

Cult of the Suicide Bomber: Extreme Insurrection When Nothing Left To Lose

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Although I generally have little use for Robert Baer, the former CIA agent who served as a model for the character George Clooney played in "Syriana," I certainly can recommend "Cult of the Suicide Bomber," a British documentary written and narrated by Baer. It is, if nothing else, a good introduction to some of the politics surrounding the current war in Lebanon.

Baer was stationed in Beirut in 1983, when a suicide bomber blew up the American embassy. Just by happenstance, he was not on the premises at the time. That event spurred him to look into the whole question of terrorism and suicide bombing. Unlike a Philip Agee, Baer is fixated on improving the quality of services delivered by the CIA rather than on its role in subverting third world struggles for democracy and economic development. In a very real sense, this documentary reflects his efforts to better understand the "enemy".

With his command of Arabic and Parsi, Baer is well-equipped to conduct interviews throughout the region. He also has a way of softening people up for interviews, another skill no doubt learned in the CIA. Many years ago, when I was in the Trotskyist movement, a party leader advised me never to speak to the FBI because they have received special training in how to extract information even during what appears to be a casual conversation. Since I would have soon kept a rattlesnake as a pet as chat with an FBI agent, that never presented itself as a problem.

Baer argues, with some degree of plausibility, that the first suicide bomber was Hossein Fahmideh, a thirteen year old Iranian boy who threw himself under an Iraqi tank in 1980 during a climactic battle. Shrines were erected to the youth all over Iran in a gesture that Baer sees repeated throughout the region. Suicide bombers become "exemplary figures" whose likenesses dot the walls of buildings and billboards, like Che's in Cuba.

Fahmideh's parents, like the relatives of all suicide bombers interviewed in the film, are deeply proud of his heroism. As devout Muslims, they are sure that he has merited entrance into Paradise. Unlike the Christian true believers, whose theology is based on the notion that good acts can't buy you a ticket into heaven, Muslims are much more results-oriented.

Baer maintains that suicide bombing was marketed by the Iranians to the Lebanese in the 1980s. Despite the tendency to explain this tactic as a function of Shi'ite fanaticism, Baer makes clear that it was used across the board by the Lebanese resistance, including the secular Syrian National Socialist Party. When Baer asks its leader if his members expected to gain entry into Paradise after blowing themselves up, he shrugs his shoulders and says that their Paradise would be on Earth, a liberated Lebanon.

The role of secular activists in the Lebanese resistance is confirmed by suicide bombing expert Robert Pape in an op-ed article that appears in the August 3, 2006 NY Times:

"In writing my book on suicide attackers, I had researchers scour Lebanese sources to collect martyr videos, pictures and testimonials and the biographies of the Hezbollah bombers. Of the 41, we identified the names, birth places and other personal data for 38. Shockingly, only eight were Islamic fundamentalists. Twenty-seven were from leftist political groups like the Lebanese Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Union. Three were Christians, including a female high-school teacher with a college degree. All were born in Lebanon.

"What these suicide attackers -- and their heirs today -- shared was not a religious or political ideology but simply a commitment to resisting a foreign occupation. Nearly two decades of Israeli military presence did not root out Hezbollah. The only thing that has proven to end suicide attacks, in Lebanon and elsewhere, is withdrawal by the occupying force."

After leaving Lebanon, Baer travels to Gaza and the West Bank where he interviews Hamas activists who differ significantly from their counterparts in Iran and Lebanon, where the suicide bomber functioned more or less as a Kamikazi fighter in combat situations involving unequal forces. Hamas operated less against the Israeli army than it did against Israeli citizens in a kind of vendetta.

To Baer's credit, he makes clear that the Hamas campaign was inspired by the February 1994 attack of Zionist fanatic Baruch Goldstein on unarmed worshippers in a Hebron mosque. Forty were shot to death by Goldstein, a transplanted Brooklynite and follower of Jewish fascist Meir Kahane. In the ensuing riots by Palestinians, another 53 were killed by Israelis and hundreds wounded.

In an effort to break the cycle of suicide bombing, Israel has been constructing a massive fence to pen in Palestinians. Baer concludes the film with the mordant observation that as long as there is despair and inequality, there will be suicide bombers.

"Cult of the Suicide Bomber" is available on DVD.

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