

**OF LION HEARTS, TERRIBLE WOLVES AND SACRIFICIAL LAMBS:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE RATIONALE AND CONDITIONS FOR
SUICIDE ATTACKS IN JAPAN DURING WWII AND IRAQ POST-2003**

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis

Submitted by Robert Amir Berry

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In the name of God, the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful

**Of Lion Hearts, Terrible Wolves, and Sacrificial Lambs:
A Comparative Analysis of the Rationale and Conditions for Suicide Attacks in Japan
During WWII and Iraq Post-2003**

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To Mariko Nagai, Ai Kawamura and Yoshihisa Hosono

Jesus said to his disciples, “*You* are the ones you saw receiving offerings from the altar. That is the ‘God’ you serve. And you are the twelve men whom you saw. And the domestic animals you saw being brought for sacrifice are the multitude you are leading astray upon that altar. The ruler of chaos will establish himself, and this is how he will make use of my name. And the race of the pious will adhere tenaciously to him. After this, another man will take the side of the fornicators, and another will stand with those who murder children, and yet another with those who lie with men, and those who fast, and all the rest of impurity and lawlessness and error, and those who say, ‘We are equal to angels’—and they are the stars which bring everything to completion. For it has been said to the races of humans, ‘Behold God received your sacrifice from the hands of a priest’—that is to say, from the minister of error. But it is the Lord—the one who is the Lord over the entire universe—who commands that they be put to shame at the end of days.”

—The Gospel of Judas, 5:1-16

The looking glass, so shiny and new
How quickly the glamour fades
I start spinning, slipping out of time
Was that the wrong pill to take? (Raise it up)

You made a deal, and now it seems you have to offer up
But will it ever be enough? (Raise it up, raise it up)
It's not enough (Raise it up, raise it up)

Here I am, a rabbit hearted girl
Frozen in the headlights
It seems I've made the final sacrifice

We raise it up, this offering
We raise it up

This is a gift, it comes with a price
Who is the lamb and who is the knife?
Midas is king and he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold in the sunlight

I look around, but I can't find you (raise it up)
If only I could see your face (raise it up)
I start rushing towards the skyline (raise it up)
I wish that I could just be brave

I must become a lion hearted girl
Ready for a fight
Before I make the final sacrifice

We raise it up, this offering
We raise it up

This is a gift, it comes with a price
Who is the lamb and who is the knife?
Midas is king and he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold in the sunlight

Raise it up, raise it up
Raise it up, raise it up

And in the spring I shed my skin
And it goes away with the changing wind
The waters turn from blue to red
As towards the sky I offer it

This is a gift, it comes with a price
Who is the lamb and who is the knife?
Midas is king and he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold in the sunlight

This is a gift, it comes with a price
Who is the lamb and who is the knife?
Midas is king and he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold in the sunlight

This is a gift, it comes with a price
Who is the lamb and who is the knife?
Midas is king and he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold in the sunlight

This is a gift

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Introduction

Suicide attacks have become a defining feature of 21st Century political violence. Today, one rarely goes a week without hearing about the usage of this tactic in warzones like Iraq or Afghanistan. Similarly, suicide attacks have struck at the heart of western countries unlike any other tactic has been capable of. In Israel, a country which seemed invincible to Palestinian groups, suicide attacks came upon the country like a wraith, striking without warning and causing widespread destruction and panic. The attacks on September 11, 2001 in the U.S. had much the same effect, and changed the world. Similarly, in Europe, suicide attacks silently crept in on metropolitan populations to inflict death and rob them of their sense of security. Suicide attacks moreover are the modus operandi for modern political assassinations. Prominent figures in global politics have been victims of suicide attacks, including the late Pakistani PM Benazir Bhutto, late Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi, who were both murdered, and former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who was maimed.

Suicide attacks are a signature of modern terrorism, and likely to persist in years ahead. An important reason for this is the changing paradigm of war, which is asymmetric in nature. After all, terrorism is the quintessential 'weapon of the weak,'¹ and as some nations become more powerful, their foes will inevitably invent new and innovative ways to strike them. Suicide attacks have proven to be devastatingly effective in this regard. Not only this, they are relatively cheap in comparison to other tactics and are guaranteed media attention, which terrorist groups seek. Modern day terrorism has found its maniacal genius in the tactic, assuming terror organizations operate in societies that allow for it and find the harbingers to deliver the tactic from among them. Suicide attacks are furthermore on a steady rise without much likelihood of abating.²

Considering the continued persistence of suicide attacks as a dark presence on the world stage, and the danger they pose, it is increasingly important that we understand their nature in order to stop them. Vague assertions that suicide attacks are 'caused by religion,' or are 'incited by Islam and a promise of seventy virgins,' are no longer relevant. They only detract from the conversation. Scholars and pundits who still make these claims arrogantly serve themselves, while undermining serious efforts to understand suicide attacks in hopes finding their end. If anything, they have inhibited those efforts by muddling discourse. In order to arrive at a solution to this disturbing phenomenon, it is imperative we perform the analysis correctly first and

foremost—we have to get this right for the safety and security of our societies; for a return to normalcy.

Suicide attacks cannot be considered endemic to one religious tradition or culture. While the phenomenon is often associated with Islamic terrorist groups, the stark increase in suicide attacks in the Middle East is relatively recent. Indeed, prior to the Iraq War, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, a terrorist group that does not claim a religious affiliation, was the most prolific user of suicide attacks worldwide.³ Similarly, prior to the 1980s, modern suicide attacks were almost exclusive to the Japanese kamikaze during WWII. Therefore, it is clear that the notion of one specific religion or culture as responsible for giving rise to the phenomenon of suicide attacks is flawed. Instead, it is more pertinent to examine what other factors these societies may have in common to arrive at why suicide attacks occur.

Ariel Merari and Mia Bloom were arguably the first serious scholars of suicide attacks in academia. Merari examined the possible psychological profiles of individual perpetrators of suicide attacks that could explain the tactic. Bloom furthermore provided us with her ‘outbidding theory,’ which shows how the use of suicide attacks is intrinsically linked to popular support, and further claims that organizations utilize the tactic to garner further support in a society. Robert Pape similarly put forward his ‘occupation theory,’ in which he connected the presence of suicide attacks to the existence of a foreign occupation where they occur. By identifying these key pieces to the puzzle, these scholars have provided us with a starting point for understanding suicide attacks based in the idea that suicide attacks are indeed a rational tactic employed by the organizations that use them.

Assaf Moghadam tells us that a proper explanation of suicide attacks must examine the phenomenon at varying levels of analysis, including the organizational, individual and environmental.⁴ By not approaching the phenomenon of suicide attacks, holistically, previous scholars were unable to capture their full picture. Moghadam furthermore provided the field with a compelling analysis of the globalization of suicide attacks in which ideology serves as an important factor using Al-Qaeda as a case study.

Lastly, Ami Pedahzur gave the field key insights into the conflict dynamics and the cultures or ideologies that potentially give rise to suicide attacks, namely asymmetric warfare and what he refers to as ‘a culture of death.’ In this way these serious scholars have provided the field with some important guiding stars by which to potentially map out a final constellation and

arrive at a comprehensive theory to address suicide attacks in their entirety. Pedahzur has furthermore called for a theoretical endeavor to conduct a more broad comparative analysis in order to understand what lay at the heart of suicide attacks in modern history. My work seeks to answer that call in part. At its heart, it provides a comparative analysis and attempts to answer the question, “What is the rationale for and what are the conditions that promote suicide attacks in modern history?” using two starkly different case studies.

I will examine two case studies which are dissimilar in terms of their guiding ideology as well as their organizational goals—the Japanese kamikaze and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In terms of ideology, they differ in that the Japanese military embodied an ultra-nationalism with an imperial ideology at its base, whereas AQI espouse salafi-jihadism, a virulent strain of Islamism, as its creed. With regards to organizational goals, the Japanese wanted to inflict as much pain on the U.S. Pacific fleet as possible to achieve an honorable end to WWII that would not demand unconditional surrender. AQI’s strategic goal on the other hand is systematic collapse of the current Iraqi regime to reclaim Sunni dominance in Iraq, as well as to provide a central base in the Middle East for Al-Qaeda’s regional designs. That their ideologies and strategic goals are dissimilar, and yet they utilize the same tactic shows that these two factors—specific ideology and strategic goal—are largely independent variables in the cause of suicide attacks. That these two organizations boast the highest occurrences of suicide attacks in history warrants their comparison.

If not ideology or mission, what then lies at the heart of this phenomenon? Is there a specific formula that causes them to manifest in political conflict? While it ultimately varies, suicide attacks appear highly dependent on certain contextual factors. This work shows that there are similarities to those contexts in two very different case studies, and is suggestive of certain patterns and implications for suicide attacks given those similarities. Using these two case studies, I show that suicide attacks occur at a crossroads where (1) organizational strategy requires such an attack and (2) willing individuals to carry out such an attack meet, both of which are furthermore arrived at via (a) a moral persuasion to assert an identity, specifically influenced by a ‘culture of death,’ as well as (b) a sense of crisis at the level of existential threat, whether real or perceived, all of which exist in the environment the organization and the individuals find themselves in, and thus transcends the individual, organization and social dimensions of the phenomenon. These two underlying factors, a ‘culture of death’ and a sense of

crisis at the level of an existential threat, exist in situations with high occurrences of suicide attacks. Similarly, they are lacking in conflicts where suicide attacks do not occur. In this way they are the counterfactual.

Using these two case studies, I will show that these critical ingredients are required for the political spell that conjures suicide attacks to a given conflict. I chose the case of Japan during WWII and AQI during the Iraq War first and foremost for their abounding differences. Not only are they different in terms of ideology and goal, but one was a hierarchical military of a specific country while the other is a disjointed, transnational terrorist group. It was important to include AQI in the analysis because, as Moghadam points out, “theories that illuminate the use of the tactic in...localized conflicts seem less capable of explaining suicide attacks perpetuated by cells affiliated with or inspired by Al-Qaeda.”⁵ This is due to their failure to address the rise of suicide attacks among transnational actors, and therefore any theoretical posturing must account for the transnational dimension. Lastly, as already mentioned, along with LTTE and the Iranian *basij*, these two case studies have two of the highest rates of suicide attacks in modern history.

Invoking Martyrs and Murderers.

Prior to conducting a comparative analysis of suicide attacks, it is important to accurately define certain terms. First and foremost, the terms ‘suicide attack’ and ‘suicide mission’ (SM) are used interchangeably in the literature. I will do the same. Traditionally, ‘suicide attacks’ or SMs are defined as modes of attack that require the death of the agent in order for the attack to be successful.⁶ However, further constraints must be added to this definition in order to narrow the data set: the agent cannot be deceived about his or her potential survival, and furthermore they cannot be blackmailed or forced to carry out the attack in any way—they must volunteer to die.⁷ Diego Gambetta correctly points out that, “If agents are deceived or coerced, the puzzle of why they engage in SMs disappears.”⁸ These are the parameters by which suicide attacks and SMs are defined for our purposes.

With this more narrow definition, certain cases inevitably fall outside the realm of what constitute suicide attacks. For example, when members of the Japanese Red Army massacred tourists at Israel’s Lod Airport in 1972, the perpetrators could not have realistically expected to survive the attack. Indeed, two of them were killed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) while

another was captured alive. The man who was captured, Okamoto, then requested a gun with a single bullet by which to kill himself in exchange for a full confession. While they may have been suicidal, their deaths were not required to carry out the attack, and thus do not fit the definition. Similarly, the February 1994 massacre by Baruch Goldstein, who murdered twenty-nine Muslim civilians during prayer services at a holy site in Hebron, cannot be considered a suicide attack under this more narrow definition. Moghadam notes that, “Although Goldstein probably had no delusion that he would survive the attack, his death was not necessary for it to occur.”⁹

It must also be mentioned that, far too often, the term ‘suicide terrorism’ is used to describe suicide attacks or SMs. This term is problematic because it categorizes the method of attack—or a suicide mission—as a subcategory of terrorism.¹⁰ However, this conception is inaccurate for a multitude of reasons. First, suicide attacks have not always targeted non-combatants, which is generally a prerequisite to be considered terrorism. Second, suicide attacks have been employed by national militaries against other foreign militaries and endorsed by the state, such as in the case of the Japanese military during WWII and the Iranian *basij* during the Iran-Iraq war. In this way, the tactic can hardly be considered terrorism. While some designated terrorist groups utilize suicide attacks to achieve their ends, suicide attacks and suicide terrorism should not necessarily be collapsed together. Of course, given the shifting paradigm of armed conflict, we are likely to see more non-state groups using the tactic. Still, terrorism is ultimately a loaded term that reflects the perceived legitimacy of the attack, whereas suicide attacks and SMs are more neutral terms.¹¹

Who Speaks for the Dead?

Recently scholars have written prolifically about suicide attacks. They do so for a variety of reasons, be it the strategic effectiveness of the tactic vis-à-vis opponents, morbid fascination with the act, outrage, or simply the desire to know what drives a person to kill his or herself in order to kill others. Despite the many attempts however, no adequate theory has thus far been put forward to explain why the phenomenon occurs across such a range of groups and organizations with varying ideologies and strategic goals. The theories that have been put forward are inadequate either because they have holes, which make them easily refutable, or because they omit certain groups, and thus fail to capture the whole of the phenomenon.

Among the proposed theories to explain the occurrence of suicide attacks are what Robert Pape calls ‘the conventional wisdom’ regarding the phenomenon—namely religious fundamentalism and/or psychological pathology as causal factors.¹² The conventional wisdom is unfortunately all-pervasive in the western consciousness. The underlying thinking behind it is that suicide attacks are irrational in and of themselves, and thus seek out a causal factor stemming from irrationality; either the perpetrator is pathologically suicidal or religiously indoctrinated.

The theory of psychological pathology in fact has its roots in scientific racism, which petered out in the mid to late twentieth century. Psychological explanations for suicide attacks under scientific racism borrowed from the ingrained notion of racial hierarchies to explain them away. The original guinea pigs were the Japanese kamikaze pilots themselves. The kamikaze were often belittled as “inhuman robots,” “well trained animals,” “mindless human bombs...blindly following insane orders,” and as having “mysterious impulses that had no relation to psychological processes of the rest of mankind.”¹³ After scientific racism was no longer acceptable, and all human beings regardless of race were seen as existing on the same level ethnographic playing field, psychological pathology was explored as an explanation. During the 1980s many scholars pursued this idea in order to explain suicide attacks. Their logic was that the suicidal act in and of itself was contradictory to basic human impulses, and thus their line of inquiry was along psychological, economic and sociological factors to explain the phenomenon.¹⁴

Experts on suicide attacks today however all agree that psychopathology does not explain them.¹⁵ Ariel Merari, a trained psychologist and author of *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism*, notes that none of the would be bombers (had they not been arrested by Israel) he interviewed suffered from any psychosis.¹⁶ Hamas similarly boasts that all their recruits are psychologically healthy, and that they do not train the unstable due to their relative unpredictability. Today there is a general consensus among experts that individual perpetrators of suicidal attacks are psychologically ‘normal,’ which is backed by an overwhelming number of case studies. With psychosocial explanations crossed off the list, religious extremism became the stock answer to the question: “What is the motive behind suicide attacks?”

The Guardian's Robert Fisk interviewed a suicide bomber in Iraq just before his death: "We could produce a hundred good ways—peaceful ways—for him to resolve the injustices of the world; but the moment Khaled invoked the name of God, our suggestions became irrelevant. Rationality—humanism, if you like—simply withered away."¹⁷ Never mind Khaled's utterly powerless position and lack of agency to affect any change in the world, never mind the horrors of the Iraq War Khaled no doubt witnessed, with irrationality of the act assumed, religious fervor provides a painfully simple answer to suicide attacks given the repudiation of psychological pathology's advent.

The notion that religion itself is an irrational motive largely stems from Enlightenment thinking, which is deeply embedded into western thinking. The European Enlightenment is arguably the cornerstone of western civilization's intellectual heritage, and from it stems the concept of 'modernity,' which today is conceived of as both a project and a universalized political goal that embodies values the West defines itself by: freedom, democracy, human rights, civil equality and secularism, to name a few.¹⁸ An inherent positivity is associated with these ideas in the West. At modernity's core are the concepts of rationality and progress, which in turn are defined against irrationality and backwardness. Religion's own characterization as irrational, backward, and as an affront to modernity and its values stems from Europe's experience with religion in the Dark Ages. These terms are furthermore used to describe societies that do not fit the modern western mold.

With this type of thinking, a dichotomy is quickly constructed in which the West is considered the pinnacle or bastion of rationality and modernity while that which falls outside the broad characterization of western is its opposite. This dichotomy was articulated by Max Weber, who was concerned with "the historical trajectory of rationality to its position of eminence."¹⁹ Disenchantment with religion, according to Weberian sociology, accompanied scientific advancements and market capitalism in Europe.²⁰ However, observers of Weber note his "marked tendency...to move in terms of the dichotomy of rational and irrational"²¹ resulting from his methodology of ideal types, and thus the conclusion that deviation from the European model is irrational.²² This mode of thinking dominated western intellectual circles at the time; it was highly self-serving and ultimately helped justify colonialism through the need to 'civilize.' Within the space of a vague dichotomy, generalizations are easily made that are inaccurate and undermines our analysis.

Today, suicide attacks are oft synonymous with religious extremism, usually Islamic. Moreover, the Muslim terrorist is usually considered irrational, either portrayed as a gun-toting fanatic or a sexually frustrated young male out to blow himself up for the God-given promise of seventy virgins in heaven. This conventional ‘wisdom’ has not only been applied to Islamic extremists. Before Hezbollah’s attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in 1983, the same thinking was used to explain away the Japanese kamikaze—it still is to some extent. Scholars today still claim that ultranationalist State Shinto, a predominant strain of Japan’s indigenous religion during WWII, accounted for their suicidal behavior.²³ The events of Pearl Harbor and 9/11 make for a dubious comparison. The Japanese soldier flailing his arms, screaming ‘banzai,’ and dying for his Emperor still remains an archetypal image of the Pacific War, whether comic or sobering. Suicide bombers today have similar stereotypes associated with them, all of which communicate irrationality stemming from religious conviction to a western audience grounded in Enlightenment thinking.

Religious extremism is excellent for providing a stock answer that people will find reasonable and convincing precisely because it falls in line with our conditioned way thinking. However, upon a closer examination of motive for suicide attacks, it is easily refuted. Consider Kōzu, a Japanese *kaiten* pilot, who wrote: “I didn’t see myself throwing my life away for him [the Emperor], nor for the government either, nor for the nation. I saw myself dying to defend my parents, my brothers and sisters. For them I must die, I thought.”²⁴ His sentiments are echoed by Lieutenant Seki, from the first squadron to carry out a suicide attack against the United States: “I am not going out for the Emperor or the Japanese Empire. I am going for my beloved wife. If Japan were defeated, I reckon she would be raped by American GIs. I am dying to protect her.”²⁵ As Peter Hill notes, there were even times when the Emperor was mentioned by the kamikaze with anger and antipathy, not reverence: “To hell with it! Give me some fuel and some good weather, not your words! I would set out this minute on a suicide mission to defend my family and my country but I do not want to die for a man who calls himself Emperor!”²⁶ These testimonies from actual men who sacrificed themselves in the Pacific tell a very different story from stereotypes in which the kamikaze “believed that they were dying for the Emperor.”²⁷ Motive—if we can call it that—is far more rational and human. That is not to say that religion plays no role in suicide attacks at all, but to pin the phenomenon on it entirely is extremely tenuous.

In the Muslim world, oftentimes religious language is fused with other motivational factors, making it difficult to identify motivation at first glance. Abu Abdul Malik al-Najdi, one of three suicide bombers who attacked hotels in Baghdad, said before a camera: “I tell you that there is no good in this life, while Muslims are humiliated and the sacred places dishonored.”²⁸ While al-Najdi speaks in religious terms, there is a nationalistic undercurrent in what he says. In fact, invasion, subjugation and humiliation are far more illustrative motives for suicide attacks than religion.

The case of “Fatimah’s Fiancé” is perhaps more instructive. A highly circulated video released in February, 2006 features Abu Mouwayia al-Shimali, who drove his car packed with explosives into a combined checkpoint of American and collaborating Iraqi forces.²⁹ His action was prompted by a letter supposedly written by a female detainee in Abu Graib prison named Fatimah. “Fatimah called on the holy warriors to come to rescue all the female prisoners who were subjugated to daily rape, torture, and humiliation.”³⁰ She describes her torture and humiliation, and begs her Muslim brothers for help.³¹ Al-Shimali, after reading a poem, implores God to marry him to Fatimah upon his death: “Oh, Lord, marry me to Fatimah who was martyred after they had violated her honor.”³² The video cuts to Al-Shimali giving the thumbs up to the camera and driving off in his explosive-laden vehicle. The attack resulted in the death of 20 Americans.³³

In his seminal work *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* Mohammad Hafez notes that purely religious arguments by salafi-jihadist groups for conducting suicide attacks—religious obligation and reward—usually fall on deaf ears. “Religious arguments tend to reach a narrow base of jihadists who may question the legitimacy of certain tactics or insurgent targets. The more salient appeals in Iraq interweave nationalistic and worldly discourse with religious notions and traditions.”³⁴ The same is true in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine. Something other than religion has to account for why men and women are taking their lives by conducting suicide attacks in these places.

Through a simple survey of material on suicide attacks, the conventional wisdom that posits religion as a causal factor is shattered. Similar to writing off the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as ‘about religion,’ the conventional wisdom regarding suicide attacks does not make for good analysis. And without good analysis there is little chance of actually curbing this devastatingly effective tactic. Worse still, suicide attacks could be perpetuated through responses informed by

poor analysis. For this reason, the proliferation of the ‘conventional wisdom’ by certain scholars and pundits in the West is not only wrong, it is irresponsible and damaging to the war effort.

Regardless of the plethora of contradictory evidence, the religious explanation for suicide attacks is persistent and enduring. There are a couple of reasons for its doggedness. First, as previously mentioned, religious language often accompanies motive, which causes more deeply rooted factors to get lost. More important than this however is that the narrative in which religion is a causal factor is espoused by two important groups, which contribute to the idea’s success. Those two groups include some organizations that implement suicide attacks, like Al-Qaeda, and likewise certain western scholars and pundits. Whichever group, the notion of religion as primary in causing suicide attacks is a strategic one serving their interests. Be that as it may, religious extremism is not indicative of motive for individuals who actually conduct attacks.

On the one hand, the religious extremist explanation for why suicide attacks occur is persistent because it is proliferated by the organizations that utilize them for their own strategic reasons. Organizations in the Middle East, including Al Qaeda, generally refer to suicide attacks as “martyrdom operations,”³⁵ or *al-amaliyat al-istishhadiyya*, and couch them in Islamic justifications and language. In doing so, they can potentially appeal to a larger base in the entirety of the Muslim World, thus expanding their reach and potential streams of recruitment. Moreover, given the Manichean mindset produced and reproduced on both sides of this supposed ‘West-Islam’ divide, Islam is considered inherently good in the face of an invading ‘Zionist-crusader’ out for their perceived imperialist designs. Based in religion, suicide attacks are endowed with a moral persuasion that can potentially appeal to a much broader base in the collective Islamic world.

For the Japanese military too, the notion that their soldiers were dying for the Emperor was strategic. To understand it, however, knowledge of Japanese history is important. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 unified the entire nation under the imperial family. Shinto—particularly *Kokka Shinto* or State Shinto—was “used to give unity and solidarity to the country”³⁶ through the transcendent symbol of the Emperor. Without the unifying symbol of the Emperor, Japan was fragmented, weak, and exposed to western imperial powers. Propaganda emphasizing the divinity of the Emperor and the superiority of the Japanese started in the Meiji Period and continued through to the Shōwa Period.³⁷ In this way, devotion to the Emperor was a unifying force to be employed by the Japanese military. This is particularly true given the rapid influx of

foreign concepts, and especially disenchantment with the war in Japan by the late Shōwa Period. It is of little surprise that the imperial rescript, which served as the moral foundation for the entire nation and learned by heart,³⁸ contained the following now infamous passage: “Do not be beguiled by popular opinions, do not get involved in political activities, but singularly devote yourself to your most important obligation of loyalty to the Emperor, and realize that the obligation is heavier than a mountain but death is lighter than a feather.”³⁹

The imperial ethic stressed the temporal nature of the individual against that of an eternal state, and obliged individuals to sacrifice themselves for the state apparatus upon the political altar. The Japanese military appealed to the mystical, and promulgated the ‘uniqueness’ of the Japanese spirit, or *yamato damashii*, which Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney defines as “an exclusive spiritual property of the Japanese that endowed young men with a noble character, enabling them to face death without fear.”⁴⁰ *Yamato damashii* has for its foundation the idea of Japanese superiority, which stemmed from belief in the Emperor’s own divinity. A 1935 primer on Shinto geared toward westerners defines the Japanese national religion:

Shinto is, in fact, a Japanese patriotism infused with religious emotion...in other words, a peculiar enthusiastic patriotic sentiment, often soaring into the plane of adoration of religious worship toward the Emperor or Mikado [Shinto deity]...; a manifestation, coupled with religious zeal, of ‘*yamato damashii*’ or ‘The Soul of Japan.’⁴¹

Tied to religion and the essence of ‘Japanese-ness,’ *yamato damashii* is a moral characterization by the military to dictate how the Japanese ‘should be.’ Ohnuki-Tierney explains that this mystic concept, as well as the militarization of Japanese cultural motifs such as the cherry blossom, was an attempt to “persuade citizens to sacrifice their lives to nationalist and imperialist goals.”⁴²

In both instances—Islamic terrorist organizations and the Japanese military—the use of religion by an organization to explain, even petition for, suicide attacks is strategic for a multitude of reasons. This is an extremely important factor in understanding why the religious extremist explanation has persisted for so long. Still, to better assess motive, it is much more pertinent to examine it at the individual level instead of the organizational level. Regardless of this obviousness, analysis endlessly cites propaganda espoused at the organizational level to understand rationale without considering its actual resonance with individuals. On the flipside, and interestingly enough, the LTTE downplayed its own religious elements during the Cold War and beyond because, “in such a context, ‘mystical interventions’ and appeals to ‘divine power’ are usually regarded as embarrassing,”⁴³ which is also strategic.

And on the other hand, that of some western scholars and pundits, the idea that religious extremism causes suicide attacks serves many interests while fitting into the broader themes of the Clash of Civilizations and the menacing Islamist phantom against the West. Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis claims that Islam and the West are incompatible precisely because of the religion's supposed incompatibility with and antipathy toward the West and its values. In a post Cold War setting, there is no better 'Other' or western enemy than a foreign religion—it is almost too easy given Enlightenment thinking. Assumptions about Islam have led to many theories, including 'Muslim Exceptionalism,' which believes that something inherent in Islam makes it fundamentally incompatible with democracy and its values altogether, and disqualifies Muslim countries from realizing democracy as a result of religious conviction. Some say that it is only when Muslims shake the yoke of Islam that they will join the Enlightenment's liberal and democratic children, and are otherwise doomed to struggle against these elements.⁴⁴ Others have even described Islam as at war with modernity itself.⁴⁵

In characterizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Daniel Pipes and other pundits have stated: "Israel is targeted [by terrorists] in part because it is our friend, and in part because it is an island of liberal, democratic principles—American principles—in a sea of tyranny, intolerance, and hatred."⁴⁶ To be sure, all of this is completely bogus. Nothing is ever mentioned about egregious injustices in the Occupied Territories, or, at the macro level, about colonialism, imperialism, subjugation and humiliation by the West, whether real or perceived. In terms of 'Muslim Exceptionalism,' nothing is ever mentioned about Western governments keeping Middle Eastern dictators in power for regional interests and security. Instead the problem is Islam, and the narrative is that they hate our values—they 'hate our freedom.' In this Manichean construct, the West retains its innocence given the inherent positivity associated with its values.

Edward Said reminds us that, "[Some] scholars have tended to use their standing as experts to deny...their deep-seated feelings about Islam with a language of authority whose purpose is to clarify their 'objectivity' and 'scientific impartiality.'"⁴⁷ Rather, their subjectivity informs analysis about Islam and, more narrowly, suicide attacks that is inaccurate. Others still have a more vulgar interest in laying the whole of the blame on a constructed enemy. Scholars and pundits of this view have often been consultants or employees of a government, or various corporations with stakes in the Middle East, or of the sensationalist media.⁴⁸ A direct relationship between a political motive, a paycheck, and academic discourse means that academia is

compromised; discourse becomes propaganda. The idea that suicide attacks are caused by religious extremism is perhaps at the heart of all this because it straightforwardly supports the broader theme of an antithetical enemy to the modern, rational West based on our thinking. Ami Pedahzur notes that, “Before long, Samuel Huntington’s idea of the clash of civilizations was adapted to account for suicide terrorism and an emphasis was put on the struggle of Muslim culture with Western culture [as Manichean opposites.]”⁴⁹

The Japanese kamikaze also play a role in this dubious discourse. Because WWII is generally seen in the West as a just and moral war, by making generalist comparisons between the kamikaze and Islamist suicide attackers today, it is suggestive of a continuation of ideas beginning with WWII fascism to modern Islamism, both of which are construed as the liberal West’s antithesis, evil, as well as one and the same. Bernard Lewis writes:

The better part of my life was dominated by two great struggles—the first against Nazism, the second against Bolshevism. In both of these, after long and bitter conflict, we were victorious. Both were a curse to their own peoples, as well as a threat to the world, and for those peoples defeat was a liberation. Today we confront a third totalitarian perversion, this time of Islam.⁵⁰

The comparison of the kamikaze to Islamist suicide attackers serves to give wars in the Middle East the same moral clout as WWII on the side of the West. It has furthermore spawned an abundance of bunk discourse, including *Islamikaze* by Raphael Israeli. In his book *Japan’s Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism*, Walter Skya attempts to retroactively make the case that radical Shinto caused Pearl Harbor and thus WWII in order to fit Japan into the modern discourse on Islamic hatred for the West, which is preposterous. At a broader level, studies that link Islamism with fascism exchange ill-conceived generalizations for academic labor with the purpose of making the West appear justified in its actions. While Japan and Germany were part of the Axis during WWII, it should always be emphasized that their causes for war were quite different. Similarly, while Middle Eastern sympathies lay with Germany during WWII, it should always be noted that Germany was the only European power not colonizing their land in the twentieth century.

In other cases, some western scholars and pundits reproduce what they want to be true about suicide attacks. Instead of painting suicide attacks as fanatical, some authors romanticize them in a way that reinforces stereotypes bordering on Orientalism. For example, Fisk writes: “[The kamikaze pilots] believed that they were dying for the emperor. For them, the fall of the cherry blossom and the divine wind—the kamikaze—blessed their souls as they aimed their

bombers at American aircraft carriers.”⁵¹ This romantic characterization of the kamikaze is the author’s own conception, whether he believes it or wants it to be true due to a latent desire for an unspoiled, ‘enchanted’ East. It is suggestive of Japanese irrationality, and yet false given actual testimonies of the kamikaze. At the very most it is misleading and fails to capture the full story.

Mia Bloom was among the first to question the conventional wisdom and offer a new theory about suicide attacks in her book *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*. Bloom recognizes the strategic element of modern suicide bombing, and argues against the idea that religion, poverty or poor education contribute significantly to the phenomenon.⁵² Instead, she proposes what she calls the outbidding theory. The outbidding theory concludes that suicide attacks occur when various groups use increasingly deadly attacks against an enemy as a way of competing against each other—to outbid—to generate public support and thus secure more funding and recruits. Bloom states that, “when the bombings resonate positively with the population that insurgent groups purport to represent, they help the organization mobilize support. If suicide bombing does not resonate among the larger population the tactic will fail.”⁵³ In this way, not only is Bloom one of the first to question conventional wisdom, she also roots their occurrence in and makes them dependent upon the support of the local population.

While Bloom successfully redirected the conversation away from religious motives and offers some significant insights, Bloom’s proposed theory was unfortunately flawed and problematic. Two of Bloom’s main case studies are Palestinian groups and the LTTE in Sri Lanka. In the case of Palestine, while groups have competed with one another, alliances and partnerships are known to be fluid and those same groups have been known to cooperate with one another as well. In terms of the LTTE, there are more issues with her analysis. First, as Assaf Moghadam correctly points out, Bloom’s own findings contradict the theory she puts forward.⁵⁴ After extensive fieldwork in Sri Lanka among Tamil populations, she concludes that there was “virtually no support for attacking civilians.”⁵⁵ “Despite this limited support from the general population,” Moghadam writes, “the LTTE continued with its relentless SM campaign (including attacks against civilians), apparently undeterred.”⁵⁶ Second, and more importantly, suicide tactics were adopted by the LTTE after 1987 when Tamil Tiger cadet Captain Miller drove a truck laced with explosives into military barracks of the Sri Lankan armed forces. By this point, however, all other rival Tamil resistance organizations had been eliminated and only the LTTE remained. In short, Bloom’s case studies do not support her proposed theory.

Subsequent case studies only serve to further undermine her theory, such as Iraq. Considering that the outbidding theory connects a terrorist organization to the local population in terms of support, it cannot account for suicide attacks conducted by foreign fighters pouring into Iraq, not to mention foreign organizations setting up shop there since the U.S. occupation, all of which utilize the tactic toward their own aims without consideration for the local population. In terms of native Iraqi organizations that use the tactic, Moghadam notes that “one can hardly argue that Iraqi suicide bombers are trying to gain the sympathy of the very people in whose midst they are exploding themselves,”⁵⁷ as their main targets have been other Iraqis. Iraq is extremely important considering “more suicide bombings have occurred in Iraq since 2003 than in all other countries in the preceding twenty-five years combined.”⁵⁸

Expanding the analysis to Al-Qaeda, no rival to the organization actually exists and yet they are one of the biggest proponents of suicide attacks in history. Transnational groups like Al-Qaeda, moreover, cannot be characterized as vying for local support. Similarly, suicide bombers that have attacked western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain cannot be said to be vying for the support of their populations. This is especially true of the London bombers in 2005 who were citizens of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the outbidding theory does not fit the larger globalized salafi-jihadist paradigm.⁵⁹ Thus Bloom’s theory is extremely problematic.

Robert Pape is another prolific scholar on suicide attacks. He too questions the conventional wisdom and offers a new theory about suicide attacks in *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. It is no coincidence that the book’s title puts emphasis on logic and strategy, implying rationality for the tactic. Pape’s proposed theory is that suicide attacks are a direct response to foreign occupation. He posits that, “Nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland,”⁶⁰ exclaiming that the “bottom line is that suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation.”⁶¹ According to Pape, the foreign government target must furthermore be democratic for three reasons: Democratic regimes “are often thought to be especially vulnerable to coercive punishment,”⁶² terrorist organizations are “confident that their [democratic] opponent will be at least somewhat restrained,”⁶³ and because “suicide attacks may...be harder to organize and publicize in authoritarian police states.”⁶⁴

Pape rightly put forward a theory that implicates the West to some degree in the proliferation of suicide attacks. Frankly, rather than endlessly refuting suicide attacks as stemming from socio-cultural factors that we have no sway in, such as religious fervor, it would bode well for western powers like the U.S. and Israel to consider this and subsequently realize it is actually very powerful—If we are partly the cause of suicide attacks, we are then in a position to be part of a solution to this devastating tactic.

Of course, while Pape rightly notes that religious extremism fails to explain suicide attacks, his counter theory is also flawed for a variety of reasons. First, suicide attacks have been used against many non-democratic targets and/or have occurred in non-democratic countries. Examples include the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, and the 2003 bombing of a Riyadh compound, both in Saudi Arabia. Second, individuals that have carried out attacks were never under a physical occupation by a foreign force. The 9/11 hijackers, for instance, were Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian nationals. Third, in many cases suicide attacks do not even target the occupation in the places where one physically exists. Iraq is the perfect example. In post-2003 Iraq, the majority of suicide attacks are carried out against Iraqi *Shi'a*.

More damaging, Pape undercounts the instances of suicide attacks worldwide, omitting instances that did not support his theory. In expanding the instances of suicide attacks beyond Pape's own database, occupation is less and less likely to be a considerable causal factor. Suicide attacks have occurred in places like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Uzbekistan, and yet no occupation is actually apparent in any of these instances.⁶⁵ In Iraq, which was occupied by the United States, Pape collapses a variety of organizations utilizing suicide attacks that consisted of both Iraqi nationals and foreign fighters with competing and inconsistent goals in order to support his occupation theory. Given the sheer complexity of the Iraq case study, Mohammad Hafez correctly states that, "Current researchers on suicide terrorism would have to refocus their analytical lenses to describe, let alone explain, the rise of suicide bombings in the Iraqi insurgency."⁶⁶

Not only this, but despite Pape's ridicule of the conventional wisdom, he seems to fall victim to the overly simplistic dichotomy of the religious versus the secular. To refute claims that religious extremism causes suicide terrorism, Pape characterizes the LTTE, known for having one of the highest rates of suicide attacks in modern history, as a "Marxist-Leninist group whose members are from Hindu families but who are adamantly opposed to religion."⁶⁷ However,

actual specialists on the LTTE and the Sri Lanka conflict like Stephen Hopgood counter that Pape “greatly exaggerates when he describes the LTTE as a Marxist-Leninist group, a claim for which there is scant evidence indeed.”⁶⁸ Considering that Pape’s categorization of the LTTE as staunchly secular stems from the premise that they do not seek a reward in the afterlife suggests an extremely narrow view of what constitutes religion versus what secularism is.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, this claim by Pape has been disseminated widely and is considered fact. The BBC’s Ronald Buerk noted: “They [the Tamil Tigers] are not religious and believe there is nothing after death. Their fanaticism is born and indoctrinated from childhood.”⁷⁰ To the dismay of many Sri Lanka specialists like Michael Roberts, “such popular misunderstandings in international circles seem to be grounded in both ignorance and in the rather truncated view of ‘religion’ espoused by Westerners nourished in rationalized realms that have been cleansed of ‘magical enchantment’ [i.e. the European Enlightenment].”⁷¹ While the LTTE have the goal of establishing a secular state, that should not suggest they are not religious at all. At the same time, Tamil Tiger adherence to Hinduism or Christianity should not suggest religion plays a large role in causing suicide attacks in the Sri Lankan conflict. The world simply does not exist in these either/or dichotomies. According to Roberts, the characterization of the LTTE as an unconditionally secular organization by Pape “seems to point to the cultural sway of Enlightenment philosophy and Cartesian rationality in the Western world.”⁷²

In sum, rather than lay the blame on a foreign religion Pape cited foreign occupation as a factor by which to explain suicide attacks, implicating the West and debunking the conventional wisdom. In doing so, however, he manipulated data in his favor and, unfortunately, in some instances got the analysis wrong to support his claims. He was however among the first to explain that the West or, more narrowly, a stronger adversary has an important role to play in the proliferation of suicide attacks among weaker actors in war.

Given the failure of both Bloom and Pape to address the globalized salafi-jihadist paradigm from the onset, and the recent “marked increase in the number of groups employing suicide missions every year,”⁷³ Assaf Moghadam put forward another theory geared specifically at them in his work *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*. For Islamic groups specifically, Moghadam argues that “there are two interrelated reasons for the globalization of suicide missions: the rise of Al Qaeda as a global

terrorist actor; and the growing appeal of the Salafi Jihad, the guiding ideology of Al Qaeda and its affiliated and associated movements.”⁷⁴

Interestingly, Pape has recently released a new book co-authored by James Feldman titled, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*. The book largely reaffirms Pape’s original occupation theory and furthermore applies it to transnational groups like Al-Qaeda in response to Moghadam. It rather stubbornly holds fast to his initial claims despite the amount of valid criticism Pape received for them. While still claiming that religion plays no role in suicide attacks, he fails to account for the fact that transnational networks engaged in suicide attacks are invariably predicated on their being Islamic. The book has received a lot of criticism in the academic community, including the following: “*Cutting the Fuse* is characterized by strawman argumentation, contradictions, poorly defined critical concepts, and cherry-picked evidence. It may well be the worst academic book on terrorism published in 2010.”⁷⁵ More and more, Pape is appearing as an apologist. Once again, I caution that it is imperative we get analysis correct before claiming to have ways to stop suicide attacks.

Anyway, aside from addressing the globalized, transnational dimension of suicide attacks for the first time in the scholarly literature, Moghadam argues for the importance of ideology in their proliferation. He cogently returns the religious factor to the discourse on suicide attacks, while not ignoring other critical factors for motive, including humiliation, despair, fear, revenge and extremely salient gendered aspects. Rather than the motive of Islamic salafi-jihadists consisting merely of the pretext of a reward in heaven, Moghadam approaches motive from a more serious stance. Moreover he characterized salafi-jihadism as a virulent, all-encompassing ideology that he claims is (at least partly) responsible for suicide attacks on the world stage. Ideology is also addressed in other works, including that of Hafez.

Ideology explains “why social, political, or economic conditions are as they are. Because individuals oftentimes seek explanations in times of crisis, ideologies are particularly appealing when a given group of people perceives itself to be in a predicament.”⁷⁶ Ideologies also create group identity, attribute blame for a present situation to an outsider and generate a proposed action to overcome the predicament.⁷⁷ In the case of salafi-jihadism, as an ideology it exclaims that Muslims communities are in the state they are in because they are not living in accordance with the Islamic practices of the earliest Muslim community, which is seen as great and powerful. In other words, by adhering to the practices of the earliest Muslim community—indeed by

perfecting their faith—can Muslims reverse Islam’s global decline and overcome the imperialist “Zionist-crusader.”

The difference in terms is that, while the emphasis of motives like virgins in heaven is inaccurate and belittling that ignore more realistic and critical factors, the religious factor presented as an ideology or worldview highlights its ability to penetrate the collective psyche of a group with a sense of purpose and way of being. That way of being is usually opposite some antagonized out group. Moghadam is acutely on to something when he notices that:

No other group appears to have invested the time, effort, and money than Al Qaeda has in preparing its cadres for suicide attacks, and no other groups has imbued the collective psyche of its fighters to the same extent with a cult of martyrdom and spirit of self-sacrifice... They present jihad and self-sacrifice as the antithesis to everything that the West stands for, and hence repeat the mantra that ‘the West loves life, while true Muslims love death.’⁷⁸

Moghadam is also among the first class of scholars to assert that a good analysis of suicide attacks requires analysis at a multitude of levels, including the individual, organizational and environmental. He writes:

A proper explanation of suicide attacks requires several levels of analysis. It must strive to explain why individuals are willing to die in order to kill; why organizations plan and execute suicide operations; and what role the larger environment plays in enabling [causing?] individuals and organizations to do so.⁷⁹

These sentiments are echoed by scholars like Hafez and Pedahzur. Indeed, any analysis of suicide attacks must examine the phenomenon at each of these levels.

There are however a few critiques of Moghadam’s work. While ideology is an important factor in the case of Al-Qaeda, other potential factors should not necessarily be overlooked that are pertinent to other case studies. In the case of the LTTE, for example, the nature of asymmetrical warfare appears to be exceedingly important, including their lack of ability to launch other types of attacks, powerlessness, and being pushed into a corner by Sri Lankan armed forces. In this way, ideology may only be a central factor in some cases of suicide attacks on the world stage. Also, as James Forest points out, “the global spread of suicide attacks may be a temporary aberration more than a sustained ideological contagion.”⁸⁰ Many factors beyond ideology could be at play, particularly if the analysis is expanded beyond Al-Qaeda.

Also, Moghadam does not overtly explain why some ideologies give rise to suicide attacks while others do not. In their work “Killing Without Dying: The Absence of Suicide Missions,” Stathis Kalyvas and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca claim that, “SMs are alien to the ideological inclinations of Marxism...the absence of SMs could be partially explained by reference to ideologies.”⁸¹ Though Moghadam makes references to radical leftist ideologies in

his work, the differences between ideologies that are and are not linked to suicide attacks are not addressed given the focus on one case study. Regardless, as a result of Moghadam's work, analysis is truly closer to understanding the dramatic rise in suicide attacks as well as their causal factors.

Though he does not intend to in the first place, Moghadam's theory does not offer a comparative analysis of suicide attacks across different organizations aside from those affiliated with Al-Qaeda; therefore, it is difficult to ascertain a broad theory explaining the phenomenon from his work. To produce such a theory, a comparative analysis of diverse groups in terms of ideology is necessary. Pape and Bloom tried, and produced their respective theories. Similarly, Diego Gambetta attempts it in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, but largely fails to produce a sound theory, stating: "The search for an overarching explanation of their [suicide missions'] occurrence and patterns seem futile. The wealth of facts and arguments may leave the reader wondering whether SMs should be treated as a single phenomenon rather than several."⁸² Though Gambetta examines a variety of case studies—including the Japanese kamikaze who were no terrorist group—his final conclusions, while helpful, are generalist and leave the reader wanting more. For example, he conclusively states that "all SMs have been decided by and executed with the support of an organization,"⁸³ or that "all SMs are carried out by the weaker side."⁸⁴

Pedahzur too calls "for a broad theoretical endeavor and a comparative analysis of the different manifestations of suicide terrorism in different parts of the world."⁸⁵ He then takes a slightly differing approach. Pedahzur himself provides the field with an analytic model of suicide terrorism, which he divides into three stages and incorporates all levels of analysis outlined by Hafez and Moghadam. He then incorporates factors he considers salient into the model to explain suicide attacks in a more simplified form. His model is reproduced here in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1.)

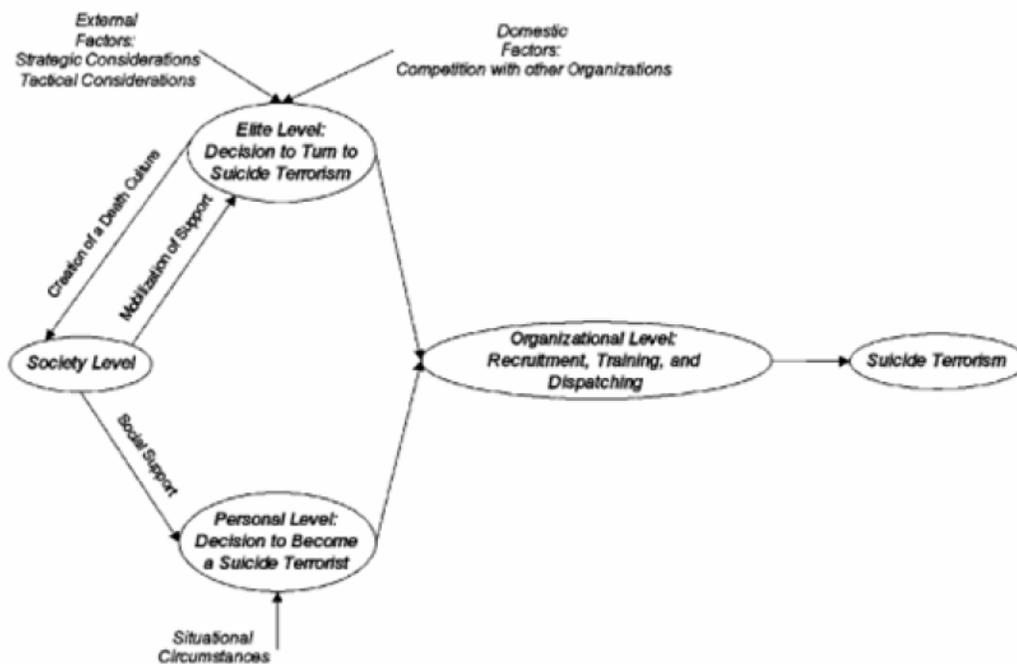


Figure 1. A model for describing and explaining suicide terrorism.

Source: Pedahzur, Ami. "Toward an Analytic Model of Suicide Terrorism—A Comment." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Vol. 16, No. 4. 2004. 841-844. p 842.

The first stage consists of "a rational process where leaders of the organization...reach a conclusion that suicide terrorism is the most effective way of furthering their goals at a certain point in time."⁸⁶ This is always in the context of asymmetrical warfare and often occurs in light of "internal political considerations."⁸⁷ At the same time, the broader social context must approve of this method of attack. Pedahzur's second stage in the analytic model deals with the recruitment of individuals for suicide operations by the organization. He believes that:

The person who chooses this act is mostly motivated by reasons anchored in personal experiences he/she has been exposed to, or is a result of certain feelings invoked by events undergone by the group to which he or she belongs and with whom he or she feels a deep sense of identification. This aspect, as well, cannot be analyzed in isolation from the broader context, namely, the social endorsement of the commitment to such an act.⁸⁸

Lastly, the third stage in his analytic model "takes place within the framework of the organization: it starts off with the definition of the individual as a potential suicide and concludes at the point when he or she is considered a 'live bomb.'"⁸⁹ This involves training, as well as the implementation of 'mechanisms of no return' that "bring him or her to a mental state which

enables him or her to set out upon the operation fully reconciled with the purpose.”⁹⁰ He admits the model is not without its limitations, however it is a much needed framework for this complex phenomenon. For example, some of the factors are rather roughly conceived. Also, disproven theories leave their mark on the model.

For Pedahzur, the environmental context is extremely important for the analysis of suicide attacks, as individual and organizational level analysis cannot exist in a vacuum outside of it. Perhaps the most original and important value-add that he brings to the field is the idea of a ‘culture of death,’ which he defines as “the use of religious or nationalistic rhetoric [to] make martyrdom appear as the right thing for this particular society at this point.”⁹¹ If a ‘culture of death’ is collapsed with Moghadam’s ideology in that an ideology is infused with or promotes such a culture, then this is perhaps the distinguishing factor between ideologies that facilitate or inhibit the phenomenon of suicide attacks. Another important contribution by Pedahzur is that he is among the first to articulate the experience of “being pushed into a corner”⁹² as a potential causal factor of suicide attacks in his work titled *Suicide Terrorism*, which is an important dynamic that once again implicates another side in combat rather than laying the blame for the proliferation of suicide attacks solely on one actor.

Toward a Comparative Analysis of Suicide Attacks.

Many serious scholars thus far have pointed to drivers or motivations that are manifest in the primary and secondary literature on suicide attacks, including Hafez, Moghadam and Pedahzur. At the organizational level, drivers are what Pedahzur calls strategic and tactical considerations, which connect to an organizational goal or strategic objective. These include: the need to win an asymmetric war through unconventional means, the cost-benefit analysis of suicide attacks, and, in some instances, utilizing the tactic when it fulfills an organizational goal in and of itself. These organizational drivers hold across case studies. Because the organization is more mechanical or bureaucratic, their drivers tend to be more technical, while at the individual level they tend to be more emotive and imparted with a human element.

At the individual level, drivers are extensive and include the following: Altruism, anger, assertion of masculinity, defilement of femininity, despair, fear, frustration, guilt, hopelessness, humiliation, rage, restoration of dignity, pride or honor, revenge, shame and vanity to name but a few. These drivers stem from themes that are pervasive in both the primary and secondary

literature concerning suicide attacks; they can also be conceived of as motivating factors or triggers.

While these themes are omnipresent in the literature, they need to be further disaggregated as some may be more important than others. Some of them are impulsive, while others are more ubiquitous to a society and bound up in moral persuasion and identity. I argue that these latter drivers are more influential than the more emotive ones. Moreover, it is not the driver itself but rather the underlying identities or values associated with them that stem from a moral persuasion that are more important.

What do I mean? For example, masculinity (and the need to assert it) is a social construct that men are subject to. Should a male not fulfill societal pressures to ‘become a man,’ he may be considered a failure. This creates pressure to perform the rituals of manhood, including protecting one’s nation and loved ones from invasion in times of war. To give an example, after witnessing daily scenes of U.S. subjugation of the Iraqis, including American soldiers in full gear leading bound Iraqi men wearing only their underwear through the streets of Baghdad,⁹³ one Iraqi man involved in the resistance gave his rationale for joining: “[What I saw] lit a fire in my heart...I had to show them the nature of a true Iraqi man.”⁹⁴ Similarly, the value attached to honor, one’s pride, and so forth create a moral imperative to act. An emotive driver like anger, revenge or despair is not as influential and, at the same time, may be attached to something more deeply rooted. The importance placed on particular drivers varies by context.

Of course, motives for the dead are often indeterminate ultimately and open to interpretation by the living.⁹⁵ Talal Asad posits that, “Motives in general are more complicated than is popularly supposed and ~~that~~ [the] assumption that they are truths to be accessed is mistaken: the motives of suicide bombers in particular are inevitably fictions that justify our responses but that we cannot verify.”⁹⁶ Asad rightly asks, “How can one possibly know what went on in the mind of a surprise suicide attacker in the moment before she died?”⁹⁷ Jon Elster furthermore concludes in his work “Motivations and Beliefs in Suicide Missions” that, “Although some [motives] are more plausible than others, we may not ever know the exact motivational and cognitive states of the suicide attackers for the simple reason that (to some extent at least) *there is no fact of the matter.*”⁹⁸ For example, in the case of Mohammad Atta it is said that, “it is impossible to know if he was bothered more by the injustice or the apostasy of Egypt’s public power. The two issues must have seemed inextricably intertwined in his

thinking.”⁹⁹ That said, drivers for individuals are merely what perpetrators of suicide attacks and secondary analysts state are the reasons behind their actions. No concrete theory about them has ever truly been nailed down at the level of the individual and doing so is always with its limitations.

In my view, it is not necessarily these disaggregate drivers but rather the underlying identities, or values they stem from, combined with an organization’s decision to conduct a suicide attack, which are the determining factors for suicide attacks to manifest in a given conflict. Indeed, there are many asymmetric conflicts the world over in which these factors exist, and yet suicide attacks never occur. For example, Ximena Bunster documents use of sexual torture in Central American conflicts in her piece “Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America,” and touches upon the most salient drivers,¹⁰⁰ and yet no suicide attacks have occurred in the context of those conflicts. Therefore, something else is present that are not these drivers. I argue that the something else is ultimately two criteria that combine to bring about the phenomenon of suicide attacks: (1) a historically rooted and/or cultivated ‘culture of death’ and sacrifice, and (2) the onset of a crisis at the level of an existential threat to a community, whether real or perceived.

This work seeks to answer Pedahzur’s call for a theoretical endeavor that incorporates a broader comparative analysis of the phenomenon of suicide attacks in order to understand the conditions and motivations that foster it the world over. At its heart, it provides a comparative analysis and attempts to answer the question: “What is the rationale for and what are the conditions that promote suicide attacks in modern history?” It holds that suicide attacks are not characteristic of one group or society, but are instead a feature of the human experience that is dependent mostly upon the environmental context. I argue that suicide attacks occur at a crossroads where (1) organizational strategy requires such an attack and (2) willing individuals to carry out such an attack meet, both of which are furthermore arrived at via (a) a moral persuasion to assert an identity, specifically influenced by a ‘culture of death,’ as well as (b) a sense of crisis at the level of an existential threat, whether real or perceived, that transcends the individual, organizational and social aspects of the phenomenon, all of which exist in the environment the organization and the individuals find themselves in.

These two underlying factors exist in situations with high occurrences of suicide attacks, and are not present in conflicts where they do not occur. In other words, they appear to be the

counterfactual. Whereas drivers can be thought of as triggers, these two prerequisite requirements that set off the trigger both exist in the environmental and/or socio-cultural spheres as all-pervasive presences. Pedahzur correctly shows in **Figure 1** that a ‘culture of death’ contributes to popular support of suicide attacks, which is another prerequisite for them to occur.

Given its centrality to the argument, it is important to adequately define the term ‘culture of death,’ and the means by which it materializes in a given society. To reiterate, Pedahzur himself defines it as “the use of religious or nationalistic rhetoric [to] make martyrdom appear as the right thing for [a] particular society at this point.”¹⁰¹ In this way a ‘culture of death’ is endowed with a moral component, namely that the method of attack is correct and proper in a given situation. In other words, martyrdom or voluntary death for a higher purpose is definitive of what a ‘culture of death’ is. This moral component is absolutely key to the facilitation of suicide attacks.

A ‘culture of death’ furthermore is ultimately an assertion of an identity bound up in a moral persuasion. The perfect example of this is *yamato damashii*, which was construed as the essence of ‘Japanese-ness,’ and thus a dictation of how the Japanese ‘should be.’ It was John Burton, and his ‘Human Needs Theory’ as an explanation for violent conflict, that said human needs—and particularly identity needs—will be pursued in the face of their denial and can “lead to behavior outside the legal norms of the society [i.e. violence].”¹⁰² Burton goes on to say that, “In conditions of oppression, discrimination, underprivilege and isolation, the defense of values is important to the needs of personal security and identity... Preservation of values is a reason for defensive and aggressive behaviors.”¹⁰³ As will be seen in the case studies, in the face of an encroaching West, a ‘culture of death’ became infused with certain identities to be asserted in conflict.

Besides a national identity, a ‘culture of death’ often informs and is even fused with other identities bound up in moral persuasion and needing to be asserted. It colors many moral aspects of a society or culture, such as honor, shame, and expectations of gender roles, among others. To continue with the Japanese example, one kamikaze pilot wrote that, “A man will die sooner or later. The value of being a man is given at the time of his death.”¹⁰⁴ This quote is illustrative that dying the ‘good death’ of a kamikaze in battle was a moral matter, both manly and honorable. In other words, manliness, honor and other ‘moral identities’ needing to be asserted were predicated on (heightened by?) the act of suicidal attack in a particular socio-cultural context informed by a

‘culture of death.’ Mexico, despite its celebration of death and annual Dead of the Dead festivities, would not be considered as possessing a ‘culture of death’ necessarily because it does not advocate for voluntary death or sacrifice for a higher cause at the societal level nor are moral identities like manhood or honor predicated on dying ‘a good death.’ Lastly, a penetrating ‘culture of death’ into a society will likely facilitate a given society’s acceptance of suicide attacks and will impede them from taking root if not present as was the case with Chechnya.

While Pedahzur holds solely the organization responsible for cultivating a ‘culture of death’ in society based on **Figure 1**,¹⁰⁵ I contend that a ‘culture of death’ and sacrifice can be pre-existing within a given society. That is not to say that a particular organization cannot take advantage of its presence, merely that the organization does not necessarily create it for its own designs. Maurice Pinguet, for example, chronicles the entire history of the tradition of Japanese voluntary death in his seminal work aptly titled *Voluntary Death in Japan* which existed long before the Meiji Period and subsequent eras leading up to WWII. Furthermore, it is not by chance that suicide attacks in the Muslim world originated with the *Shi’a*, with their strong culture of heroism and cultic martyrdom. Indeed, many societies are endowed with such a culture. However it is stronger in some than in others, and the added components of being the weaker side in asymmetric warfare, as well as an existential crisis, must be added in order for suicide attacks to manifest.

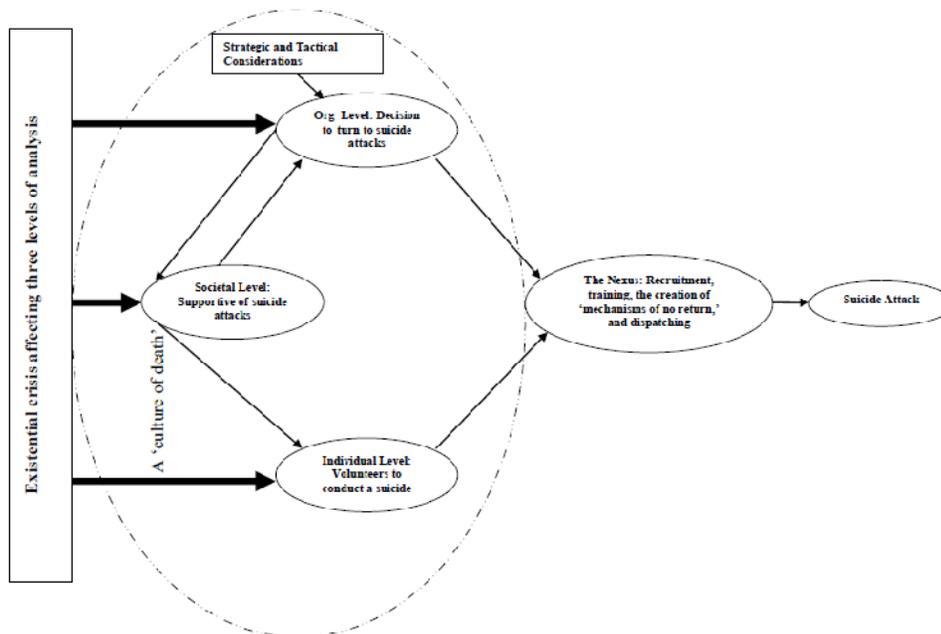
I argue furthermore that a ‘culture of death’ is solidified in the face of a constructed Other. This can be done by an organization, but not always. In the case studies examined, it is clear that the group associated with the Other had as much of a hand in constructing a ‘culture of death,’ as any organization did. Moreover, a ‘culture of death’ generally exists by virtue of historical circumstances. The idea of the Other, however, has utility in that it can be used to define what a particular society is and is not; it is simultaneously the standard to be weighed against. Generally, the Other is characterized in opposition to a given society, its values and core identity. In the Japanese example, the U.S., imperialist European powers, or the catch all of western civilization was the Other and characterized as a “poisonous materialistic civilization,”¹⁰⁶ decadently “individualistic” and “the modern thing” just before and during WWII. Japan’s essence then became characterized by the imperial rescript and *yamato damashii*, which simultaneously harked to the past and called for the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the nation as Japanese. This is not dissimilar from Al-Qaeda playing upon the dichotomy that

“The West loves life, while true Muslims love death”¹⁰⁷ in that it is strategically predicated on an Islamic identity, which Muslims hold as central to their own identity and moral character, but in the dichotomy against a constructed antithesis.

It is not just a ‘culture of death’ that determines the manifestation of suicide attacks in a conflict. A ‘culture of death’ must exist in the context of an existential crisis for the weaker side in war. That existential threat can either be real or perceived by a community. While the defining features of a community undergoing threat change depending on the case study, the nature of the threat of an in-group by an out-group remains the same in all case studies and is therefore a factor to be examined. What do I mean? For example, Japan is a nation-state, whereas the Tamils are a sub-national ethnic group while perpetrators in Iraq are either members of a sub-national group or internationals bound together by the notion of the Muslim *ummah*. For the latter, identity appears to undulate; the multiple identities of belonging to a global religious group, a nation-state or sub-national group can expand and contract depending upon what is emphasized. What is important is that there exists a defined in-group or community and its existence has come under attack in some way. An existential threat could be the destruction of culture, but more often it is a physical annihilation of some kind regardless of whether it is real or construed.

A graphic representation of this theory on the rationale and conditions for suicide attacks is represented in **Figure 2.**

Figure 2.)



I argue that for existential threat to be pronounced it must be a threat along ethnic and/or national lines rather than simply ideological ones. In his piece “Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars,” Chaim Kauffman shows us that ethnic and ideological wars have very dissimilar dynamics and thus play out differently. While he is primarily addressing civil war dynamics, what he identifies applies to others situations as well. Kauffman notes that in an ideological warfare, the sides in conflict vie for political support while undermining the opposition.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, war along ethnic lines by definition is inter-community, driven by ethnic divisions. In the latter loyalties are quite rigid, determined by being a member of a distinct ethnic, clan or religious community.¹⁰⁹ The motivation to protect families, homes and the homeland in an ethnic war is heightened, causing the restraints on the use of force to be weakened and military action more important and likely.¹¹⁰ This difference may explain why in the global radical leftist struggles of yesteryear suicide attacks were not present as Kalyvas and Sánchez-Cuenca note; they were not along ethnic lines but ideological ones. Existential threat along ethnic lines certainly separates the LTTE case, among others, from groups like FARC in Colombia or the Shining Path in Peru. Expanding this logic to international conflicts, namely Japan in WWII and post-2003 Iraq, Kauffman’s work is also applicable.

Some scholars may contend that the idea of an existential threat in the case of some Muslim suicide bombers is tenuous. While the case for an existential threat can be made for Palestinians, Chechens or Iraqis, many Muslim suicide bombers hail from Europe or countries not subject to the same level of threat by an out-group. In response to this I say that in the moments leading up to recruitment and attack, perpetrators define themselves as part of the greater Muslim *ummah* and not by the nationalities of the countries they hail from. In this way, they become fused with a threatened in-group, such as the Iraqis, through religious affiliation and react by way of attack inspired by a moral ‘culture of death’ that was formed by history and propaganda.

Case Study 1: The Japanese Kamikaze of World War II

To restate my hypothesis, I argue that suicide attacks occur at a crossroads where (1) organizational strategy requires such an attack and (2) willing individuals to carry out such an attack meet, both of which are furthermore arrived at via (a) a moral persuasion to assert an

identity specifically influenced by a ‘culture of death,’ as well as (b) a sense of crisis at the level of an existential threat, whether real or perceived, all of which exist in the environment the organization and the individuals find themselves in. I will begin by chronicling the presence of a ‘culture of death’ in Japan, the events that contributed to it, and how Japan became a society that accepted voluntary death and suicide attacks. Second, I will show the emergence of an existential threat to Japan by the Allied forces during WWII. These two factors serve as the crucial environmental context that gives rise to suicide attacks toward the latter part of the war. With that in mind, I will explain how the Japanese military arrived at the rationale to conduct suicide attacks through the following organizational level drivers: The need to win an asymmetric war through unconventional means combined with a positive cost-benefit analysis of suicide attacks in the context of WWII. Third, I will unpack how a ‘culture of death’ and a crisis or existential threat influenced individuals to become suicide attackers or kamikaze. It should be noted that the term kamikaze is interchangeable with *tokkōtai* (‘Special Attack Force’). While ‘kamikaze’ originally referred to the first squadron of these men during the Leyte Gulf Campaign in the Philippines, it has since come to signify the men who participated in Japan’s suicide attack campaign against the Allied Forces in the Pacific during WWII.

The Construction of a Voluntary Death Culture in Japan

During debates on how Japan would respond to the U.S. atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, Japan’s war minister stated: “Would it not be wondrous for the whole nation to be destroyed like a beautiful flower?”¹¹¹ Major Hujī Hajime wrote authorities requesting to become part of the *tokkōtai* operation three times before he wrote his fourth request in blood. Meanwhile, his wife drowned herself and her children requesting in her will that her husband ‘join them’ in death.¹¹² How, rationally, did we get here? The answer lay in Japan’s ‘culture of death,’ which had had historic precedent going back through millennia and became deeply embedded in the Japanese consciousness by way of history, culture and folklore.

A ‘culture of death’ is moral, connected to a non-negotiable identity of an individual or society, and calls for a voluntary death. Japan has an exceedingly long history of a ‘culture of death’ and sacrifice that stretches back even to ancient times. “Since the dawn of Japanese history, this theme, this mingling of sacrifice and suicide, has been continually heard.”¹¹³

Maurice Pinguet’s seminal work *Voluntary Death in Japan* chronicles the phenomenon’s entire

history in the country. I will focus on only what it absolutely crucial for the kamikaze case study. However, to be sure, historical precedent of a ‘culture of death’ is indicative of the manifestation of suicide attacks in modern conflict. A precedent is set, which lowers the threshold and makes a similar act easier in accept in a given society in the future.

While people are quick to blame religion, this ‘culture of death’ hardly stems from Shinto, Japan’s indigenous religious tradition. Shinto at its heart is concerned with purity, whereas death and decay are conceived of as pollutants to the natural environs it worships. In Japan, funeral rites are given by Buddhists. Some highlight Buddhism’s very slight impact on Japan’s ‘culture of death,’ but it does not have much influence. Zen Buddhism in particular is concerned with extinguishing attachment to this life. Some Zen scholars have predicated maturity on the ability to face death: “To acquire the knowledge of *mujō* (a sense of eternal change and the ephemeral quality of all things, including human beings) is the purpose of Japanese religions, and to develop the capacity for meeting death with complete equanimity is a *sine qua non* of Japanese maturity.”¹¹⁴ Still, surviving kamikaze note the light footprint of religion—both Buddhism and Shinto— on their personal decision to become suicide attackers.¹¹⁵ Religion is rarely as important to the Japanese as it is to western civilization. While it perhaps made its contributions, something much more core constructs a ‘culture of death.’

Instead its origins are in the *bushidō*, or ‘way of the warrior,’ the latter which, overtime, became essential to Japanese identity. The dictum, ‘I found that the way of the samurai is death,’ is emblazoned in Yamamoto Jōchō’s (1659-1719) *Hagakure*, a manual outlining the samurai code. Indeed, an integral aspect of the *bushidō* is the martial art of dying well. Its tenants started to take shape as early as 1156, when there was a succession crisis in the imperial household between two warrior houses, the Taira (Heike) and the Minamoto (Genji). Men out for power do despicable things; the violence was so savage that “those of the defeated who could not escape begged their best friends to kill them, if they no longer had the strength to do it themselves... It was not enough to kill the enemy chiefs; their children and grandchildren, heirs of their vengeance, must perish too.”¹¹⁶ In the belly of the beast, “suicide seemed not only the proudest, but even the most sensible course for the defeated. A chieftain’s suicide robbed his enemy – not, of course, of victory, but of triumph. They escaped the fearful humiliations which would precede inevitable death.”¹¹⁷ This thinking takes shape as a core tenet of the *bushidō* during this period

and manifests in Japanese chronicles of their civil wars (*gunki monogatari*), such as *Tales of Heike* and the *Taiheiki*.

What started as the relatively primitive practice of falling on one's own sword developed into a highly ritualized ceremony among the samurai class called *seppuku* or, the more vulgar, *hara-kiri* (literally 'stomach-cutting'). Some sources note that accounts of suicide by stomach-cutting in Japan appear as early as the eighth century.¹¹⁸ Regardless, *seppuku* would burgeon in Japan as a formalized ritual soon after the twelfth century in both literary form and Japanese history. According to Pinguet, "In medieval Japan, the cruel, unbending and arrogant rituals of *seppuku* gave suicidal impulses a moral prestige which no other civilization has ever accorded them."¹¹⁹ *Gunki monogatari*, popular literary entertainment in feudal Japan, would glorify the practice and reserve *seppuku* for the most outstanding of individuals—it was characterized as laudable.¹²⁰ In this way, the glorification of voluntary death by virtue of moral resonance contributed to its popularity and persistence. The *Taiheiki* paints one of the most famous suicides by *seppuku* in Japanese history:

At the battle for Yoshino Castle in February 1332, things have gone badly for Prince Morinaga, son of Emperor Go-Daigo. With arrows embedded in his armor, and 'bleeding waterfalls of blood' from his wounds, the prince is preparing for suicide. Hundreds of his men are ready to follow him. One of his generals, Murakami Yoshiteru, suggests a way out. If the prince will exchange armor with him, Yoshiteru explains, he will climb one of the castle turrets and disembowel himself in full view of the enemy; this will allow the prince time to escape. Prince Morinaga is moved to tears. The two men swap clothes, and Yoshiteru climbs the turret above the castle gates. He waits until the prince is out of sight before showing himself to the enemy.¹²¹

'Behold!' he roared from the castle tower, 'I am Prince Morinaga, second son of the divine Emperor Go-Daigo, who traces his lineage through ninety-five generations to the sun goddess Amaterasu. My men have run away. Now I shall destroy myself out of contempt for them—and you! Watch carefully and you will learn how to cut your bellies, for your day will surely come.' He removed his armor and hurled it down from the tower. Now all his enemies could see that he was wearing the prince's robes and cloak. As they looked on, he stabbed himself in the stomach, cut cleaning from left to right, and hurled a fistful of his guts against the wall. Dropping to his knees, he inserted the sword into his mouth until the tip of the blade touched his throat. Then he pushed himself forward and died.¹²²

The imagery of Morinaga is that of an eastern Saint Sebastian, while Yoshiteru is the dying hero. An interesting note on Japanese aesthetics that no doubt also influences a 'culture of death' is that its stories, histories and chronicles are often told from the loser's perspective. They take on the role of protagonist, and the tragic becomes the heroic. Weighed against other cases, one finds a strikingly similar tendency with other societies that have produced and supported suicide attackers.

Some may criticize *seppuku* as a cowardly act. However, that criticism is deprived of the act's true meaning in the Japanese context. Pinguet tells us that, "*seppuku* was the linchpin of the collective morality of the *bushi* [warrior] caste."¹²³ The warrior was not his own person, but rather belonged to a clan or the Emperor himself. Morality for the warrior consisted of fulfilling duties, and was intimately tied to honor and integrity. There was value in dying with or for superiors to convey devotion and live on in history as exemplary. The contrary, dishonor in defeat, was unbearable. The logic of Yoshitsune (d. 1189) was "suicide to protest his innocence and crown the brilliant victories of his short life with an exemplary death."¹²⁴ It was preferable to soiling his reputation with defeat and humiliation; it was preferable to dishonoring clan or country. Furthermore, *seppuku* was a means of depriving the enemy of his glory.

Seppuku in the Japanese context was linked to manliness, pride, vanity, and also to freedom. "The bloody demonstration of prowess tickled men's pride, and fostered the masochism which is the dark side of a strong will. The physical agony was the worst possible, but it was accompanied by a moral apotheosis: in his last moments any man could be a hero."¹²⁵ In the presence of a defeat, moreover, this act alone stole back man's free will. Pinguet describes the mentality: "It is for me alone to decide, by acting, who I am."¹²⁶ It was a multitude of values associated with the act of *seppuku* that allowed it to take such a hold on Japan.

Though the mania of *seppuku* would wax and wane through the ages, even to the point where warriors were chastised for being too quick to kill themselves without fighting the good fight,¹²⁷ the act left a profound imprint on the moral character of the Japanese. Throughout Japan's history, many a prominent figure would petition the old rite, tragically take their lives for reasons thus outlined, and invoke the highest honor through their self-sacrifice. This occurred deep into the modern period. Among the rite's victims were war heroes like Saigo Takamori (d. 1877), General Nogi Maresuke (d. 1912), and even literary genius Mishima Yukio (d. 1970).

Japan's truly perfected 'culture of death' however was forged in the crucible of the modern period, and by WWII it would be definitive of Japanese culture and society. Japan by the late Edo Period (1603-1868) was strictly closed to outsiders. All of this would change however when U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan open to trade with a combination of threat of the use of force and carrot-stick diplomacy, which resulted in the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the U.S. and Japan. In the minds of the southern Satsuma and Chōshū samurai clans, the Tokugawa Shogunate had opened their country up to a swarm of locusts—

hubristic, imperialist western powers. For its part, the Tokugawa government was entirely powerless to stop it; they forcibly agreed to the treaty which sold them out in order to avoid war with the United States and Britain.

The decision by the Tokugawa government ignited rebellion against it the same year, which manifested as isolated confrontations like as the Sakuradamon Incident in 1860, which was an attempt on the Shogun's life by disgruntled samurai. A torrent of incidents implicating foreigners however caused discontent to spread through Japan like wildfire. For instance, in August, 1863 the British Navy invaded Satsuma territory and bombarded Kagoshima to exact revenge for an earlier episode in which Satsuma samurai maimed two and even killed one British national for their blatant disrespect for their chieftain. In March, 1868, French ships entered the port of Sakai in Tosa territory, which was an area of Japan not open to foreigners. They reportedly wreaked havoc on the town and the Tosa warriors responded in kind. The Sakai Incident resulted in the deaths of 11 French sailors, the arrest of the Tosa samurai by the Shogun, and the sentencing of 20 of them to death by *seppuku* to be witnessed by the French. After observing the gruesome deaths of 11 samurai by ritual disemboweling, it is told that the Frenchmen retched and fled from the scene, and later requested the Shogun to spare the remaining nine Tosa men. This event inevitably conveyed a psychological victory for the samurai ethnic over an arrogant West.¹²⁸ It was later enshrined in modern Japanese literature by Mori Ogai's *Incident at Sakai*, which played up the nationalist theme of cultural victory in defeat.

The Shogun's sins mounted; the government's association with foreigners coupled with its betrayal of the Japanese people was intolerable. Clans like the Satsuma and Chōshū wanted a change in government, and an appeal to the past through the restoration of the imperial line and the 'purity' of ancient Japan suited their reactionary beliefs. By 1868 the rebellion against the Tokugawa government was a success, which ushered in the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji Period (1868-1912) abolished the shogun system in favor of the Japanese Emperor and served to unify the entire country under the imperial line. Shinto was co-opted for the transition and its ancient texts "came to be paralleled by an emphasis on Amaterasu as the divine foundress of the nation and the ancestress of the imperial house."¹²⁹ It furthermore helped to foster national solidarity. Lastly, these more mystic ideas serve as foundations of the imperial rescript and the education system during the war.

Saigo Takamori (Saigo the Great) was among the Satsuma samurai who assisted the coup against the Tokugawa shogunate in favor of the Emperor. He was similarly among those implicated in the Sakuradamon Incident. Of course, rarely does a coup ever equate to what it was originally intended for, and the 1868 Meiji Restoration was no different. Many of the Meiji advisors ended up embracing westernization and foreign powers in Japan. “The southern samurai had beaten the Tokugawa, whom they accused of collaboration with foreigners; nine years later they realized they were the first victims of their own victory, for their chieftains, having fought their way into the government, were speeding up the modernization of Japan, transforming its social structure and abolishing its most venerable traditions.”¹³⁰

Imperial decrees abolished the privileges of the samurai one by one. First, hereditary pensions paid to samurai families were forcibly converted into state bonds and were eaten up by inflation. They were next deprived of their way of dress and wearing their hair, as well as the sole right to a patronymic. Later, their penal code would be abolished by the state. And, lastly, the state banned their right to wield a sword. Their very identity as samurai was vanishing into thin air, as were their rights. To add insult to injury, this was juxtaposed with the encroachment of all things western, which befell upon them like a torrent washing away their traditions and way of life. “These zealots carried a white fan to protect themselves against overhead telegraph wires, and always carried a packet of salt to purify themselves if their eyes happened to light on one of those heinous (and, alas, ever commoner) Western innovations, trousers, jackets and hats.”¹³¹ In sum, everything Saigo and his diehard clansmen struggled so hard for was ephemeral and quickly disappearing in a modernizing Japan under the Meiji government just the same. “It was not only the land, but the very spirit of the nation (*Yamato damashii*), the spirit of the warrior (*bushi no tamashii*) which was being imperiled by the government’s own act.”¹³²

The onslaught of western civilization descending upon Japan, combined with appeals to Japan’s pure and ancient past, forged the notion that ‘Japanese-ness’ and *yamato damashii* was embodied in the ethic of the samurai who were disappearing in plain sight. They represented true Japan, whereas the creeping West and its government lackeys were its moral adversaries. The samurai rite of voluntary death by *seppuku* too would become definitive of what Japan was in light of this dichotomy. In this way, the encroachment of western civilization, and its destructiveness to individual rights vis-à-vis colonialism and identities vis-à-vis globalism, combined with a justifiable reaction to it, partly forged a ‘culture of death’ in Japan.

The disappearing samurais' "class interests and political opposition were all expressed in the moral language of purity versus degradation."¹³³ However, the Emperor, an embodiment of all things pure and good, was never blamed for the decay of Japan. Rather it was the state—his ministers—who were implicated. And when the state was corrupt, self-emolition for the salvation of the sovereign and the nation was obligatory.¹³⁴ Indeed, the act was the embodiment of the nation in its purest sense.

The first samurai rebellion in the Meiji Period took place in 1874, which was quickly put down by the government. Their leader, Eto Shinpei, was denied his 'right' to die by *seppuku* for his disgrace at rebellion. Instead, he was beheaded for his transgression. Considering what is established in regards to *seppuku*, this denial was not without its significance: It makes samurai like other Japanese by taking away their privilege in death. Rather than granting the self-effacing virtue of the rite to the convicted it renders them common criminals in death. Furthermore, it dissolves a defining tradition that is intrinsic to their identity. And lastly, it firmly establishes government dominance over the rebellious samurai.

In 1877, Saigo led a second rebellion, the Satsuma Rebellion, against the state that started the Seinan Civil War. A group assembled at Kumamoto, Kyūshū and called themselves very significantly, the *Shinpuren* ('League of the Divine Wind'), *shinpu* being the Chinese reading of the characters that can also be pronounced '*kamikaze*.' This title harked back to Japanese folklore in which it is held that the Japanese deities sent a great storm to destroy an advancing Mongol fleet in 1281, sparing Japan complete destruction by foreign invasion. This divine wind that crippled the Mongol fleet serves as the basis for the name *Shinpuren* or *kamikaze* both in Saigo's period and in WWII. The imagery is the same: Expel the foreigner with godly force.

Pinguet notes that in Japan during the time of Saigo that, "revolt was no less a sacred duty than obedience, so long as it was prompt to self-sacrifice. [Per the Imperial Rescript] the law required all people to face death if the state [read: nation] (in the name of the Emperor) demanded it."¹³⁵ In their view Saigo and the other warriors, through their actions, were attempting to save an endangered Japan and the Emperor from 'corrupting' state officials. These rebels stormed Kumamoto Castle never expecting to win much less survive the battle with government troops, for they were armed with swords while the troops were equipped with guns. Instead, their last stand was to make a point: 'We are Japan, and are willing to die for it to save it.' The act of *seppuku*, with all its moral reverberation in society, reflected his stance and was

simultaneously the embodiment of the nation itself. In those last moments, Saigo would be claimed by the ghastly rite, earning his triumph and absolution simultaneously. In 1891, after westernization in Japan took root and these bitter events only existed as national memory, Saigo was officially vindicated and the Emperor conferred upon him the dignity of third rank. This fact alone conveys voluntary death's moral aspect in the Japanese context. Furthermore, though they were adversaries, it communicates how the act is understood as an embodiment of the nation itself.

The most important contributions to the solidification of a 'culture of death' from this period are two: (1) The *bushidō*, or 'way of the warrior,' became definitive of Japan in the face of western encroachment and its vanishing past, and (2) voluntary death became an expression of identity as true Japanese in the face of a charlatan government. The Emperor furthermore, as a symbol of the nation that appeals to a pure and ancient Japan, was always associated with the former. Many prominent figures in Japanese history would express the sentiments of Saigo and others through action, including Mishima Yukio, who, not only eulogized the events of the 1877 Seinan Civil War in his Homer-like epic *Runaway Horses*, but took his own life by *seppuku* after a failed coup d'état to restore the Emperor to prominence in 1970.

While the samurai disappeared, the *bushidō* for its part was enveloped into the national ideology of Japan.¹³⁶ During the Meiji Period the destruction of all things traditional was palpable, and many Japanese had a need to define exactly what Japan was vis-à-vis the West and a changing world. Modern literature like Natsume Sōseki's classic *Kokoro* conveyed Japan in its death throes. Others clung to aspects of the past to redefine the country on a national scale. Nitobe Inazō defined the soul of the nation in his work *Bushidō* in 1895. He writes:

We have no religion comparable to Christianity, but the morality of our former warriors is enough. A people can live without believing in the other world, but not without belief in something: *it must at least have faith in itself if it is to continue to exist. And since faith is shown in sacrifice, must we not teach our children to die well, if we are to survive?*¹³⁷

He further describes the *bushidō* as an ethical system and Japan's soul.¹³⁸ As for the samurai, "The samurai grew to be the *beau ideal* of the whole race... What Japan was she owed to the samurai."¹³⁹ It is no great surprise that these ideas were folded into the national education system and the Imperial Rescript:

Should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.¹⁴⁰

Similarly were these ideas the very meaning of *yamato damashii*, conceived of as the heart and soul of Japan. In this way, a ‘culture of death’ was embedded in the modern cultural milieu of Japan, in its history, literature, folklore and education system. It was unseen and yet everywhere. By 1942, a grand symposium titled ‘Overcoming Modernity’ was held in Tokyo in which academics discussed the dissolution of a cultural identity, and how to stop it.¹⁴¹ The zeitgeist of cultural destruction was potent much like the Meiji Period, except that by this time it was more combative and *yamato damashii* was very much the mood. Their answer in 1942 to saving Japan from cultural disintegration too was similar. Thus reads the essay presented by Hayashi Fusao at that same symposium:

Japanese literature, return to your true nature! You are the progeny of the country. You are the valiant son who, born from your country, can now exalt it. You must succeed the proper lineage and genealogy of Japanese literature. Reject all the filth of contemporary literature! The true purity sought by literature can be found in the heart of imperial loyalty. You must cultivate only this sense of imperial loyalty as lies within your own heart! Do not look anywhere else; just walk straight on the path as revealed by this loyalty.¹⁴²

All this suggests that a preexisting ‘culture of death’ can be intensified in the face of cultural destruction—something to consider.

The *bushidō* lived on in the modern Japanese soldier fighting for the state.¹⁴³ “He who fears death dies defeated, he who defies it lives a conqueror: this paradox has often been heard on the battlefield... Never had the secrets of invincibility seemed more vital, in this world open to the greed of any power equipped with steam and gunpowder.”¹⁴⁴ *Yamato damashii*’s merit, so the Japanese believed, was proven on the battlefield in 1904-5. Japan’s weakness relative to western powers was palpable given Japan’s recent history. The arrival of Commodore Perry’s ‘black ships’ left an imprint on the collective psyche that the West had devastatingly superior technology. Also, in a world fixated with racist science discourse, it was inconceivable that an Asian nation might best a western power in war. However, Japan’s winning of the Russo-Japanese War changed Japan’s (and the world’s) perception of itself. Japan’s answer to its perplexing superiority in battle: *Yamato damashii*. In this way, a ‘culture of death’ is encouraged by its successes. Suddenly Japan was a key player on the world stage.

Still, the world remained a Christian, white men’s club that Japan was not allowed to join. Japan left the signing of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles that ended WWI, to which Japan was an Allied Power, incensed. Despite western imperialist expansion into China and other parts of Asia, the Allied Powers refused to include Japan in carving up the mainland, despite its desperate need

for natural resources as a small archipelago. Worse, the other Allied Powers failed to endorse the principle of the equality of all races despite Japan's establishment as a world power. These points of contention set the backdrop for the 1937 Manchurian Incident that kicked off the Pacific War for Japan. According to Japanese diplomat Mamoru Shigemitsu:

The Japanese were completely shut out from the European colonies. In the Philippines, Indo-China, Borneo, Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, not only were Japanese activities forbidden, but even entry. Ordinary trade was hampered by unnatural discriminatory treatment... In a sense the Manchurian outbreak was the result of the international closed economies that followed on the First World War. There was a feeling at the back of it that it provided the only escape from economic strangulation.¹⁴⁵

This occurred under an anti-colonial guise of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. With its slogan 'Asia for the Asians!' Japan gained a lot of initial support in the Pacific theatre among the colonized which helped them achieve their aims in Asia. Of course, Japan's expansion into China upset American and European interests there. These tensions set the stage for WWII in the Pacific theatre.

Japan committed evil in the Chinese mainland. It became the monster it dreaded in order to stall the domination of its land by outside forces. Imperialism, no matter what its disguise—Rudyard Kipling's white man's burden, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, or quarantining a Communist contagion—is evil and is always met with repercussions sooner or later. The terror Japan inflicted on China, combined with the perception of a growing Japanese menace, alarmed the U.S. to action. President Roosevelt decided to halt oil shipments to Japan, and soon the Netherlands and the U.K. followed suit. In response, Japan invaded the Dutch East Indies to access its oilfields in order to continue its rampage in China. And on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor with the hope of stalling the U.S. Pacific fleet long enough to achieve their ends in China and the Pacific, which drew the U.S. into the war.

It is not only Japan's history, culture and relationship vis-à-vis the West that crafted its 'culture of death.' The state and circumstances during WWII also had a hand in its creation. First, the imperial rescript was all pervasive in Japan and the cornerstone of moral guidance from the Meiji Period until the end of the war. As already mentioned, it implored citizens to willingly give their lives for the country. Its ethics moreover were all pervasive in the Japanese education system, serving as the moral foundation. Hill presents the following excerpt from ninth-grade Japanese text books from 1910: "The state exists independently forever, but the individual for only a time, and compared with the state, his life is very brief. It is only natural that the people

must conform to the purposes of the eternal state and give no heed to personal interests.”¹⁴⁶ In 1924, all middle school and high school students were required to perform military training under army officers, and according to one high school principle during that time, “The quintessence of military education is to cultivate the attitude of patriotic martyrdom and patriotism.”¹⁴⁷ Many Japanese “stressed that the moral education based on the 1890 rescript was the most important factor in creating a popular preparedness to die for Japan.”¹⁴⁸ It worked. During the 1930s and 40s more copies of *Hagakure* were sold than ever before. Jōchō’s original teaching that, “the way of the samurai is death,” was lauded as Japan’s essence—*yamato damashii*.¹⁴⁹

Not just military school, but Japan’s actual military training further transmitted Japan’s ‘culture of death.’ Much of the *bushidō* was incorporated into the *Seijin Kun* or ‘field service code.’

To transcend considerations of life and death is to have a spirit of sublime self-sacrifice. Stand aloof from thoughts of life and death and concentrate all your attention on pushing forward in the completion of your duty! Use up all your mental and physical strength and take joy in living in the principle of eternal righteousness!¹⁵⁰

Don’t suffer the shame of being captured alive! Die and avoid leaving behind a bad name due to dishonorable conduct!¹⁵¹

The Catalyst of Crisis at the Level of the Japanese Military Command

As early as 1942, Japan was on the run in the Pacific and the U.S. was quickly closing in on the Japanese mainland. The Allies had won Midway, giving the U.S. the upper hand in the Pacific theatre. The Solomon Islands and then the Marshall Islands fell in 1943, followed by Saipan and the Marianas in 1944. Japan’s oil supply chain from Indonesia was cut off after the U.S. took back the Philippines, and the country was starved of both food and supplies to continue fighting the war. Okinawa was next. It was inevitable that the U.S. was coming for the mainland, and the Japanese authorities knew it. “The main external obstacle to a negotiated peace was the declaration of the Allied leadership that it would accept only an unconditional surrender from the Japanese.”¹⁵² Preservation of the imperial institution’s integrity was the minimal condition for the Japanese—an honorable peace.¹⁵³ By 1944, Japan’s primary strategic objective was to try to “inflict such heavy damage on the American forces that the U.S. would stop the war before invading the home islands, and would not insist on an unconditional surrender.”¹⁵⁴ This was the backdrop to the decision by the Japanese military to deploy the use of the kamikaze.

The idea to systematically utilize such a tactic was introduced as early as 1943. However, it was not popular among military circles at the time and was met with resistance. The army and navy high commands initially refused to even consider it.¹⁵⁵ Authors like Naitō note that the commanding officers were “proud and spirited men who still believed they could defeat the Allied Forces in regular combat.”¹⁵⁶ Pride was certainly one reason. Another reason commonly cited for the initial resistance included the fact that the tactic was extremely expensive, resulting in the loss of both an aircraft and a trained pilot in a single attack, contradicting the military principle of achieving strategic objectives at minimal expenditure of resources.¹⁵⁷ Also, it was argued that crashing planes on their own could not deliver a fatal blow to aircraft carriers; instead they needed to be laden with explosives.¹⁵⁸ Lastly, it would be difficult to evaluate the success of the tactic.¹⁵⁹

Resistance by the military gave way to increasing pressure put on the Japanese by the Allies. It soon became clear that there was little other choice given the strangulation of Japan and the need to fight an asymmetric war in order to achieve their strategic objective of an honorable end to the war. In March, 1944 Prime Minister Tojo gave the orders to the Army Air Corps to make the preparations for special suicide missions in the Pacific.¹⁶⁰ The first officially scheduled suicide attack occurred on May 27, 1944 when Major Takada Katsushige crashed his plane into an American Subchaser-699 off the coast of West New Guinea.¹⁶¹ At the organizational level, it is clear in the case of Japan that being in a position of weakness and the need to fight an asymmetric war led to the use of suicide attacks given the varying levels of resistance to them by the high command.

With Japan now losing the war, the cost-benefit analysis of suicide attacks was turned on its head. Given the disparities between the Allied Forces and Japan post-1943, the potential benefits of the tactic suddenly outweighed the costs associated with them and provided a window of opportunity to achieve Japan’s strategic objective. It is little surprise that the battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines in August, 1943 is one of the first instances of officially sanctioned suicide attacks. Hill describes the rationale of the military:

By this stage of the war, the Japanese high command had begun to pin all its hope on one decisive battle that would destroy the Allies and hold them at the outskirts of Japan’s pre-1930s imperial boundaries. This would put them in a position from which they could honorably conclude the war. Japan’s only major offensive assets in the Pacific theatre were her land-based forces and big battleships...In order for Japan’s battleships to successfully engage the main Allied fleet, then at Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, it would first be necessary to put the enemy aircraft carriers out of action, if only temporarily. Admiral Ōnishi, the man newly appointed to command the first Air

fleet in the Philippines, was tasked to carry out the mission. Although he had initially been opposed to the idea of SMSs, Ōnishi reluctantly realized that, with the forces at his disposal, he had little option but to destroy the carriers' wooden flight decks by bomb-laden Zero fighters crashing into them.¹⁶²

The 201st Air Corps were among the first to conduct suicide attacks, and were given the name *Shinpū*, or 'divine wind.' The characters can also be read '*kamikaze*,' which is where the suicide pilots derive their title from today. They managed to damage five carriers and a destroyer, which suggested the tactic's overall success and superiority to conventional methods to the military.¹⁶³ With this success in the Philippines the relative cost was justifiable and the tactic would be repeated as the U.S. inched ever closer to Japan. Hill maintains that suicide tactics were "considerably more effective than conventional attacks given the remaining military assets available to the Japanese."¹⁶⁴ Considering the horror the kamikaze conjured among the Allied Forces, it was widely believed among military elites that the tactic would successfully "intimidate Americans to an honorable end of the war."¹⁶⁵

Aside from an existential threat to Japan, by this time it was very clear that a 'culture of death' had deeply penetrated Japanese society. One volunteer pilot indicated, "I want to live in the noble spirit of the Special Attack [*tokkōtai*]."¹⁶⁶ In other instances, many kamikaze conveyed that they were representative of Japan's 'essence' and *yamato damashii* through their solitary act, similar to the suicidal protests of historical figures like Saigo Takamori: "Us members of the *tokkōtai*...represent the Spirit of Japan [*yamato damashii*]."¹⁶⁷ Not only did the kamikaze self-endorse their actions, the entire nation did. "They were...lionized in the press and official communiqués in which they were referred to as god-heroes. Their photos would appear in the newspapers...kamikaze pilots would also receive fan mail and handmade dolls from schoolgirls to take on their mission. Civilians would approach them in the street and thank them."¹⁶⁸ Lastly, using the tactic once and witnessing its success is incentive to repeat the use of the tactic again, thus lowering the threshold of resistance to it and further contributing to the mood of a 'culture of death.' The two ingredients of existential threat and a 'culture of death' created a storm of steel and fire in the skies over and under the waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Volunteerism among the Kamikaze

It is widely accepted that just under 4000 individuals became kamikaze during WWII. Naitō sets the number at 3913,¹⁶⁹ while Morioka says 3,843.¹⁷⁰ These numbers exclude the

human-wave assaults by Japanese soldiers and citizens which occurred during the late stages of the war in defense of Japanese colonies in the Pacific and the mainland. Were they to be included, this number would increase exponentially. “In the case of Saipan, the defenders were ordered to fight to the last man by their commanding officers who then committed suicide themselves. The poetic euphemism for these mass-suicidal last stands was *gyokusai* (‘shattering jewel’).”¹⁷¹ Compared to suicide attacks by other countries and organizations, the numbers are unprecedented except for but a few case studies: LTTE, AQI and the Iranian *basij* during the Iran-Iraq war.

Attacks were conducted via the use of aircraft—planes and *Ōka* (‘exploding cherry blossoms;’ essentially, manned bombs)—as well as via submarine called *kaiten* (‘turning heaven’) and motor boats, both of which were less common and less successful. Almost all attacks by the Japanese kamikaze took place during 1944 or 1945 when Japan was losing its captured territory and the Pacific War. The closer the U.S. came to the Japanese mainland, the more intense the kamikaze campaign became with less than one hundred sorties during October, 1944 and almost 1200 sorties during April, 1945.¹⁷²

It is widely held that some individuals who became kamikaze pilots did not volunteer; instead they were ‘forced into it.’ Ohnuki-Tierney hotly contends they did not volunteer because they were drafted into service and subsequently coerced by the military into becoming kamikaze.¹⁷³ She makes her case using the writings of university student pilots drafted into the war in *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soliders*. Even the ultra right-wing nationalist Mishima Yukio, who praised the kamikaze as a high expression of ‘The Way of Japan,’ concedes that “these youths not yet out of school were forced by the national authorities to proceed to their death against their will. Even if they [student pilots] went of their own will, they were rounded up into attack forces almost by coercion and sent to certain death.”¹⁷⁴ Some pilots referred to the tactic as an “act of murder under the disguise of a military order.”¹⁷⁵ The issue of volunteering or not for suicide attacks is extremely important because, by definition, an individual cannot be included in the data set if they did not willingly carry out the operation.

However, on second glance, perhaps coercion is not the right word in these instances. Instead, it is reported that members of the military corps would be assembled by senior military officials and publically asked to volunteer.¹⁷⁶ This strategy did create peer pressure among the cadets to volunteer. “The writings that *tokkōtai* pilots left behind reveal that they did not resist

volunteering simply because of peer pressure but because they could not bear to protect their own lives while seeing their friends and comrades offer theirs.”¹⁷⁷ This issue is controversial because it calls into question the nature of volunteering—if morality begs that we do something, are we volunteering? To their credit, “sometimes the officer in charge went through the ritual of blindfolding the young men—a gesture ostensibly intended to minimize peer pressure—and asked them to raise their hands to volunteer.”¹⁷⁸ At the same time, by not volunteering it is also said soldiers became *persona non grata*. Still, this is not coercion per se, but rather persuasion based in circumstance; nobody strapped men into planes and forced their crash down.

Also, while Ohnuki-Tierney makes her argument by reflecting on a select number of student soldier case studies, it is important to recall that “because these students left behind far more written material than the less educated career officers and enlisted men, they have attracted a disproportionately large degree of interest.”¹⁷⁹ The number of volunteers, particularly among enlisted officers, was actually quite high,¹⁸⁰ and this needs to be equally emphasized. “In the case of the first *Shinpū Tokkōtai* [Divine Wind Special Attack Force, i.e. kamikaze] attack, all of the non-commissioned officers and reserve officer pilots (though significantly none of the academy graduates) volunteered to participate in the mission.”¹⁸¹ Other squadrons in Japan and, similarly, across the Pacific also volunteered. The focus on the drafted student soldiers stems not only from the fact they left behind a corpus of writings, but also a Japanese tendency to demonize the military authorities while attempting to absolve the kamikaze post-WWII. They simply do not reflect all kamikaze during the war.

Concerning the drafted student pilots, coercion by the military is not clear in every instance, including those presented by Ohnuki-Tierney herself. Sasaki Hachirō, who was drafted from the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1943, is one such example. Ohnuki-Tierney largely defeats her original argument by noting that “the father tried his best to dissuade Sasaki Hachirō from volunteering to be a pilot.”¹⁸² Writings by other student pilots, including those enshrined at The Chiran Peace Museum for Kamikaze Pilots in Chiran, Kyūshū show that other student, and even boy pilots, also volunteered to become kamikaze.¹⁸³ Of course, the dynamics of volunteerism are not always so black and white. Some “had a strong urge to decline but realized that this was impossible; to do so would be considered unbecoming of a naval pilot.”¹⁸⁴ Structures like these which influence decision making must be incorporated into the analysis. For our

purposes, those for whom it is proven they did not volunteer to become kamikaze are excluded from the analysis.

A ‘Culture of Death’ and Crisis at the Level of Individual Kamikaze

Scholarship is extremely fortunate that many individual kamikaze left behind a corpus of primary literature outlining their rationale for volunteering for suicide attacks in their own words, including journals, diaries, letters and *issho* (‘death notes’). Also, volunteers who did in fact survive the war have elucidated their own motivations post-Japan’s surrender. Understanding the rationale for their act *ipso facto* is best accomplished by allowing the kamikaze to speak for themselves rather than relying on analysis clouded by biased viewpoints. Some scholars note that journals and diaries are more reliable sources because letters and *issho* were censored by the military,¹⁸⁵ while the former two were strictly forbidden, the broader themes contained within each largely match nonetheless.

The themes contained within their words are exhaustive. One fact that becomes very clear is that they were very disenchanted with the military and the Emperor as Ohnuki-Tierney and others argue. Consider the following:

I will never fight for the navy. If I am to die I will do so for the country or, to put it in extreme terms, my own personal pride. I feel nothing but hate toward the navy! I say this directly to my heart. I am able to die if it is for the sake of my pride. I will absolutely not die for the Imperial Navy.¹⁸⁶

However, many still volunteered to crash planes and other vehicles into the U.S. Pacific fleet to defend the country and their loved ones. Many others blew themselves up under fire of advancing American forces just the same.

The words of the kamikaze highlight an exhaustive list of potential motivations, including masculinity and (fear of) defiled femininity, fear for loved ones, honor, pride or dignity, shame, vanity, despair, and a deep sense of altruism. Of course, given the limitations in adequately assessing motive mentioned in a previous section, our analysis utilizes these writings to look beyond these drivers or motives to arrive at the heart of the matter. These themes represented in the literature all connect to individual identities transfixed by moral persuasion and are underscored by a ‘culture of death.’ Furthermore, these writings draw attention to kamikaze understanding of an existential threat facing their country and their loved ones, which rendered their need to act.

Masculinity is among the most common themes in the writings of the kamikaze, and furthermore one of the most basic moral identities. To begin, masculinity is a social construct that all men are subject to; should a male not fulfill societal pressures to ‘become a man,’ he may be considered a failure, particularly in hyper masculine societies like wartime Japan. In this way, to be a man is an identity with a fixed moral influence, which in turn creates pressure to perform the rituals of manhood. That is not to say that masculinity is causal of suicide attacks—not at all. It requires that extra ingredient to attach itself: A ‘culture of death.’ Infused with a ‘culture of death,’ manhood becomes the ability to face death without fear and/or die willingly. Consider a journal entry from student soldier Takushima Norimitsu:

The news of the death of my comrade Shōda was a great blow to my heart...I had kept hoping that he might have drifted onto an island in the South Pacific. But the news that his plane was shot down terminated that dream. Lieutenant Yuta, too, died when his plane plunged into a mountain. I am very sorry to have lost these two close comrades. But to have met the proper death must have been quite satisfactory for them as males.¹⁸⁷

2nd Lieutenant Hosogane Masayoshi echoes this understanding of manliness in a letter he wrote, “You should think to die of an illness is the shame of [a] Japanese man. See you, good luck.”¹⁸⁸ Lastly, Petty Officer Kameda wrote, “A man will die sooner or later. The value of being a man is given at the time of his death.”¹⁸⁹ Quite clearly, men are in quest of what they are conditioned to believe is a ‘good death’ by virtue of their being men, which is achieved by dying courageously. Masculinity influenced by a fully cultivated ‘culture of death’ (in part) encouraged them to volunteer.

In a final letter to his mother, Hayashi Ichizō strikes a profound chord as he invokes masculinity and what it means to be a man in a Japanese context. His letter is important not only because it displays how incredibly human these men were, but also because it shows that religious affiliation was mostly irrelevant in determining who volunteered to become kamikaze—Hayashi and his family were Japanese Christians. Sometimes he addresses his mother as ‘*kāchan*,’ which is an endearing rendering of ‘*okāsan*,’ and best translated as ‘mommy’ in English. He wrote:

Mother, finally the time to write a very sad letter has arrived. My thoughts echo the following poem: “Parents’ thought is deeper than children’s thought of them. How would they take today’s news.”

I have been truly fortunate. I did whatever I wanted to do. Please forgive me; it was because I was relying on your indulgent love. I am happy to go as a *tokkōtai* pilot. But I begin to cry when I think of you. When I think how Mommy struggled so hard to raise me, I find it hard to leave you behind without ever having given you pleasure or peace of mind...I still want to be spoiled by you. There is nothing that pleases me more than your letters. I wish I could see you

once more. I want to be held in your arms and sleep...I am writing this letter when my final flight is the day after tomorrow. By chance I might be able to fly over Hakata on my way.

Mommy, Mommy—I went against your advice and had to reach this destination. I wish I could say that I am pleased to have my wish fulfilled. But I should have followed your advice.

Mother, I am a man. All men born in Japan are destined to die fighting for the country. You have done a splendid job raising me to become an honorable man [*rippana otoko*]...I will do a splendid job sinking an enemy aircraft carrier. Do brag about me.

My wish to return to you haunts me. But this is not good. Do you remember that I was told to die at the time of baptism?...All is in God's hands. Life and death in this world are of no importance...I read the Bible every day. When I am reading the Bible, I feel I am next to you. I shall bring the Bible and the book of hymns on my plane and sortie. And also the mission medal which the school principal gave me. And the amulet mother gave me.

Mother, you are a person who commands great respect. I have always thought that I would not measure up to you...Tomorrow is our day to fly. I find it hard to concentrate, but I wanted to leave my words to tell you that I want to be spoiled by you.

Cherry blossoms must be at their peak...I imagine horsetails are growing in the schoolyard. I fondly recall the spring vacation. Please send my best to Teacher Hagio, the principal, and [a list of teachers and relatives follows].

I am going to have Umeno, a close friend and navy comrade, come and we will chart the course for flying. I shall fly over Hakata and Munakata. I shall bid farewell as I look from a distance at the cherry blossoms in Nishi Park.

Mother, please be pleased that someone like me [using a phrase expressing humbleness] was chosen to be a *tokkōtai* pilot. I will die with dignity as a soldier. We are Christians. Nevertheless, Mother, I am sad. When you are sad, please cry. I too will cry; let us cry together to our hearts' content. I will sing a hymn as I dive into an enemy vessel. I have a great deal more to say, but I will stop there...

The day before the final sortie. Good-bye.¹⁹⁰

Writings left behind by individual kamikaze also suggest honor, pride and dignity—even shame—in connection with death and dying well. These concepts are once again socially constructed and possess a deep-set moral persuasion about them. Moreover they are connected to non-negotiable identities like being male and Japanese, among others. A 'culture of death' is at a height when honor, pride or dignity are predicated on a 'good death,' as was the case during WWII. To illustrate that dying in such a way was laudable, a surviving WWII kamikaze states the following during an interview: "There was a sense of crisis. We had to save the country. Anyhow, there was a feeling that, if we were to die in battle, wasn't a special attack as good a way as any? Pilots all have pride, we are different from other people—the so-called chosen ones. Won't everybody praise us?"¹⁹¹ In a more extreme case, Okabe HIRAKAZU wrote, "Now at long last I am a member of the Special Units [*Tokkōtai*]. Will the next thirty days be my real life? Here is my chance! I am to train for death: an intensive training for a noble death."¹⁹² And lastly, "I wonder if we fail this decisive battle, how our country will be in the future. I am inspired by the happiness and honor that I bear the burden of [this] important mission."¹⁹³ It is not necessarily that by not performing such an act one is deficient in honor, pride or dignity, but

rather, based on societal constructs, a kamikaze's act embodied the pinnacle of honor and pride in Japan during this period. This too contributed to their decision given other conditions happening simultaneously, namely an existential threat and the operational ability to conduct such an 'admirable' attack.

The reverse of pride, honor and/or manliness is shame, and can be just as powerful a motivator. If voluntary death becomes commendable based on a 'culture of death,' then failure to perform is shameful for a Japanese man during this period.

Because we were men we were vain. It would have been a disgrace to lose your composure...you didn't have much time but still you looked back down and forced yourself to smile...you wanted to be praised after you died, just as much as you wanted it during your life. You wanted them to say, 'Yokota was young, but he went with incredible bravery. He was dignified to the end.' It would be terrible if they said, 'He went shaking. So unlike a *Kaiten* pilot. There was only one like that in our whole group. He was a disgrace to the *Kaiten* Corps.'¹⁹⁴

Nagatsuka's sentiments relate to Yokota's. He writes, "When given a chance to go out again he is 'joyful' but can't work out whether this is due to patriotic zeal or the desire to wipe out (his) shame."¹⁹⁵

One of the rituals of manhood is protecting one's nation (read: motherland) and loved ones from invasion in times of war. This ties into the notion of an existential threat, which mobilizes men to action. In the Japanese context, given the other brewing factors, it prompted men to become kamikaze. Personal accounts that convey existential threat to Japan are exhaustive and come to the fore in the motives for individual kamikaze. 2nd Lieutenant Mukujima Kochi wrote in a letter to his mother and father: "Now, our country faces a crisis between life and death. I feel I am quite happy that I was born in this world as a man...I hope you [mother and father] will live cheerfully with the others and also hope to carry out the mission of the Japanese people."¹⁹⁶

The student pilots communicated similar sentiments. Sasaki Hachirō wrote in his journal that, "We must now be the shield to protect the eternal life of our nation by going to the front to prevent the enemy's advance as much as possible...Even if I fall, society does not rely on one individual. I am not concerned and shall eagerly go to the front."¹⁹⁷ Takushima Norimitsu from Keiō University wrote in his journal: "For those innocent children, I would not mind sacrificing my life,"¹⁹⁸ and later that, "No matter what happens, I must prevent you people [of mainland Japan] from another tragedy like the one on Saipan,"¹⁹⁹ Takushima refers to the mass suicides of

Japanese soldiers and citizens on Saipan in the face of an invading U.S. In this way, his sacrifice is pure altruism.

In a longer correspondence, 2nd Lieutenant Aihana Nobuo conveys a similar sense of purpose in a letter to his stepmother:

Dear Mother, How have you been? I really appreciate you for your kindness. You brought [me up] from when I was six years old. Though you were a stepmother, there were no scandals around you as usually happened. You cherished and brought me up with love. I appreciate and respect you, Mother. I was happy in my life. I never called you 'Mother' [until] now. I often tried to do so, but how I was a man of weak character. Please forgive me Mother. You might feel very lonely. Now I will call out [to] you 'Mother, Mother, and Mother' ... Life is fifty years. I already lived twenty years. I will give my other thirty to mother and father half by half. There are no debts for [the] house. Please put your mind at ease because I have no problems [with] debt and [women]. Please use this money enclosed to get cigarettes you like.²⁰⁰

Kōzu, a Japanese *kaiten* pilot already touched upon briefly, wrote in his journal: "I saw myself dying to defend my parents, my brothers and sisters. For them I must die, I thought."²⁰¹ The examples go on and on. What is important is that the overabundance of writings shows the presence of an existential threat and, with that, the moral identities that call for voluntary death in its presence bleed through their own words.

Intimately connected to masculinity and shame is the possibility of defiled femininity, which is furthermore intrinsic to existential threat. The sentiments of Lieutenant Seki are worth repeating again here. He writes, "I am going for my beloved wife. If Japan were defeated, I reckon she would be raped by American GIs. I am dying to protect her."²⁰² During this time there was widespread fear of mass rape, which was increased by official government warnings of it.²⁰³ And why not? This is precisely what Japan did in the countries it ravaged during the Pacific War. The rape of Nanking and the legacy of 'comfort women' live on today in national memories of countries like China, Korea and Indonesia. Western colonial legacies too have their share of sexual abuse. At the more abstract level, defiled femininity is represented in the invasion of the 'pure' motherland by outsiders. Sakai wrote, "Can we bear seeing our countries being invaded by outside enemies? That was what was on my mind."²⁰⁴ Similarly, Hayashi Ichizō wrote: "My earnest hope is that our country will overcome this crisis and prosper. I can't bear the thought of our nation being stampeded by the dirty enemy. I must avenge [it] with my own life."²⁰⁵

‘Mechanisms of No Return’ for the Kamikaze

Once these men volunteered for their mission and were accepted, they underwent a training process that is integral to the success of a suicide attack. While on the one hand training involved the practical (i.e. learning how to maneuver a plane), beyond it there existed a persistent psychological component that is related to camaraderie, shame and even guilt which ultimately resolved the volunteer to their eminent death. The kamikaze had a series of rituals that further played upon these moral persuasions, and facilitated in the explosion of the individual. I call these ‘mechanisms of no return,’ certain structures put into place that capitalize on both one’s pride and shame to ensure they fulfill upon their mission. Based on the fact that these moral persuasions were key factors in their decision to volunteer, the use of them as ‘mechanisms for no return’ largely helped guarantee the successes of their individual missions.

The first ‘mechanism of no return’ is arguably found in the asymmetric context of the war. WWII had gone poorly for Japan, and there was a general mood among soldiers that they would not survive the war, particularly given that Allied Forces were rapidly closing in on the mainland. In this sense, some argue that it was psychologically easier to become kamikaze and, essentially, choose their own death instead of waiting for it to come upon them.²⁰⁶ Many kamikaze describe the wait to sortie as an agonizing experience.²⁰⁷

Related to death’s eminence for soldiers was the prevalent mood among them that they were “supposed to die. From the time they received their assignment, they were no longer of this world.”²⁰⁸ This idea is another ‘mechanism of no return,’ in which receiving their assignment created a psychological barrier or demarcation that separated their past life before personally receiving their ‘time of death,’ from their new ‘life’ as a dead man walking. Before his death, Captain Anazawa Toshio wrote to his fiancée Chieko that, “Anazawa is no longer of this world.”²⁰⁹ Writings like these conveyed the sense that they were ‘already dead,’ and moreover I argue the prolific writings of the kamikaze were, in and of themselves, re-enforcers to that mental demarcation in that they helped convince them of the idea that they were ‘no longer of this world’ by decrying their deaths to loved ones. Lastly, the writings of the kamikaze appear to be an exercise in rationalizing their deaths, which, once accomplished, they would seldom go back on.

This psychological barrier or mental demarcation was further reinforced by the physical. It was common for kamikaze to be given a white scarf prior to their sortie to distinguish their

‘crossing over’ to the world of the dead.²¹⁰ Furthermore, Kaimondake, a mountain at the southern tip of Kyushu, Japan, from whence the majority of the kamikaze pilots departed, came to represent still being part of this world.²¹¹ According to the Chiran Peace Museum for kamikaze pilots, once the mountain was out of sight the kamikaze took that to mean they were ‘no longer of this world.’²¹² In this way the physical took on the power to reinforce the psychological, contributing to the ‘mechanism of no return.’

Perhaps a more powerful ‘mechanism of no return’ is peer pressure. The kamikaze in the same squadrons had the practice of signing their names and leaving messages on the same Japanese flag,²¹³ which signifies camaraderie, but in a very real sense was a death pact. It created the expectation among the men who signed their name that they would all die together. Peer pressure is a very powerful ‘mechanism of no return,’ particularly when re-negotiating a pact among men is impossible given the deaths of comrades. This peer pressure was further fostered in that squadrons would bunk together, not to mention the fact they would often perform an intricate Japanese ceremony together involving *sake* that rendered them ‘brothers’ or ‘family,’ not dissimilar from rituals of a Japanese wedding ceremony or the rites of geisha.²¹⁴

As one after another of their comrades are picked off by sortie, guilt is fostered as is the need to keep the pact among those still alive. Guilt and that which creates it are other ‘mechanisms of no return.’ Not only did the death of comrades create guilt in the context of war, but furthermore it is known that the kamikaze, once committed, were treated notably better than other Japanese soldiers. This differentiated treatment serves to compel the volunteer to follow through with their mission.

Lastly, to create the dynamic of shame or the possibility of losing face should a kamikaze try to back out in those last minutes leading up to their death, the military would ensure that pilots were accompanied on their sortie to be delivered to their target.

Case Study 2: Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Transnational Martyrs

The paradigm of war is changing. What was state militaries versus other state militaries has largely shifted to the paradigm of militaries versus non-state actors. The latter was the case for Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine, and countless other conflicts during the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. And with the advent of the War on Terror the paradigm expanded beyond mere

nationalist-separatist or radical leftist groups, to include transnational terrorist groups. Al-Qaeda is the prototype of the non-state group's metamorphosis—transnational and leaderless.

Al-Qaeda as an organization utilized the idea of the Muslim *ummah* ('nation'), originally outlined in the Qur'an, to expand beyond a single state. Warring tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia were tearing the Arabian Peninsula apart, and Islam sought to eradicate this dynamic. It did so by imagining the Muslim *ummah* ('nation') essentially as a 'super-tribe' bound, not by blood or race, but by religious affiliation. In so doing, Islam also sought to eliminate hierarchies associated with race and tribe, rendering all members of the community equal. The Qur'an states: "O Mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you."²¹⁵ While Islam was largely unsuccessful in this regard, this idea and the subsequent Islamic caliphate under the four Sunni *rashidūn* caliphs serve as a basis for Al-Qaeda's transnational character. Likewise, the organization plays upon the popular notion that by returning to the Islam of the companions of the Prophet, Muslims will recapture their eminence on the world stage. Al-Qaeda thus attempts to reestablish the Islamic caliphate and appeal to Muslims worldwide. In the words of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "We are not fighting for illusionary borders drawn by Sykes-Picot... We fight to raise God's word on earth."²¹⁶

The idea of a greater Muslim *ummah* allows for Islam (and Muslims) to take on a transnational identity which bonds together on basis of religious belief. That is not to say that other identities are not important. Identity in the Islamic world appears to undulate; someone can be from a particular tribe, Sunni or Shi'a, an Iraqi, a Palestinian, an Arab, an Iranian, an Indonesian, but most broadly, a Muslim. Still, these identities can at times create cohesion while at other times be sources of contention, making matters complicated. Identity expands and contracts depending upon what is emphasized. What is important however is that this bond based on religion is crucial for understanding how Muslims may view the plights of their co-religionists in places like Palestine and Iraq as their own. Al-Qaeda has capitalized on this original conception of the *ummah* in Islam to recruit sympathizers and craft a transnational fighting force, which was first forged on the battlefields of Afghanistan during the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979-1988). Al-Qaeda's idea of a transnational Muslim fighting force would rear itself again in Bosnia against the Serbs and, most recently, in Iraq post-2003.

In is little surprise that Al-Qaeda capitalizes on this notion of the Muslim *ummah*. Not only does it allow them to become involved in the affairs of countries like Afghanistan, but the use of the notion is strategic in that it expands the potential sea of recruits to their organization. This is unlike non-state groups in, say, Palestine or Chechnya, which have historically taken a more nationalist approach to identity given the nature of their respective struggles. To further its aims, Al-Qaeda also espouses a platform of ‘Islam versus the West,’ which suits it strategically as a transnational actor and reinforces its Manichean ideology. The religious platform has been successful considering the majority of suicide attacks in Iraq have been carried out by foreign Muslims streaming into Iraq.²¹⁷ These foreign fighters define themselves on the basis of the collective Muslim *ummah*, rather than simply by their nationality. They attach themselves to the suffering of their co-religionists, in this case the Iraqi Sunnis.

Similar to the previous Japanese case study, I will begin the Iraq case study by recounting a ‘culture of death’ as it pertains to Al-Qaeda. Instability caused by the Iraq War gave Al-Qaeda the opportunity to establish a base in the heart of the Arab world to experiment with their regional designs. Their organizational goal was system collapse by drawing the Shi’a into a civil war in hopes of establishing a Sunni Islamic Caliphate in Iraq after wresting the country from a weakened regime and coalition forces.²¹⁸ Due to Al-Qaeda’s internationalism, and the fact that other groups have helped craft a ‘culture of death as it pertains to the organization,’ I will trace the development of a ‘culture of death’ in the broader Middle East and Muslim world. With the history of a Middle Eastern ‘culture of death’ established, I will show how Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) arrived at the rationale to utilize suicide attacks through the same organizational drivers in the prior case studies: the need to win an asymmetric war through unconventional means combined with a positive cost-benefit analysis of suicide attacks in the context of the Iraq War, not to mention the idea that suicide attacks are a goal in and of themselves. Last, I will show both this ‘culture of death’ and the idea of a crisis or existential threat to Islam and Sunnis in Iraq influenced individuals to be martyrs for AQI, among other groups in Iraq.

The Genesis of a Middle Eastern ‘Culture of Death’

An unidentified Iraqi man, only known to us as ‘the Teacher,’ retells how he felt when foreign Arab fighters came to the defense of Baghdad’s Adhamiyah neighborhood after U.S. bombs destroyed the sacred Abu Hanifeh mosque.

The Arab *Fedayeen*...yes they came to fight. And this evoked the feelings of everyone in Adhmyia. When I look at this old Yemeni, with his big beard and he's 70 year's old and I am just sitting at home? No way. Oh, how cheap life is...and how precious death and martyrdom become. I was hit, but only with one piece of shrapnel. Even so, I want if I could be sleeping there instead of those martyrs, I would have brought pride, honor, respect to my children, my brothers, my clan and family.²¹⁹

Once again, his words beg the question: How, rationally, did it come to this?

Given Al-Qaeda's internationalism vis-à-vis other non-state groups, not to mention its origins outside of Iraq, any history of a 'culture of death' as it relates to Al-Qaeda requires an examination of it in a regional context. Ultimately, the Middle East and key events in its history forged a 'culture of death' there, and Al-Qaeda (and other radical Islamist groups) employs the use of suicide attacks against their adversaries under its auspices, receiving praise and support.

Immediately we are confronted with a conundrum. Al-Qaeda and its predecessors are characterized as Islamist extremist groups, and yet Islam morally forbids suicide. The prohibition on the act of suicide is clearly stated both in the Qur'an and the *hadīth* (oral traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), both from which the religion derives its legal code.

And do not kill yourselves, for God is merciful to you. Whoever kills himself with an iron weapon, then the iron weapon will remain in his hand and he will continually stab himself in the belly with it in the fire of hell eternally, forever and ever; whoever kills himself by drinking poison will eternally drink poison in hellfire, and whoever kills himself by falling off a mountain will fall forever in the fire of hell.²²⁰

Generally speaking, that Islam is the moral standard in the Muslim world, and if a 'culture of death' is rooted in the moral persuasion to commit a voluntary death as it relates to a moral identity, how then can we claim that the Middle East possesses a 'culture of death' as the term is defined?

The answer lay in semantics. Religious sheikhs and muftis in the Arab World consistently outline the same logic to help illuminate their thinking about how suicide attacks by groups like Hamas or Al-Qaeda do not contradict the principles of Islam. To the contrary, their perpetrators are exalted as men and women of deep faith. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in Doha, Qatar presents his thinking to us:

He who commits suicide kills himself for his own benefit, who he who commits martyrdom sacrifices himself for the sake of his religion and his nation. While someone who commits suicide has lost hope with himself and with the spirit of Allah, the *Mujahid* ['holy warrior'] is full of hope with regard to Allah's spirit and mercy. He fights the enemy of Allah with this new weapon, which destiny has put in the hands of the weak, so that they would fight against evil of the strong and arrogant. The *Mujahid* becomes a 'human bomb' that blows up at a specific place and time, in the midst of the enemies of Allah and the homeland, leaving them helpless in the face of the brace

Shahid [‘martyr’]...who sold his soul to Allah, and sought the *Shahada* [Martyrdom] for the sake of Allah.

Similarly, salafi-jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda “reject the use of the term ‘suicide operations,’ (*‘amaliyyat intihariyya’*) and insist on the euphemistic label ‘martyrdom operations’ (*‘amaliyat istishhadiyya’*).”²²¹ Hassan Salame, a failed Hamas suicide bomber sits in an Israeli prison cell, and is asked how he could justify suicide bombing when Islam forbids suicide. To which he replied, “This is not suicide. Suicide is weak and selfish; it is mentally disturbed. This is *istishhad* (martyrdom or self-sacrifice in the service of Allah.)”²²² For radical Islamists, then, there exists a fundamental difference between what constitutes immoral suicide from what are deemed ‘martyrdom operations.’ The former is contra Islam, whereas the latter is firmly grounded in their understanding of Islam and thus morally acceptable—applauded. It is an example of how Muslims ‘ought to be.’

While he is a Shi’a thinker, Ali Shari’ati explains the significance of *shahīd* (‘martyr’ or ‘witness’): “[Shahīd] signifies one who is present, an onlooker, an observer, a witness and one who bears witness. It also means the truthful and honest informant...It is what is sensed and seen, the one toward whom all eyes are directed, and last but not least, it means pattern, exemplar, model.”²²³ The nuance is absolutely critical. Etymologically, the term conveys a standard of truth. Theologically, the term conveys a human being who has not only witnessed truth in religion (i.e. a view of the afterlife), but also a religious high standard. It is a standard to achieve in a society that attains religious perfection through praxis. In an Islamic context, the term itself is a moral imperative. The martyr is religiously exemplary, and what are called suicide attacks have now become a means to attain martyrdom. The moral ethos found in a ‘culture of death’ then is grounded in this religious distinction.

Scholars have consistently rooted the origins of martyrdom in the Shi’a traditions of martyrdom.²²⁴ While Shi’ism’s romance with martyrdom will be examined significantly due to its impact on a ‘culture of death,’ I argue that the origins of martyrdom are actually earlier in Islamic history. In fact, Middle Eastern martyrdom has its roots in early Christianity. For groups like AQI the basis of their argumentation ultimately rests in earlier episodes in Islamic history. “Sunnis express blanket adulation of Islam’s [P]rophet and his company of martyrs, regarded as the first champions of their faith.”²²⁵

The verses on martyrdom in the Qur'an are two, and are narrated in the context of battles fought by the Prophet and his companions long before the murder of Imam Hussein by Yazid. The Qur'an borrows from the original Christian concept in its understanding of martyrdom and the idea is the same. The Qur'an states:

Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord; They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind, who have not yet joined them (in their bliss), the (Martyrs) glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they (cause to) grieve (Qur'an 3:169-70).

Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in Allah? Then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme (Qur'an 9:111).

Much like Christianity, martyrdom (remaining steadfast and dying for one's beliefs in the face of prosecution) was morally acceptable, if not encouraged with Islam's emphasis on the evanescence of this life versus an eternal afterlife. This set the moral standard for martyrdom and, while not *fard* ('required'), the act in and of itself is testament to one's sincerity in faith. That martyrdom is laudable in the Qur'an, which is both law and moral standard, solidified its acceptability in Islamic society very early on. Consequently, the concept of martyrdom pervaded the Muslim world. In early Islamic history, Muslim armies in places like Yemen and Oman referred to their soldiers as *shūrat* ('purchasers'), a nuanced invocation of Qur'anic verse 9:111, signaling ambivalence toward this life, as well as longing for the afterlife and God's promise.²²⁶

AQI for its part uses the Battle of Badr in 624 CE as an allegory for their efforts in Iraq, just as Al-Qaeda uses it as one for the larger struggle in the Muslim world.²²⁷

The first issue of AQI's publication *Zarwat al-Sinam* (The Pinnacle) features a letter by Osama bin Laden to the holy warriors in Iraq. Bin Laden writes: 'In a Prophetic tradition, the Angel Gabriel asks our Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, 'Who among the companions participated in the Battle of Badr?' The Prophet answered: 'Our Best.' The Angel Gabriel replied: 'And that is who participated among the angels.' He goes on to declare, 'Know that this is a great war similar to the immense Badr conquest in its wonderful results and enduring influence... Today I consider the holy warriors who resist America's fighter planes and tanks, and who strike with missiles in Palestine and Iraq, to be the best of this Islamic nation. Success comes from God the almighty who granted success in the Badr of Palestine, Badr of Iraq, Badr of Afghanistan, Badr of Chechnya, and all other fields of jihad.'²²⁸

The Battle of Badr is an example of when the original Muslim community under the Prophet Muhammad, outnumbered by a vastly superior Meccan army, was able to stave off the invaders despite the odds being stacked against them. According to Hafez, the significance of the battle is

that is shows how a few individuals were able to defeat superior forces given “their faith in God and desire for martyrdom.”²²⁹

Still, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala in 680 CE would take the concept of martyrdom and make it definitive of Shi’ism. “Karbala is always present; it’s the very bedrock of the Shi’ite sensibility and consciousness.”²³⁰ It was at Karbala, known as the battlefield of battlefields, where Imam Hussein and his followers were brutally murdered by the villainous Sunni caliph Yazid and his army of many thousands on the tenth day of *Muharram*. The scene is set: Imam Hussein and his men were running out of water, and Yazid’s army blocked the route to the Euphrates. Death seemed inevitable for the small-band of followers, and Imam Hussein begged his followers to flee—to save themselves. He knew Yazid had come for him, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and rightful heir to the Islamic polity. Seventy-two men remained. They would rather die with their virtuous leader here than leave him behind. Each one of them was slaughtered and Yazid arrogantly took Imam Hussein’s head back to Damascus as his prize. “In [Shi’ism], allegiance is pledged not to the victors, but to the vanquished.”²³¹

Every year on ‘*Ashura*, the tenth day of the Islamic month of *Muharram*, the Shi’a commemorate the martyrdom of their greatest saint, Imam Hussein. Processions of black clad men are seen flagellating themselves for atonement, feeling immense guilt over the fallen and somberly chanting, ‘*Ya Hassan, Ya Hussein.*’

The sights and sounds of [‘*Ashura*] are gripping. This is a ritual filled with symbolism and passion. It is deeply spiritual and communal. It defines Shi’as and renews their bond to their faith and community...[‘*Ashura*] is an act of piety, but not one that is recognized as an obligatory practice of the faith. It has not foundation in the Qur’an and was not practiced at the time of the Prophet.²³²

Behind the procession enters a majestic white horse donning an ornate saddle without a rider. The animal is crowned with white feathers. Women trail behind, wailing. The empty saddle reminds witnesses that Imam Hussein is no longer among them. The singular event of Hussein’s martyrdom is the basis for Shi’ism as what Hamid Dabashi calls a ‘religion of protest.’²³³ Much of Shi’a history, culture and theology is furthermore informed by it, not dissimilar from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ’s impact on Christianity. Shi’a passion plays called *Ta’ziyeh* during the month of Muharram which tell the solemn story of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom are quite common.

The martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and subsequent murders of the Shi’a Imams by Sunnis, is an allegory for historical Shi’a suffering at the hands of the Sunni establishment. Since early

Islamic history the Shi'a have been persecuted by the Sunni. Given the symbolism and the mythology of martyrdom in Shi'ism, it is of little surprise that the now infamous Assassins of the medieval period, who were the first employers of 'martyrdom operations' in the Middle East, were Shi'a. This was not the norm, but it is an indicator that in the shadows of Shi'a culture lurked the components for a 'culture of death.' "Even in modern times, martyrdom for the sake of God has been extolled as the greatest possible service to God by leading Shi'a thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, and Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari."²³⁴ In this way, martyrdom as a moral parable became embedded in the faith.

The deeply felt cult of sacrifice and martyrdom that is particular to the Shi'a tradition would ultimately reverberate across the Middle East with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and subsequent events affecting the country. According to Vali Nasr, the watershed events of the Iranian Revolution were among the key events in the development of political Islam in spite of the Sunni-Shi'a divide.²³⁵ Indeed, for the first time in history, a markedly Muslim entity rose up and successfully stood up to the West, its imperialism, and ousted one of its cronies—the Shah of Iran. The motto of the revolution: 'America can't do a damn thing.' Despite sectarianism, the Iranian Revolution inspired Sunnis living under corrupt Arab dictators with American backing just the same.

Just as important, the rhetoric of the Iranian regime inspired power vis-à-vis Islamic martyrdom and death. Ayatollah Khomeini said, "The more people die for our cause, the stronger we become."²³⁶ In fact, Al-Qaeda echoes these sentiments still today. Osama bin Laden once said, "I do not fear death. On the contrary, I desire the death of a martyr. My martyrdom would lead to the birth of thousands of Osamas,"²³⁷ as though martyrdom's power is that of a hydra. The narrative of the revolution became such that, "It was [Shi'a] fearlessness and veneration for martyrdom that brought down the regime of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, despite the fact that it was heavily armed and supported by all the Western powers,"²³⁸ and bordered on narcissism.

Another key component to the solidification to a 'culture of death' in the Middle East is the role of western countries. This point is often neglected. Like in Japan, the encroachment of the West through either imperialism or globalization creates the need to protect culture and identity—the need to protect Islam. The defense and/or glorification of martyrdom parallels with Fatima Mernissi's original argument regarding oppression of Muslim women with the advent of

encroachment that, “When Muslim countries were defeated and occupied by the West, the colonizers used all available means to persuade the defeated Muslims of their inferiority in order to justify occupation...[that] in this situation Muslims found themselves defending anachronistic institutions.”²³⁹ Other Islamic values are affected in much the same manner due to the sense of a threat posed to traditional society. Values are defended and the response is to entrench them further into the threatened society to the point of zealotry. This is especially so for martyrdom because it is characterized as a pinnacle of the spiritual in the face of what Sayyid Qutb called “Modern-style *jahiliyya* [ignorance] in the industrial societies of Europe and America.”²⁴⁰ In the Manichean worldview of extremists, the mechanical West is presented as ‘loving life,’ whereas a Muslim is defined by spirituality and the ‘love of death’ in contrast.²⁴¹

The position the West has historically taken in the Muslim world too has caused much antagonism against it. The West inspires a laundry list of grievances throughout the region due to its historical support of regional dictators, the backing of Israel vis-à-vis Palestinian disenfranchisement, and wars that are viewed as unjust. In this context, the West does not equal freedom but rather oppression. Some answered injustice with communism, others with Arab socialism, and other still with Islamism. Today, Islamism is the dominant mode of opposition to the West due to the failure of communism, and the disillusionment with Arab socialism. That dichotomy, which is disseminated by groups that oppose the West, not to mention pundits in the West, intensifies the gravitational pull of Islamism in the face of threatening traditional culture and society. Western atrocities committed in the region have much the same effect.

The Iranian Revolution was inspirational to many living in a highly frustrated Muslim world. Still, Khomeini sought to replicate the revolution and tried to aggrandize himself as the leader of a greater Islamic revolution, which a seldom few actually accepted. While he inspired uprisings among Shi’a in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen, many Sunni groups could not accept a Shi’a as their leader. Instead they sought to replicate the Iranian Revolution and the new found power of religion in their own countries, while completely shutting the Shi’a out. Also, when Khomeini began funding Shi’a uprisings as the first step to a wider revolution, Sunnis in many parts of the Muslim world were mobilized to counter them. And though sectarianism kept the Islamic Middle East divided against itself, power through martyrdom and death would be transcendent as a theme.

Power through Islamic martyrdom took on a physical form during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Saddam Hussein started the Iran-Iraq War partly because he saw an opportunity in a weakened Iranian state due to the revolution. As a result of the political upheaval, Iran had virtually no army. Not only this, but the Iran-Iraq border had never quite been defined, and Saddam Hussein wanted to exploit Iran's vast oil reserves in the southwest Iranian province of Khuzestan. Lastly, Saddam Hussein attacked Iran in its moment of weakness because he saw a Shi'a revolution as a grave threat to the stability of his own country with its majority Shi'a population. Suddenly, the long-oppressed majority had a potential representative in Khomeini.

Iraq invaded Iran on September 20, 1980, marching westward into Khuzestan. Iran for its part had but one actual resource to combat the then vastly superior Iraqi military: its larger population. To counter the Iraqi offensive, the Iranian Regime recruited its citizens—mostly young children—to conduct the now infamous 'human wave attacks' of the *basij*, which usually resulted in their almost certain death. It is said that those who volunteered had hoped for as much.

After weeks of relative quiet, an Iranian attack had begun. Muhammad Salam, one of the few foreign journalists to be right at the front, spotted an Iraqi marksman sitting behind a heavy machine gun, his body so stably wedged in that he would be able to remain in position for a good while. His hand was on the trigger. And then, Salam says, they arrived. You could only hear them first: a high, buzzing sound, as if a swarm of locusts were approaching. The sound swelled, thousands of human mouths coming closer and closer, all of them roaring: 'Ya Karbala! Ya Hussein! Ya Khomeini!' as they came. As a human wave, they emerged from the trenches and dugouts, from behind ramparts and hillocks; thousands, tens of thousands of them, coming closer and closer. And almost all of them were children, youths, some of them holding Kalashnikovs with difficulty, other just with clenched fists. Every now and then, you could see an older man among them, egging them on.

The marksman with the machine gun started shooting. And he shot, and shot. And he simply didn't stop: 'And he shot these children, in the same way you'd shoot at a row of empty bottles; he just mowed them down—and these were nothing but children. And they kept running; they were climbing over the dead, jumping over them, falling over them; and the man with the machine gun just kept shooting. What's more, from above, helicopters were bombing the Iranians, who were just running as if nothing could stop them... And at one point they really were so close to the marksman that he suddenly jumped up, grabbed his Kalashnikov, and ran off behind the line of defense next to us. Shortly after this, they rushed me away from there, when it looked as though they might lose this too. We had heard about it beforehand, but we had never seen it with our own eyes: that's how an Iranian offensive works.'²⁴²

The Iranians rushed the invading Iraqis in the tens of thousands with all the religious ecstasy of Euripides' Dionysian bacchae. "Until the 1979 revolution, these children had grown up just like children anywhere else: poor, perhaps, not entirely happy, but all the same, with a profound sense that it was better to be alive than dead. Now they were rushing to their deaths, as if the world had been turned upside down. And it was always the same word: Karbala. Karbala

on their lips; Karbala on their flags.”²⁴³ Their ranks were named Karbala I, Karbala II, III, IV and so forth.²⁴⁴ Their slogan was, “The road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala.”²⁴⁵ “Karbala is the turning point for the [Shi’a], the pivot of their faith; the climax of a divine plan of salvation promising rich rewards to all those who take up arms in the name of the martyred imam.”²⁴⁶

Khomeini, both mystic and populist politician, wove the spiritual story of Karbala, its symbolism, into the Iran-Iraq War and all of its brutality, its chemical and trench warfare, appealing to Iranian sensibilities in the context of their existential threat. The allegory of Imam Hussein at Karbala was almost too perfect for the Iran-Iraq War. As though it was a grand *Ta’ziyeh*, the populist puppet master cast Saddam Hussein as Yazid, the hated caliph arrogantly invading from the west with his superior army. Saddam Hussein represented simultaneously the superior might and arrogance of the Sunni caliph and that of the modern western imperialist powers that backed him.²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Iranian people were cast as Imam Hussein’s magnificent seventy-two loyal followers at Karbala who would die with him.²⁴⁸ Tens of thousands of brave Iranians made the final sacrifice as testament to both their faith and their nation during the Iran-Iraq War. It worked. The odds were very much against Iran, and the country had lost whole cities and regions to Iraq. Yet, Iran won back the city of Khorramshahr in 1982. They later went on the offensive, pressing deep into Iraq in hopes of liberating their Shi’a brethren in the south and recapturing the disputed borderlands and the magnificent Shi’a cities of Najaf and Karbala, where Imam Ali and Imam Hussein respectively were laid to rest.

Significantly, Khomeini used moral persuasion to coax volunteers into joining the *basij*. His argument was relatively straightforward, utilizing religion as its basis.

‘Can anyone who believes in the world beyond be afraid?’ asked Khomeini, without the least doubt as to what constituted the right answer: ‘We must thank God if he confers upon us the honor of dying in the Holy Battle. Let us thrust our way into the ranks of the martyrs in our hordes... if we have been afraid, this means that we don’t believe in the world beyond.’²⁴⁹

Morally, one identified as a good Muslim—a non-negotiable identity. In Khomeini’s line of argumentation, to be a good Muslim one must: (1) Rise up to defend his or her homeland in defensive jihad and (2) believe in the afterlife. If one dies a martyr it is a blessing, glorified in the holy texts, and so there is nothing to fear.

The Iran-Iraq War contributed significantly to the allure of power and strength vis-à-vis death by making it manifest in a physical form. Not only was it totally effective in achieving the goal of expelling the Iraqis, it was also extremely damaging to them psychologically, something

that future groups would no doubt take note of. Muhammad Salam, the Lebanese journalist on the front lines, commented on how the method of attack would drive Iraqi soldiers mad.²⁵⁰ One Iraqi soldier gives his personal account:

And the Iranians with their '*Allah Akbar!*' watching from the other bank, *Allah Akbar!* As our lads are swept away, swept down the river like scum down a plug. I hate *Allah Akbar!* Especially *Allah Akbar!* I used to like saying my prayers. You can't say your prayers without saying *Allah Akbar!* It doesn't count as prayers. I tried saying my prayers without *Allah Akbar!* Then I stopped saying them – makes me feel sick. The lack of sleep is getting me now. I don't know about God... The Iranian barrage has started. I have my Kalash and I need a hole. They do that most nights, the barrage I mean, so we don't know when they're coming. Could be tonight. Could be setting out now, the mine-clearers clearing a path. Basijis follow up to the wire. That's when you know for sure, when they blow the wire and it goes leaping like tumbleweed, blowing mines as it goes.²⁵¹

In this way the Iran-Iraq war served as a catalyst for a 'culture of death' in the region more broadly. Furthermore, from Iran's perspective, it possesses all the alchemic components for suicide attacks: Asymmetric warfare, an existential threat, and a deep-seated 'culture of death' stemming from Shi'a history, culture and symbolism.

Much like LTTE 'discovered' suicide attacks by watching American movies and Hezbollah, organizations in the Middle East—and especially Hezbollah—were largely able to conceive of suicide attacks after witnessing the tactical genius of their Iranian predecessors. They also learned how to market the grave tactic by rooting it in religion and the guise of righteous Muslim martyrdom, thus sidestepping more traditional morals. Hezbollah made suicide attacks appear morally imperative and religiously acceptable, just as they Iranians did before them.

In order to counter the strict prohibition against suicide, Fadlallah ingeniously equated death as a suicide bomber with soldiers entering battle in which they knew that they would die, arguing there was no moral distinction, and that the only difference was the time of death. He used this moral logic to justify suicide bombings by Shi'a forces as actions justified by oppression and the military asymmetric nature of the war against Israel: "If an oppressed people do not have the means to confront the United States and Israel with weapons in which they are superior, then they possess unfamiliar weapons...Oppression makes the oppressed discover new weapons every day."²⁵²

Hezbollah, given its common Shi'a identity, its intimacy with Iran and the threats it faced during the Lebanese Civil War, was the first group outside Iran to experiment with suicide attacks in the modern Middle East. In doing so, they helped set the precedent and contributed to the malaise of a 'culture of death' in the region. More importantly, the tactic was viewed as highly effective for Hezbollah in pushing U.S. and French forces out of Lebanon in 1983, and subsequently Israel in 1985.²⁵³ Suicide attacks continued to spread throughout the Middle East because they worked—a most rational of reasons to engage in them in times of war.

The packaged appeal of a powerful attack through a morally acceptable (heroic) death spread like a virus across the region. It affected Sunni groups just the same as Shi'a ones. While martyrdom had not been part and parcel to the Sunni ideology, as an Islamic concept extolled in the Qur'an it was not alien to them, nor immoral. Moreover, the Shi'a tactical successes edged them toward their conviction to use the tactic given the similar challenges they faced in asymmetric warfare combined with existential threat. The first Sunni contagion was in the Palestinian Occupied Territories when Hamas used suicide attacks against Israel.

Once again, with the incorporation of a 'culture of death' through moral justification all the ingredients for suicide attacks were manifest in Palestine. No doubt that asymmetric warfare is being fought in the West Bank and Gaza, and existential threat for the Palestinians is palpable considering more Palestinian territory disappears with each day, not to mention the occupation and increasing acceptance of Israel by more moderate Palestinians. Hafez records themes in the last testimonies and wills of Palestinian suicide bombers in his book *Manufacturing Human Bombs*. Regarding the Palestinians, he writes:

Suicide bombing is not only an opportunity to punish an enemy and fulfill God's command to fight injustice but also a privilege and a reward to those most committed to their faith and their values. To be selected for 'martyrdom operations' is akin to receiving a stamp of approval or a certificate of accomplishment from one's peers. It is an endorsement of one's moral character and dedication.²⁵⁴

Just as in Lebanon during the 1980s, suicide attacks conducted by Hamas and other Palestinian groups during the 1990s would prove to be effective at striking back against the seemingly invincible Israel. And just as it pertained to the West and the Shah in Iran, the radical Islamist narrative went that the militarily superior, yet religiously baseless, Israelis were no match for Palestinian martyrs and Islam. With each successive application of suicide tactics in the Middle East, and the reaffirmation of their effectiveness, they gathered support and spread like a miasma across the region.

If Karbala is the foundation for Shi'a guilt, then Palestine is the cornerstone for Arab and Muslim political grievances and perceptions of injustice inflicted upon them by the West. It was only when Hamas and other Palestinian factions began using suicide attacks that the debate about their religious permissibility occurred among *salafi* circles in the wider Muslim world.²⁵⁵ Today, Sunni radicals have largely decided that 'martyrdom operations' are not suicide, building off the argument of Fadlallah, while using the same logic as al-Qaradawi and others.

With the suicide question sufficiently satisfied, current salafi-jihadists spend their energies eulogizing the virtues of martyrdom.²⁵⁶ The *Virtues of Martyrdom in the Path of Allah* by Al-Qaeda's spiritual leader Abdullah Azzam is a classic example in which he puts forward the benefits of martyrdom: "The martyr has a seat in Paradise, avoids torture of the grave, marries seventy black eyed virgins, and can advocate on behalf of relatives."²⁵⁷ Martyrdom becomes further tied to an Islamic moral identity through these anecdotes. Nevermind if suicide attacks are technically permissible or not, it becomes something that is laudable and rewarded; It becomes something Muslims 'should do' based on Islamic tenets. Defining 'suicide attacks' as 'martyrdom' gives them a persuasiveness that is connected to the moral identity of being a good Muslim in these circles. Combined with the precedent set by countries and groups in the region, suicide attacks become part and parcel to the region as a method of attack for the weaker side, and of resistance.

Al-Qaeda utilized suicide attackers to conduct the attacks on September 11, 2001 in order to force the United States to pull out of the Middle East and abandon its interests in the region. The U.S. is oft seen as an all-powerful force in the Middle East—the unseen master who keeps dictators in power, Israel afloat, and the people downtrodden. America the invincible too was struck in its heart by the terroristic genius of a suicide attack. While the 9/11 attacks generated the opposite response from the U.S., the attacks were once again instrumental in conveying the power of suicide attacks, this time at the global level. As a result of the attacks, the U.S. went into Afghanistan in 2001. In 2003, the U.S. went into Iraq under the pretense of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction and the heightened fears of those weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors in a post-9/11 world. The Iraq War was largely viewed as illegitimate (even predatory), particularly in the Arab and Muslim world. The Iraqi army was no match for the Americans, who rolled into Baghdad with ease. However, during the occupation—and especially after the subjugation of Iraqis by the military and scandals like Abu Ghraib—transnational non-state groups and Iraqi ones alike responded in kind to the occupation. One of their preferred methods of attack in asymmetric war was suicide attacks.

Al-Qaeda, Crisis and the Iraq War

Navigating the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq can be harrowing given the sheer amount of groups caught in the fray that are competing for power and influence. To further complicate it,

alliances between these various groups have consistently changed throughout the Iraq War. To break it down simply, however, there are former Iraqi ba'athists and Iraqi nationalists, national and transnational Islamists, including salafi-jihadists, as well as Shi'a militias. All are out for political influence, protection of their own, and/or retribution. Of these groups, both nationalists and salafi-jihadists are known to have conducted suicide attacks in Iraq during the war. The two ideologically distinct groups furthermore worked together at times when it suited their individual interests. And while the ba'athists are an important case study, we are exclusively concerned with one group among the salafi-jihadists operating in Iraq—namely AQI. AQI is made up of Iraqi nationals, as well as foreign Arab and European Muslim fighters. That said, the component of an existential threat as it relates to the Iraq War occurs on two different levels: both transnational and national.

Crisis of Existential Threat at the Transnational Level

A Gallup World Poll Special Report published in 2006 titled “The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Muslim World” indicated that, “Muslims are both humiliated and threatened by the West. The result is a greater sense of urgency to protect their cultural identity—and thus, the justification of extremist means as well as a great deal of willingness to make extreme sacrifices.”²⁵⁸ The poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Muslim ‘radicals’ (defined in this context as those who viewed taking up arms against the U.S. to be justified) stated that Islam was not only degraded, but *threatened* by western encroachment. When asked about their greatest fear, the majority answered, “Occupation/U.S. domination.” Furthermore, the poll noted that “political radicals are far more likely than moderates to say it is ‘completely justifiable’ to sacrifice one’s life for a cause one believes in.”²⁵⁹

The majority of AQI members are transnational fighters and not Iraqi. “Many, if not most, of the suicide bombers in Iraq are not Iraqis. They are Muslim volunteers from Arab and non-Arab countries.”²⁶⁰ AQI’s leader was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was a Jordanian. In piecing Iraq together, it is critical to recognize and understand a broader Sunni Muslim identity extending beyond the borders of Iraq per the concept of the Muslim *ummah*. Iraqi Sunnis were regarded as ‘brothers and sisters’ to other Sunnis worldwide and consistently referred to as such.²⁶¹ In a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote: “We are in a battle, and more than half of that battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a race for the hearts and minds

of our *ummah*.²⁶² Some radical Muslims funneled into Iraq to assist the efforts of the insurgency by becoming suicide bombers because they felt an existential threat to their transnational community, and because they were morally obliged to do so given a ‘culture of death’ predicated on their extremist understanding of Islam.

Fears mentioned in the Gallup report are not unjustified—an incredible blunder by the United States. The U.S. (and more broadly the West) is considered an existential threat outside the region to an ethereal Sunni Muslim political identity due to its encroachment into Muslim countries. Post-colonial legacies of the West, as well as sentiments toward the West contribute to the feeling of threat. The example of western legal codes and political systems infringing on Muslim self-determination has already been explained. More important than these precedents however are modern day intrusions upon the sovereignty of Muslim countries by the West, which there are many examples of. Some of these include, but are not limited to, illegal settlements by Israel in Palestinian territory and the continued U.S. strategic presence in the Arab Gulf States. This is the context in which Al-Qaeda originally decided to use suicide attacks to strike at the U.S or ‘the far enemy.’

Non-state groups like Al-Qaeda are no match for the superior militaries of the U.S. and other states in conventional warfare. Therefore, Al-Qaeda utilized asymmetric warfare in order to make gains they could otherwise not make—suicide attacks were the preferred method of attack. While a perceived threat to Islam was real to many, it was not like the case of Japan in which suicide attacks were a last resort. Instead, they were Al-Qaeda’s first choice due to the relative impenetrability of the U.S and the proven effectiveness of suicide attacks in a regional context. In short, suicide attacks were the best option for Al-Qaeda to realize its global aims. They would be repeated in Iraq post-2003.

The subsequent invasion of Iraq (and Afghanistan to a lesser extent) served to conflate an existential threat in the Sunni Muslim world posed by the West because it is largely considered illegitimate and unlawful; it is seen as predatory and out for economic interests under the dubious guise of ‘freedom and democracy.’ “[The invasion of Iraq] fed the Al-Qaeda narrative of the West’s war against Islam²⁶³ in the Muslim world after the precedent for such a narrative already existed given other actions by western countries in the region. U.S. and coalition insensitivities to Iraqi culture, not to mention clear images of subjugation and humiliation that emanated from Iraq, further exasperated the sense of a threat to Islam by the West.²⁶⁴ It is well

documented that the Abu Ghraib scandal mobilized many to fight against perceived oppressive superpower western countries in Iraq.²⁶⁵ In this way, U.S actions played into the hand of Al-Qaeda and generated a vast stream of recruits across the Muslim world to be used in AQI's Iraq operations.

At the organizational level, a case can be made that AQI—and Al-Qaeda more broadly—faces existential crisis given their position as a non-state group without its own territory fighting (which in turn could contribute to an explanation as to why non-state groups are more likely to use suicide attacks). This notion is exasperated by the fact that the Sunnis are fragmented and living under 'apostate dictators,' while the Shi'a appear to be on the rise. Al-Qaeda's nature as a disembodied non-state group fighting against a vastly superior military therefore allows for a much lower threshold in which to begin conducting suicide attacks for their survival than the Japanese or even the LTTE as a military and semi-military. In this context, AQI used suicide attacks as a method of attack because it was one of the only means by which to strike a vastly superior U.S. military effectively. "Despite the uncertainty over exact figures, there is no doubt that the Iraqi suicide attacks rank with the deadliest. In Iraq they [suicide attacks] have realized their potential to function as the high-precision artillery of the militarily weak—they are more deadly, more accurate and less costly for the attackers."²⁶⁶

It must be noted however that most suicide attacks conducted by AQI were aimed at Iraqi Shi'a, their communities, religious sites and festivals. To understand the rationale for this, it must be considered within the boarder context of the region. Strains of Islamism espoused in some Sunni circles, whether Wahabism or Salafism, are vehemently anti-Shi'a. "The radical salafis in Saudi Arabia are said to nurture a hatred for [Shi'a] that rivals that for the U.S."²⁶⁷ Quintan Wiktorowicz in his article "Genealogy of Radical Islam," notes that Ibn Wahhab's book *The Ten Voiders of Islam* was highly circulated among Sunni radicals. Interestingly, his supposed 'ten voiders,' which exile a practitioner from the Muslim community correlate with practices the Shi'a could be construed of doing, including: Using mediators for God (i.e. praying to saints), and supporting or helping non-believers against 'Muslims.'²⁶⁸ Many radicals argue the Shi'a are "heretics outside the creed...[Thus] Shi'a blood is not sacrosanct and may be shed for the interest of the broader Islamic community."²⁶⁹ This is known as *takfir*, or the process rendering another a non-believer or infidel.²⁷⁰

Al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI, was known to have a similar deep-seated hatred for the Shi'a. Like so many others, he was likely exposed to radical interpretations of Islam which are staunchly anti-Shi'a in either Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan or during his time spent in Peshawar in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.²⁷¹ In a document titled "Why Do We Fight, and Whom to We Fight?" AQI outlined its strategy regarding the Shi'a: "Only the sharp and cutting sword will judge between us and them...[The Shi'a] provided [The United States] with an easy path into the land [just as they] supported the Tartars against the Muslims, which was a direct cause of the Abbasid Caliphate's overthrow."²⁷² In this way, the Shi'a are not viewed as Muslim at all by the transnational Sunni community streaming into Iraq, but rather traitors and collaborators with the U.S. In sum, they are perceived as part of or conflated with the threat. This is especially so given the fact that the U.S. installed a Shi'a government to power in Iraq.

It is also important to consider other regional politics with regards to the rise of the Shi'a to assess the extent of an existential threat in the minds of radical Sunni Muslims. To them, it is very clear that the markedly Shi'a Islamic Republic of Iran is on the rise. "Egypt and Jordan fear that Iran will overshadow them regionally, while Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf monarchs—all of whom are Sunnis ruling over sizable numbers of [Shi'a]—worry about the spread of an aggressive Iranian hegemony over their domains."²⁷³ Virulent anti-Shi'ism needs to be considered in the context of the threat Iran poses as well. And according the Vali Nasr, nothing has helped the Shi'a rise to prominence in the region like the Iraq War.²⁷⁴

Suicide attacks against Shi'a by transnational fighters too are in the context of an existential threat. Foreign fighters under the banner of AQI entered into the fray with the main objective of a system collapse by drawing the Shi'a into a civil war in order to establish a Sunni Islamic Caliphate in Iraq.²⁷⁵ As a non-state group and a disembodied community, this goal was essential to regain Sunni prominence on the world stage in their minds. Suicide attacks were the best means by which to do so given their effectiveness. Not only this, but by espousing anti-Shi'a rhetoric AQI was able to capitalize on Iraqi Sunni fears and make strategic alliances with Iraqi groups. Indeed, due to political developments in Iraq post-2003 (to be explored), the Iraqi Sunnis felt their own existential threat vis-à-vis the ascendance of the Shi'a to prominence through U.S backing. One Iraqi Ba'athist group that reorganized during the occupation by the U.S laid out objectives that spoke their own fears. The first among them read: "Eliminating the Persians, their

consulate, their intelligence, and those who cooperate with them, especially the Iraqis that carry out sectarian genocide.”²⁷⁶ Parts of the homegrown Iraqi resistance to occupation ultimately allied with groups like AQI, forming an alliance against the U.S and what were viewed as their ‘Shi’a agents.’²⁷⁷

Crisis of Existential Threat at the National Level

At the national level, existential threat gradually coalesced for Sunnis in Iraq as a direct result of the Iraq War. The collapse of the old Republican Guard and subsequent ascension of the Shi’a to power was extremely threatening to them. Scholars David Lake and Donald Rothchild were among the first to propose collective fears of the future as a factor in spurring violence among groups and tell us that, “as groups begin to fear for their safety, dangerous and difficult-to-resolve strategic dilemmas arise that contain within them the potential for tremendous violence.”²⁷⁸ To understand this however in the context of Iraq, it is important to highlight certain dynamics between the two communities prior to the 2003 invasion into focus to capture why this is the case. The contentious relationship of the Sunni and Shi’a in Iraq here is a critical factor. Historically, the relationship of the Shi’a vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein’s Sunni dominated government was one rife with inequality, and has colored interaction among the two sects both prior to the 2003 invasion and especially its aftermath.

The Shi’a historically suffered severe economic inequality at the hand of the former Iraqi regime. Harsh economic strain was felt in Iraq due to both the Iran-Iraq War and the sanctions imposed upon it by the international community. “As the state’s resources came under strain... favoritism, which was never absent, became more glaring and more pronounced thereby widening a number of rifts that were often transposed onto sectarian relations (tribe, region, party rank).”²⁷⁹ Under Saddam, it is noteworthy that Shi’a cities and towns were neglected almost entirely in terms of resources and expenditures.²⁸⁰ Despite the Ba’athist rhetoric stating it opposes all forms of sectarianism, regionalism or tribalism,²⁸¹ all three were endemic of the Ba’ath party. Hanna Batatu once wrote regarding Iraq that: “It would not be going too far to say that the Tikritis [Saddam Hussein’s own tribe] rule through the Ba’ath party, rather than the Ba’ath party through the Tikritis.”²⁸² The fact that tribal affiliation usually determines religious sect conflates frustration at corruption with antagonistic sectarian identities. As a result, the Shi’a have felt disenfranchised in comparison with the Sunni by the former Iraqi regime.

Not only was there economic inequality, the Shi'a were notably prohibited from observing their religious festivals in Iraq, which were a core expression of their identity. The Sunnis faced no such proscriptions. The Shi'a suffered a number of pogroms at the hands of Saddam's forces, the most notable of which was the March 1991 massacre, where it is believed that tens of thousands of Shi'a men, women and children were butchered.²⁸³ A precursor to the massacre was the U.S. encouraging Shi'a uprisings in the south against Saddam. When the U.S. failed to offer material support due to the fear of strengthening The Islamic Republic of Iran, Saddam Hussein mobilized forces against the Shi'a in the south.²⁸⁴ For them, the massacre lived on in national memory as a silent omnipresence for years.

The Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq have existed simultaneously as two virtually different nations with two different national narratives. These narratives are derived from what Fanar Haddad calls competing myth-symbol complexes that inform their respective national identities. Haddad defines a myth-symbol complex as the following:

The combination of myths, memories, values and symbols that define not only who is a member of the group, but what it means to be a member. The existence, status and security of the group thus come to be seen to depend on the status of group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them—and why they are willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for dubious or selfish purposes.²⁸⁵

Haddad significantly cites the events of March 1991 as the single most important event generating divergent myth-symbol complexes because of how it is remembered among the two communities.²⁸⁶ For the Shi'a, it was an attack on them that served to reinforce their identity as victims by the Iraqi regime, hardening the divide between them and a Sunni dominated Iraq.²⁸⁷ Meanwhile, in the Sunni narrative, the massacre is either discredited or defended as putting down an uprising and securing the state from treacherous outside forces.²⁸⁸ "The Arab tribes were [then] presented as a bulwark against this foreign (read: U.S. and Iranian) infiltration... as part of their loyalty to Saddam and Iraq."²⁸⁹ Saddam Hussein's adoption of the Arab tribes was overt and they publically supported the regime's narrative of Shi'a as conspirator.²⁹⁰ By this narrative, the Shi'a were essentially pushed out of the framework of the nation-state under Saddam.

The polarized nature in which 1991 is imagined by Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'a—not to mention other events in their respective communal histories—has caused the gap between the two communities to widen.²⁹¹ Significantly, the idea of 'the Shi'a as traitor,' is a common theme in Iraq both before and after the invasion, as well as among salafi-jihadists, which inevitably facilitated cooperation among national and transnational groups.²⁹² Particularly from the Iraqi

Sunni perspective, the two religious communities can hardly be seen as cohesive and existing under the common framework of the nation-state. Therefore, empowerment of the Shi'a by the U.S. was a threat and met with resistance from many Sunnis and Saddam-loyalists alike in Iraq.

According to Haddad, divergent myth-symbol complexes caused contested ownership of the land of Iraq and the modern state.²⁹³ This further contributed to the perception of an existential threat among the Sunnis post-invasion. The first instance of contested ownership of the state by a Shi'a surfaced with Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr. His writings were viewed as a direct challenge to the state itself. His rejection of the theory of *khalifa*, "prone to confrontation and rejection,"²⁹⁴ is barely disguised as a rejection of the Ba'athist regime and its ills by a true (Shi'a) Islam.²⁹⁵ That his writings were Islamist in character lends itself easily to the sectarian divide in the contest for the state. He writes in his now infamous *al-Madrasa al-Qur'āniyya*:

The Qur'an has shown here one of the laws of history, according to which the prophets were always confronting the rich (*mutrafīn*) in their societies... a group of people whose interests, wealth, material and worldly existence are dependent upon the idol... They fall into place in a dual structure of the world consisting of two main relationships: one between man and nature, another between man and man, in which exploitation is the root of evil.²⁹⁶

Though there is a sectarian flare to them, Al-Sadr's writings are not dissimilar from those of Sayyid Qutb. Al-Sadr crafted a vision of social justice and governance using the Qur'an and early Islamic history that was an affront to Saddam's Iraq. As the Shi'a make up Iraq's majority, this was seen as a major threat to a Ba'athist regime dominated by Sunnis. Writings like *al-Madrasa al-Qur'āniyya* cost al-Sadr his life—he was brutally executed by the regime by a power drill to the brain.²⁹⁷

Because al-Sadr was such a figurehead in the Iraqi Shi'a community, when Saddam Hussein himself was being executed, it is said that Shi'a guards chanted "Long live Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr!"²⁹⁸ The interpretation of this among Ba'athists and Sunnis loyal to Saddam as both treacherous and a threat to their position in a previously Sunni-dominated state almost goes without saying. Post-2003 Sadrist anthems describing Iraq as the land of Najaf, Hussein, Karbala and Sadr are viewed as highly threatening to Sunnis and their place in the new Iraqi republic.²⁹⁹ For the Sunnis, these myth-symbol complexes complimented the downfall of the Sunni vis-à-vis the Shi'a.

Not only the Shi'a, but American actions in Iraq too contributed to the climate of existential threat among Sunnis there. First and foremost, the 2003 invasion itself sparked this sentiment among many Iraqis. While the media showed some Iraqis cheering and greeting the U.S. as

liberators, it was only half the story—the story of the Shi'a in Iraq who, living under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, were treated as third class citizens. For many other Iraqis of Sunni origins, the U.S. invasion destroyed the socio-economic fabric their status and security was based on. It deprived influential Sunni tribes that were contracted under the old regime of their privileges.³⁰⁰ Many joined the resistance from the onset to combat the invading Americans. Anyone who collaborated with the U.S was subsequently viewed as a traitor to the nation of Iraq.

The U.S. made a series of severe policy blunders that contributed to the climate of existential threat. The policy of 'de-ba'athification,' authored by Brenner, disbanded the Sunni dominated Iraqi army and failed to offer any alternative means of employment. This caused major economic instability for large swaths of Iraq's Sunni population.³⁰¹ Making matters even worse for the Sunnis, the lack of necessities in Iraqi cities and towns as a result of the Iraq War further pointed to their deteriorating condition, causing both exasperation and fear among them.³⁰² Criminal activity was the only viable economic option. Many Sunnis turned to the insurgency, including jihadist groups, both to resist American invasion and to receive desperately needed income.³⁰³

Shi'a ascension to power in Iraq could not have been secured without the assistance of the U.S. The worsening situation for Sunnis thus outlined was juxtaposed with the rapid rise of the Shi'a to power through American backing, causing much anxiety among the former. "One man, one vote," which greatly empowered the majority Shi'a population, created fears over a tyranny of the majority situation among Sunnis.³⁰⁴

Personal security was another issue. "Many Sunnis felt physically threatened by the Shi'a and Kurdish-dominated security services. After decades of repression, the Shi'a and the Kurds were seeking retribution against former regime functionaries and supporters."³⁰⁵ A distinctly Iraqi insurgency was in part driven by collective fear.³⁰⁶ Parts of the homegrown resistance furthermore allied with the foreign insurgency which came into Iraq to support their 'Sunni brethren,' of which AQI was most prominent.³⁰⁷ Capitalizing on Iraqi Sunni fears, many indigenous Iraqi groups made alliances with AQI and adopted a similar position regarding the Shi'a.³⁰⁸

Facing an existential threat, AQI offered support to Iraqi Sunnis. While many groups in the Iraqi national resistance maintained a secular character, others were susceptible to the rhetoric of AQI and similar groups.³⁰⁹ The decision to use suicide attacks among Iraqis affiliated with AQI was arrived at using the same logic as AQI. Already facing the risk of annihilation, suicide

attacks were the best means in which to ensure the systematic collapse needed to secure power over the Shi'a and reclaim prominence in the country.

A 'Culture of Death,' Crisis and its Effect on Individual Suicide Attackers

As compared to the Japanese kamikaze, the suicide attackers in Iraq have left a limited amount of material behind to assess motive. There are isolated writings, but more prominent than that are video clips of individual suicide attackers making their final statements. Furthermore, some men and women who sought to become suicide attackers in Iraq are detained and still alive to give their testimonies. As more is uncovered about the men and women who made the final sacrifice in Iraq, we will be in a better position to piece together why they made the decisions they made. Yet, even with the relatively limited personal accounts that do exist, some important themes are manifest that closely mirror the Japanese case study.

One of the most important distinctions that must be made between the Japan case study and that of Iraq is that the Japanese kamikaze sought to prevent the humiliation and subjugation of their homeland, while the transnational and Iraqi suicide attackers acted in the face of their humiliation and emasculation. Themes invoked by the suicide attackers in Iraq are emasculation and the re-assertion of masculinity through martyrdom, as well as the despair or outrage at defiled femininity through sexual violation by coalition forces and their collaborators. Closely linked to these are the critical themes of honor, pride or dignity, shame, a deep sense of altruism and, uniquely, the need to be 'a good Muslim.' These broad themes that articulate motive are similarly underscored by a 'culture of death' in that these sought after identities of exemplary maleness or 'Muslim-ness,' and the honor and pride associate with them, are predicated on the act of martyrdom. Not only this, materials left behind by individual suicide bombers also convey the existential threat they believed they faced, which inspired their need to act.

Aside from their materials left behind, another means by which to examine the broader themes that spurred volunteerism is the propaganda espoused by AQI, among other groups. Of course, this operates under the assumption that terrorist groups seeking volunteers understand their audience and that the themes they used were indeed the means to generate the desired effect of volunteerism. The themes highlighted in AQI and other groups' propaganda does coincide with those mentioned by individual suicide attackers; they play off each other, as will be seen.

To begin, being 'a good Muslim' as underscored by a Middle Eastern 'culture of death' through altruistic martyrdom is among the most salient moral identities to persuade scores of

Muslim men and women to give their lives in Iraq post-2003. Mustafa Lounani, a Moroccan man who was apprehended by Belgian authorities and currently serving a sentence in Belgium, told his interrogators that, “Every good Muslim has the obligation to go and fight in Iraq. Me too.”³¹⁰ This idea of proving one’s worth through martyrdom, originally instituted by Khomeini and echoed by countless organizations, challenges Muslims on the basis of their faith and morals to become suicide attackers, lest they appear unfaithful. The need to assert their identity as ‘a good Muslim’ in the face of Muslim suffering at the hands of global superpowers is truly Al-Qaeda’s snare. Abu Osama al-Maghribi, who blew himself up at the UN headquarters in Baghdad, is similarly reported by his biographers to have been “unable to resist the urge to join jihad.”³¹¹ There are countless others.

The desire to be ‘a good Muslim’ through martyrdom is intrinsically tied to another theme that is ubiquitous in materials left behind by suicide attackers in Iraq—that the act of martyrdom is means of absolution or purification. “Radical Islamist martyrs generally believe that dying for the sake of Allah washes away all their sins at once.”³¹² The case of Saif al-Ummah from Saudi Arabia is instructive: “[Al-Ummah] believed that he had committed sins in his life for which [he stated], ‘Only martyrdom for Allah can purify me. I ask that you do not refuse me and that you give me speed in seeking to meet my Lord.’”³¹³ Al-Ummah met his end by driving a pickup truck full of C4 explosives into a police station south of Baghdad on an unknown date.³¹⁴ Many appear to have followed in al-Ummah’s footsteps for similar reasons. While it is upon a political altar, the age old human practice of performing a sacrifice to God for absolution is pervasive here.

This is suggestive that martyrs are the best of Muslims, creating the moral persuasion to conduct a suicide attack. Of course, it is important to remember when Hafez states, “Religious arguments tend to reach a narrow base of jihadists who may question the legitimacy of certain tactics or insurgent targets. The more salient appeals in Iraq interweave nationalistic and worldly discourse with religious notions and traditions.”³¹⁵ While religion and its celebration of martyrdom may serve as a moral persuasion, a sense of crisis is still necessary for what he calls “the alchemy of martyrdom”³¹⁶ that makes suicide attacks manifest in a particular conflict.

Moghadam tells us that, “Suicide attackers [in Iraq] keep referring to the humiliation of Islam and to their need to preserve the honor of Islam.”³¹⁷ Honor, pride and dignity—their violation through humiliation and the urgent need to reclaim them—are other recurring themes

among suicide attackers in Iraq. Abu Abdul Malik al-Najdi's words are worth repeating here: "I tell you that there is no good in this life, while the Muslims are humiliated and the sacred places were dishonored...to my family...I also tell you that I found my happiness that cannot be described."³¹⁸ Thus he spoke before blowing himself up in an attack on two hotels in Baghdad.

Traditionally in Arab culture honor is tied to masculinity, and gender roles more broadly. This is reflected in the materials left behind by individual suicide attackers and organizational propaganda. "Insurgents undoubtedly are appealing to notions of masculinity that pervade tribal culture, in which *sharaf* ('nobleness'), *ird* ('honor'), and *muruah* ('chivalry' or 'manliness') are of vital importance."³¹⁹ AQI and similar groups have furthermore created elaborate mythologies associating masculine or honorable images with volunteerism, such as the image of "a father leaving his newborn child or a husband leaving his bride to fight and die in the path of God."³²⁰ Not only this, AQI strategically "promotes the image of the heroic Muslim willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to redeem his nation and avenge the personal suffering inflicted on helpless Muslims, especially women."³²¹ It clearly resonates: "As one Lebanese teacher said, 'I decided to join the jihad because I wanted to stop the occupation, not out of love of blood.' His anger, he said, was fed by almost daily scenes on television of Iraqi women and children dying, 'not to mention Palestinians suffering the same fate.'"³²²

The theme of masculinity is all-pervasive in the Iraq case study.³²³ Once again, masculinity is a basic moral identity and men are obliged to fulfill their manhood by performing its rituals, one of which is the defense of the nation (in this case the Muslim '*ummah*' and, more acutely, Iraq) from its attackers. In the Iraq case study specifically there is a particular need to assert masculinity due to emasculation through invasion and the humiliation associated with it. In Iraq, fully clothed American soldiers would parade handcuffed Iraqi men in nothing but their underwear through the streets of Baghdad.³²⁴ Not only this, but the emasculation of Iraq was given a face worldwide in the advent of the Abu Ghraib scandal. There exists ample evidence that Abu Ghraib and subsequent atrocities featuring sexual torture which brought emasculation and dishonor to the fore of the Iraq War inspired many to become suicide attackers and strike back against the United States.³²⁵

But why suicide attacks? Through propaganda, suicide attacks became perceived as a means by which to restore manliness, honor and even purity in the face of humiliation and subjugation for those who volunteered.

Insurgent videos are replete with images of pious Muslims praying, chanting ‘God is great’ (*‘allahu akbar’*), even in the midst of [a suicide] operation or planting IEDs. These ‘true’ Muslims are intent on reversing the humiliation of their Muslim brethren around the world. One of the melodic hymns repeated over and over in several insurgent videos declares:

We shall not accept humiliation,
 We shall not accept humiliation,
 We shall not accept humiliation or subjugation;
 We will not bow our heads,
 We will not bow our heads,
 We will not bow our heads to the depraved.³²⁶

Masculinity in the face of humiliation is predicated on fighting back, and the most effective means by which to do so is through suicide attacks, as has been explained. Interestingly, through the association of strength with martyrdom and death, masculinity is becoming predicated on martyrdom within these circles, very similar to the Japanese case study in which masculinity was predicated on ‘a good death.’ It comes as little surprise that propaganda espoused by AQI and other groups emphasizes the degree of strength acquired by martyrs by virtue of being martyrs, often described as superhuman.³²⁷

The restoration of honor and manhood are tantamount post-invasion and suicide attacks provide a means to do so. Marwan Abu Ubeida, a 20 year old Iraqi from Fallujah, is one among many who was on a quest to repair both given the U.S. invasion.

Marwan joined the insurgency in April 2003 when U.S. soldiers fired on a crowd of demonstrators at a school, killing 12 and wounding many more. Marwan, who took part in the protest, escaped unharmed, but the event proved decisive. He says that a few days later, he and a few friends collected grenades and small arms from a military site abandoned by the Iraqi army and mounted an attack on a building occupied by U.S. soldiers. ‘They shot back but couldn’t hit any of us,’ he recalls. ‘It was my first taste of victory against the Americans.’³²⁸

Abu Ubeida later signed up to become a suicide bomber with AQI, stating that “He fights first for Islam, second to become a ‘martyr’ and win acceptance into heaven, and...third for control of his country. ‘The first step is to remove the Americans from Iraq,’ he says. ‘After we have achieved that, we can work out the other details.’”³²⁹ It is very clear he wants the U.S. out of his country after witnessing the horrors of the Iraq War. “First I will ask Allah to bless my mission with a high rate of casualties among the Americans...Then I will ask him to purify my soul so I am fit to see him, and I will ask to see my mujahedeen brothers who are already with him...The most important thing is that he should let me kill many Americans.” Abu Ubeida continues, “I pray no innocent people are killed in my mission...But if some are, I know when they arrive in heaven, Allah will ask them to forgive me.”³³⁰

As has been seen, the reverse of honor and masculinity are humiliation and shame. One

man who expressed his desire to be martyred also conveyed his shame at the notion that foreign Arab fighters were willing to come to fight and die for Iraq while Iraqis themselves were not.³³¹ He joined the fight against U.S. forces in Adhamiya as a result of this shame.³³² As honor is intrinsic to gender in Arab culture, humiliation and shame are undoubtedly linked just the same. Emasculation and particularly the defilement of femininity are key to the Iraq case study. It is very likely that the shame felt in either not being ‘a good Muslim,’ ‘a man,’ or the fact that women were ‘dishonored’ in Iraq at the hands of foreigners and ‘apostates,’ were causal in people volunteering to commit suicide attacks. In a highly circulated tape, Al-Zarqawi addressed the Muslim world: “Have you not heard that many of your chaste and pure sisters from among the Sunnis of Tel Afar had their honor desecrated, their chastity slaughtered, and their wombs filled with the sperm of the Crusaders and of their brothers, the hate-filled Rafidites [i.e., the Shi’a]. Where is your religion? Moreover, where is your sense of honor, your zeal, your manliness?”³³³

The cause and effect of such propaganda is clearly illustrated by Abu Muawiyah al-Shimali, also known as ‘Fatimah’s Fiancé.’ A video clip by the same name was highly circulated on jihadist websites, and features al-Shimali, a Saudi in his twenties, who decided to become a suicide bomber in Iraq after reading a letter Fatimah supposedly wrote while she was detained at Abu Ghraib prison.³³⁴ “In December 2004 Fatimah called on the holy warriors to come to rescue all the female prisoners who were subjected to daily rape, torture and humiliation at the hands of the ‘sons of pigs and monkeys’... ‘Brothers,’ Fatimah writes, ‘I’ll tell you again, fear God! Kill us with them so that we might be at peace. Help! Help! Help!’”³³⁵ The jihadist propaganda video scrolls the contents of the letter before cutting to al-Shimali reciting a poem with a Qur’an atop a gun. He asks God, “Oh, Lord, marry me to Fatimah who was martyred after they had violated her honor.”³³⁶ An overjoyed al-Shimali is then seen driving his explosive-laden car into the distance to an unidentified target, all the while saying, “This is Fatimah’s dowry.”³³⁷

‘Mechanisms of No Return’ for Suicide Attackers in Iraq

The transnational networks by which suicide attackers use to be smuggled into Iraq are based on trust—country, tribal and family ties.³³⁸ It is the same among native Iraqis.³³⁹ Once an individual volunteers, there is a vetting period that is critical. One member of the insurgency explained the weight of importance given to that time, saying essentially if a potential recruit was

found to be a traitor the insurgents would kill the person who vouched for them first.³⁴⁰ Once individuals were accepted, they too would go through a training process involving the practical but also a psychological component that included ‘mechanisms of no return’ similar to the kamikaze. It is arguable that the vetting process for Iraqis suicide attackers is one such mechanism.

Once recruits are in Al-Qaeda’s spider web, we are told by volunteers that they “have to undergo a program to discipline the mind and cleanse the soul.”³⁴¹

The training, supervised by field commanders and Sunni clerics sympathetic to the insurgency, is mainly psychological and spiritual. Besides the Koran, [one suicide attacker] says ‘I read about the history of jihad, about great martyrs who have gone before me. These things strengthen my will.’ One popular source of inspiration for suicide bombers is *The Lover of Angels*, by Abdullah Azzam, one of Osama bin Laden's spiritual mentors, which tells stories of jihadis who died fighting Soviet occupying troops in Afghanistan.³⁴²

Learned Sunni spiritual leaders are used by AQI to reinforce the idea that one who commits a suicide attack is emblematic of ‘a good Muslim,’ using their status as a scholar in the community. This is the period of religious radicalization which plays upon that moral identity underscored by a ‘culture of death.’ This idea of ‘a true Muslim ought to be doing this’ is further emphasized by the literature volunteers are given to read. Not just moral righteousness, but the salient themes of superhuman strength and mystic power are emphasized.

Azzam spun stories of miracles that Arab fighters experienced in battle. He was particularly fond of telling stories of fighters who were rolled over by tanks but miraculously survived, or mujahedeen who were pierced with bullets but yet managed to remain unharmed. He told stories of bodies of martyrs who still smelled fresh although the fighters had perished more than a year ago. The mujahedeen, Azzam said, were aided by angels on horseback, while bombs dropped by the Red Army were intercepted by birds.³⁴³

These narratives are interwoven with video clips of previously successful attacks suggesting the eminent triumph of the recruit.³⁴⁴ In this way the period of intensive radicalization as a ‘mechanism of no return’ plays on preexisting moral identities to further convince volunteers of their decision to become suicide attackers.

At the more material or worldly level, ‘mechanisms of no return’ volunteers go through the period before their final venture include formally paying off their debts, resolving family matters, and giving their final farewells to loved ones.³⁴⁵ They make lists of seventy people they will guarantee a place in paradise alongside them, which is based on certain Islamic traditions that indicate a martyr will be able to vouch for his or her closest relatives in heaven.³⁴⁶ This suggests consolation at a shortened, sacrificed life through guaranteed eternal continuity in

heaven. Furthermore, it is known that many AQI volunteers would dig their own graves,³⁴⁷ not unlike Hamas' own suicide bombers spending the night in their freshly dug graves before their scheduled attack in Israel/Palestine. Lastly, the videos that individual suicide attackers creates are a critical 'mechanism of no return' in that they have filmed themselves publically declaring what they are going to do and their resolve to do so. All of this creates a psychological barrier or demarcation that separates their past life from their mission both mentally and physically very similar to the kamikaze. In the words of Marwan Abu Ubeida, "You give up your previous life...and start a new one."³⁴⁸ The euphoria of martyrdom expressed by many AQI suicide attackers before their attack is significant, in that it suggests the psychological training the effective and similarly renders them 'no longer of this world.'

Camaraderie for the suicide attackers in Iraq is also present, and the peer pressure it fosters is a powerful 'mechanism of no return.' It is known that suicide attackers are often holed up together in safe houses in Iraq. In such conditions, it is common that death pacts are made among those in proximity of one another. "Abu Osama [the Moroccan who attacked the UN headquarters in Baghdad] made a vow with others to die in the path of God."³⁴⁹ Similarly, Marwan Abu Ubeida explains a pact he made with a friend who already blew himself up in the midst of Iraqi security forces in Anbar province:

'My friend was happier than I had ever seen him,' Marwan says. 'He felt he was close to the end of his journey to heaven.' The friend, he says, blew himself up two months ago at a checkpoint manned by Iraqi soldiers near Ramadi, capital of the turbulent Anbar province, and six were killed. 'We made a pact that we would meet in heaven,' Marwan says.³⁵⁰

Once again, a death pact cannot be re-negotiated once one of its adherents is dead. Guilt and the structures that create it, such as a death pact, are but 'mechanisms of no return.'

Conclusion

Suicide attacks are undoubtedly one of the most devastatingly effective tactics in modern warfare; therefore, it is absolutely imperative that we correctly understand the conditions that contribute to their manifestation so that we are able to stop them. To this end, many scholars have put forward important contributions toward understanding the suicide attacks phenomenon. Moreover, the conventional wisdom that suicide attacks are the product of a particular religion or culture is no longer relevant, nor is 'religious fervor' a helpful explanation given the sheer

amount of evidence to the contrary. Though religion may play a role, it has been inflated as a factor and led to poor analysis and decision making.

Ami Pedahzur has called for a theoretical endeavor to conduct a comparative analysis of case studies in order to understand what various different instances of suicide attacks might have in common with each other to begin piecing together the conditions the phenomenon. I have attempted to answer that call by comparing two radically different case studies in this work, the Japanese kamikaze during WWII and AQI in the Iraq War. It is only a start to a potentially broader comparative analysis of suicide attacks across many different ideologies, missions, societies, cultures and groups.

This work examined what these two case studies had in common, and focused on primary and secondary source material to examine what underlying factors contributed to the decision to conduct suicide attacks at both the individual and organizational levels. It found that suicide attacks occur at the crossroads where (1) organizational strategy requires such an attack and (2) willing individuals to carry out such an attack meet, both of which are furthermore arrived at via (a) a moral persuasion to assert an identity, specifically influenced by a ‘culture of death,’ as well as (b) a sense of crisis at the level of existential threat, whether real or perceived. Both of these latter two requisites exist in the environment the organization and the individual perpetrators of suicide attacks find themselves in, transcending the individual, organization and social dimensions of the phenomenon. ‘Mechanisms of no return’ are then created to ensure an individual has difficulty renegeing on the assignment they originally volunteered for.

To come to this conclusion, I relied heavily on primary source literature of individual suicide attackers and organizations that implement them to understand the rationale for the phenomenon of suicide attacks as they are connected to the conditions, not to mention secondary analysis. Indeed, this work is at once part political science hypothesis and part comparative literature project. Primary literature conveys the moral imperative and identity associated with a ‘culture of death,’ which I believe is salient to the discussion of motive. It furthermore shows the very real sense of crisis in the minds of both individuals and organizations, and how it ultimately contributed to the manifestation of suicide attacks in a given conflict. I maintain that it is more relevant to rely on primary source literature than its interpretation by potentially biased secondary source material, which has been discussed extensively.

It is my sincere hope that this work will help to further debunk the conventional wisdom as to why suicide attacks occur. If we are truly to understand suicide attacks in order to stop them as an increasingly deadly and inhumane weapon of modern asymmetric warfare, it is absolutely essential we get beyond this modality of thinking. Through the conventional wisdom and its postulated irrational reasons for suicide attacks that serve it, we are likely only contributing to a climate of dehumanization that leads to acts which contribute a marked increase of the phenomenon.

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