terrorist acts. The case for systematically collected data will be outlined in an effort to minimize the threat posed by such violence and the need to better understand the intersection of mental illness and suicide terrorism discussed.

References

1. Sheehan, Ivan Sascha. (2014). "Suicide Terrorism: A Critical Assessment of Evidence." *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* [Forthcoming November 2014].
2. Sheehan DV, Giddens JM, Sheehan IS. (2014). "Status Update on the Sheehan Suicidality Tracking Scale (S-STS) 2014." *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* [Forthcoming November 2014].
3. Sheehan, Ivan Sascha. (2009). "Has the War on Terrorism Changed the Terrorist Threat?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Routledge/ Taylor and Francis Group, Volume 32/ Issue 8, 743 – 761.
4. Sheehan, Ivan Sascha. (2007). When Terrorism and Counterterrorism Clash: The War on Terrorism and the Transformation of Terrorist Activity, Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press.
5. Atran S. (2003). "Genesis of suicide terrorism." *Science* 299: 1534-39.
6. Merari, A. (2010) Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism, Oxford University Press.

Panelist Bios:

- Dr. Ivan Sascha Sheehan is Assistant Professor of Public and International Affairs in the College of Public Affairs at the University of Baltimore where he directs the graduate programs in *Negotiation and Conflict Management* and *Global Affairs and Human Security*.² He can be reached at: isheehan@ubalt.edu
- Dr. David V. Sheehan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of South Florida College of Medicine. He can be reached at: dsheehan@health.usf.edu

² Dr. Ivan Sascha Sheehan has twice presented at the Middle East Dialogue (2013, 2014); twice published in the *Digest of Middle East Studies* (2013, 2014); and also published in a Policy Studies Organization edited volume (2014).