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# What If Some Suicide Bombers Are Just Suicidal?

Dying for a cause—minus the cause



The Comptoir Voltaire cafe, where Brahim Abdeslam killed himself in last November's Paris attacks

Charles Platiau / Reuters

**SIMON COTTEE**

MAY 5, 2016 | GLOBAL

When Brahim Abdeslam bespattered himself in a restaurant in last November's Paris attacks he didn't much look like a man, to borrow the title of Mia Bloom's seminal study of suicide bombing, *Dying to Kill*. He looked, rather, like a man killing to die. If there is a script for doing a jihadist suicide mission, as there now assuredly is, Brahim Abdeslam wasn't following it. He didn't cinematically burst through the doors screaming "allahu akbar." He didn't condemn the restaurant's patrons in bloodcurdling religious language nor profess his avenging motive for Muslims or God. He didn't smile, beatifically, in anticipation of all those black-eyed virgins awaiting him in paradise. Instead, he appeared to trudge dejectedly toward death, covering his face in what may have been a gesture of shame just before detonating his deadly load. Or at least that's how it looked from the CCTV [footage](#) of the scene released recently. Miraculously, no one else was killed in the attack, although many sustained injuries.

From the perspective of ISIS, this footage is a total PR disaster: a grainy, low-definition testament to a pitiful suicide mission in which not a single “kaffir” or unbeliever was killed. As an item of [atrocious porn](#), and by ISIS’s usual exorbitant, [Vimto-hued](#) standards, it is almost banal. And, like the [recent footage](#) taken from the headcam of an ISIS fighter killed in battle against Kurdish Peshmerga troops in northern Iraq, the emotion it arouses is more pity than terror, still less awe. But given the [pressures](#) ISIS is now under, following several bruising [military defeats](#) and intensifying aerial bombardment from the American-led coalition, the PR disaster of one of its “[martyrs](#)” looking decidedly un-martyr-like and abject is the least of its current woes.

Was Brahim Abdeslam’s abjectness just a figment of the CCTV footage, or was Brahim Abdeslam actually abject? His mother, Faklan, certainly seems to think it was the latter. Her son, she [told](#) a reporter, “did not mean to kill anyone.” According to a cousin, he took his own life because of “[stress](#).” In an interview with the British tabloid *Daily Mail*, Abdeslam’s former wife, [Naima](#), who was married to him for two years until they separated in 2008, said “his favourite activities were smoking weed and sleeping. He often slept during the day. The number of joints that he smoked was alarming. Despite his diploma as an electrician, he found no job, it made him lazy.” He was also, she said, religiously lax and neither prayed nor attended a mosque, although he did reportedly “keep Ramadan because his family forced him to.” This suggests that far from being an ideological fanatic, Brahim Abdeslam may have been depressed. Of course it is impossible to know this with any degree of certainty, since so much about his life remains opaque. And it is clearly naïve to take at [face value](#) the testimony of a dead jihadist’s relatives, since they have an obvious interest in expressing incredulity about how their ever-so-[normal, soccer-playing, Kim Kardashian-loving, Chelsea-supporting, Vans-sneakers-wearing](#) kin could have joined ISIS. But it is not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility that Abdeslam was more interested in ending his own life than those of others—which, in the end, is exactly what he did.

In Islam, as in Christian and Jewish traditions, suicide is [generally prohibited](#): Only God has a right to take the life he has granted. For those who are suicidal, one way of getting around this prohibition would be to sign up to a cause that

rhetorically redefines suicide as a communal act of heroic self-sacrifice. As the legal scholar Stephen Holmes puts it in a chapter of the edited collection *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*:

The social stigma of suicide probably deters some clinically depressed youths in Muslim societies from taking their lives. But the ideal of militant jihad gives them a way to circumvent this taboo. By enlisting in a [suicide mission], a suicidally depressed individual can kill himself with social approval. All he has to do is agree to kill an enemy of Islam in the process.

Even if Brahim Abdeslam was in fact secretly an atheist and didn't believe for a second that he would forever burn in hell for taking his own life, he would still have had a strong interest in presenting his death as an act of religious martyrdom, in the hope that this would forestall the shame that a suicide for personal reasons would have elicited from the wider community of Muslim believers in which he and his family lived. The fact that he didn't succeed particularly well in conveying this impression, since he didn't kill anyone, is beside the point.

Or is it? In *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, Diego Gambetta acutely remarks, referring to the classical Islamic distinction between “facing certain death at the hands of the enemy and killing oneself by one's own hand,” that “as the links between [suicide missions] and their effects becomes tenuous the sacrifice gets murkier.” “Why,” he adds by way of illustration, “should anyone sacrifice his life for killing a couple of retired Israelis? What exactly is the benefit in that? Why not just leave a parcel bomb and leave?” Gambetta goes on to discuss the views of the Shia cleric Sheikh Hussein Fadlallah, who insisted that the only observable proof that the perpetrator of a suicide mission is not taking his life for a suicidal or self-centered purpose is the number of people he kills or the devastation he causes. “This shows,” Gambetta elaborates, “that dying is not itself the purpose but a true sacrifice by a genuine martyr.”

It's unlikely that we will ever know Abdeslam's true motives, given how difficult it is to access the dark interior world of another person's self—even more so if that person is dead. But he would not be the first terrorist to kill himself because he no longer wanted to live, masquerading personal suicide as martyrdom.

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## **The balance of the evidence suggests that suicide terrorists are psychologically normal individuals who kill and die for a cause.**

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According to Adam Lankford, in an [article](#) published in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, “there are many reasons to think that both event-based and psychological risk factors for suicide may drive the behavior of suicide terrorists.” Lankford bases this assessment on a sample of 75 individual suicide terrorists “who may have exhibited ... classic suicidal traits.” He also draws heavily on an even smaller sample of 15 Palestinian would-be suicide bombers via the [work](#) of Ariel Merari, a retired professor of psychology at Tel Aviv University. According to Merari's [findings](#), 53 percent showed “depressive tendencies” (melancholy, low energy, tearfulness), compared to 21 percent of the organizers of suicide missions and 8 percent of the insurgents who engaged in non-suicide attacks. Merari also found that 40 percent of the would-be suicide bombers displayed suicidal tendencies, whereas none of the terrorist organizers were suicidal.

Lankford's argument, however, is deeply [controversial—and not least because of the limited sample on which it is based](#). In fact, the balance of the scholarly evidence suggests that suicide terrorists are, for the most part, psychologically [normal individuals](#) who kill and die for a cause they regard as [sacred and for comrades](#) with whom they share a deep bond.

It is also a well-established research finding that terrorist groups actively screen out depressed or pathological individuals, due to their unreliability. As Rex Hudson [explains](#), discussing the “highly selective” recruitment procedures of most terrorist groups:



Candidates who exhibit signs of psychopathy or other mental illness are deselected in the interest of group survival. Terrorist groups need members whose behaviour appears to be normal and who would not arouse suspicion. A member who exhibits traits of psychopathy or any noticeable degree of mental illness would only be a liability for the group, whatever his or her skills. That individual could not be depended on to carry out the assigned mission.

This, however, doesn't seem to uniformly apply to ISIS, which on matters of recruitment, and distinctly unlike its jihadist competitor [al-Qaeda](#), shows a striking level of permissiveness, admitting almost anyone to its ranks. And given the widely advertised sadism of the group, it is more than likely that not a few of its recruits are mentally unhinged in some way.

Does the scholarly consensus—that suicide terrorists are psychologically “normal individuals”—apply to Brahim Abdeslam? Was he unconditionally committed to a [sacred cause](#), as well as to his comrades? He was obviously, at some point, bewitched by ISIS, [reportedly](#) watching ISIS videos while kicking back with a beer and a joint in the cafe he used to run with his brother [Salah](#) in Molenbeek. Bewitched enough, also, to have gone to Syria, only to return to try and kill his fellow Europeans in Paris. What isn't yet clear, and may never be, is whether that bewitchment was driven by a death wish or an ultimate cause that he truly believed in, to the extent that he was prepared to die for it.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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