



# **The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers**

*Adam Lankford*

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*A startling look at the deepest, darkest secrets that terrorists pray you'll never know*

For decades, experts from the most powerful governments and prestigious universities around the world have told us that suicide bombers are psychologically normal men and women driven by a single-minded purpose: self-sacrifice. As it turns out, this claim originated with the terrorist leaders themselves, who insisted that they would never recruit mentally unstable people to carry out suicide attacks. As these strikes have become both increasingly common and increasingly deadly, no one has challenged this conventional wisdom. These are fearless ideological warriors, we're told, who have the same resolve and commitment to their beliefs as our own Navy SEALS, because they're willing to die for the sake of their cause.

In *The Myth of Martyrdom*, Adam Lankford argues that these so-called experts have it all wrong. The truth is that most suicide terrorists are like any other suicidal person—longing to escape from unbearable pain, be it depression, anxiety, marital strife, or professional failure. Their "martyrdom" is essentially a cover for an underlying death wish. Drawing on an array of primary sources, including suicide notes, love letters, diary entries, and martyrdom videos, Lankford reveals the important parallels that exist between suicide bombers, airplane hijackers, cult members, and rampage shooters. The result is an astonishing account of rage and shame that will transform the way we think of terrorism forever.

We can't hope to stop these deadly attacks, Lankford argues, until we understand what's really behind them. This timely and provocative book flips a decades-old argument on its head—and has huge implications for our future.

## **The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers for online ebook**

### **Olivia says**

The author offers a lot of insight into various terrorists and their biographies, arguing that they are suicidal. His book is very interesting and offers a lot of insight. His arguments are easy to follow. However, the author is not willing to consider that his arguments might not be accurate and that there are other explanations for self-destructive killing.

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### **April says**

The author takes so many different directions in this book allowing you a little insight into the lives and mental situations of these people. A lot of their thoughts are brought on by what they learn, who they learn from and what they have become to believe. Keep in mind all killers have something in common yet none of them are quite the same just like everyone else

also left review on Amazon.com

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### **SpaceBear says**

This is not a very good book. The basic argument is that because some suicide terrorists can be shown to have had depression, therefore all of them are suicidal and their political agenda is irrelevant. The author massively misrepresents the literature on terrorism and conflict in general, while writing as though he genuinely believes himself to have 'cracked the case' that everyone else is missing because they're just so stop. His writing style is also both immature and patronizing.

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### **Evan says**

I found this to be an insightful study of those who choose to die and decide to do it publicly taking other lives along with their own. It dealt with risk factors and the societal acceptance of terrorist suicide bombing versus rampage killing. It became repetitious after a while and could have been a shorter book. I agree with the author's theory that the common thread is deeply unhappy people who wish to die.

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### **Billie Pritchett says**

Adam Lankford's *Myth of Martyrdom* makes a compelling case that suicide bombers and other suicide

terrorists and rampage shooters and other self-destructive killers are basically suicidal people who want to do either as a result of coercion, a desire for escapism, as an indirect means to get killed themselves, or out of a deep sense of personal shortcomings vis-a-vis the world at large. For example, the kamikaze pilots in WWII were beaten within an inch of their lives to commit suicide via kamikaze air attacks and sometimes the abuse was so severe they killed themselves prior to ever flying missions, and so they were coerced into doing it. Adolf Hitler, seeing the collapse of the Third Reich around him, killed himself as a means to escape. Several other people have committed suicide in a classic "suicide-by-police officer" fashion, essentially killing others with the hopes that they will be killed by police or someone else. And the final type is the conventional type, who while appearing to kill themselves and other people for some grand or social reason really do it out of a fear of their own shortcomings or misfortunes, or what have you, in life.

Lankford writes that with regard suicide attacks, the killer/suicidal person need only have the intent to kill himself, have some access to weapons, and have access to whomever he perceives as enemy targets. And that's it. He argues that too long have governments focused on additional non-essential facilitators to terrorism, such as the intent to kill others, a terrorist organization to sponsor the attacks, and stigmatization of conventional suicide and/or social approval of suicide attacks.

Lankford proposes a solution to identify people who might be inclined to commit suicide attacks. They are the following: (1) Families and friends can report suspicious innuendo or overt intent on behalf of loved ones to do harm to themselves and other people, including perhaps if they have a preoccupation with suicide or terrorism or both. (2) Government officials, as well as friends and families, could keep a close eye on loved ones' internet activity to see if anything someone implies or directly states is related to the intent of suicide attacks. (3) There is also a test that could be administered, a modified Stoop test (you can search for it online) that indicates a person's favor or lack thereof toward suicide or suicidal tendencies. Finally, (4) suicide attacks should be publicly socially stigmatized and not viewed as in any way heroic; rather, these attacks should be presented as weak, desperate, and so on, knocking down the culture of suicide attacks down to what crazy or weak people do so as not to promote more of it.

I've written too much. You should read the book. :)

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### **Noah W says**

As the title suggests, this book explores the topic of suicide bombers and rampage shooters; where it gets interesting is when the author looks beneath the surface claims and assumptions that society projects onto these attackers.

We assume the 9/11 terrorists, Kamikaze pilots, or suicide bombers are brave, sacrificial patriots. However, the "sacrificial" part of the statement many times originates from the bomber's handler, not themselves. Lankford makes the case that most suicide bombers are already suicidal and that the bombing is just a "socially acceptable" way of killing themselves (Muslims) or a way of enacting revenge on the supposed sources of their painful life (school shootings).

The book is an easy and very thought provoking. It makes a clear case that the most efficient way to prevent atrocities is to look for ways of preventing the root problems, in this case, suicidal tendencies.

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## Matt says

Almost before the final gunshots echoed into eternity at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, there was speculation as to the motivation of the shooter. When it was learned that the murderer, Omar Mateen, had pledged allegiance to the terror group ISIS, the conjecture broke down along two main lines. Mateen might have been a rabid dog terrorist (he does not deserve the cool-sounding “lone wolf”) carrying out his crime independent of ISIS but in support of their cause. Or, he might have been a member, acting on the group’s behest. Either way, the implication was terrifying: the further spread of a terrorist organization that has the name and goals of a *G.I. Joe* villain.

Adam Lankford’s *The Myth of Martyrdom* wants us to pump the brakes on that kind of hypothesizing. Instead, it asks us to begin by asking a question that is so stunningly simple and fundamental that it almost comes across as a tautology.

### *Are suicidal terrorists suicidal?*

If you’re like me, it’s possible that you’ve read hundreds of pages on terror and terrorism without ever considering this basic inquiry. And it’s not an insignificant query. Wars have begun, lives have been lost, and treasuries depleted in response to terrorist acts.

We often think of suicide terrorists as “perfect soldiers.” Men and women so ideologically motivated and pure that they will give up their lives for the cause. Because death does not fear them, they seem almost unstoppable. Beyond human. Their actions cause great death and destruction; their tactics spread helpless fear.

Lankford doesn’t buy into this conception (or “propaganda”, as he calls it), at least not fully. He argues that suicidal terrorists are the same as other suicidal people. That they are, in fact, using the outlet of terrorism to escape the pain of their lives, whether that stems from relationship failures, job woes, or mental health issues such as depression.

In this short (175 pages of text), methodical book, Lankford lays out his argument. He begins by looking at past suicide-terrorism research and telling you – with limited success – why he thinks it has been wrong. He then looks into the various things that make suicide terrorists suicidal. Not surprisingly, given his brief, Lankford argues that typical suicide risk factors can be found in many terrorists. Lankford gives us a case study by focusing on the 9/11 hijackers, specifically the misogynistic enigma at the center of the storm: Mohammed Atta. Lankford posits, not entirely convincingly, that Atta was a troubled man and that his actions were not as heaven-driven as al-Qaida would like us to believe.

Following the chapter on Atta, Lankford gives us an entirely unnecessary section on the difference between suicide terrorists and “real heroes” who put their lives at risk. I’m not entirely sure who Lankford is trying to convince. All I can say is that if a person has trouble differentiating between the Mohammed Atta and a New York City fireman, that person is not going to read, much less be convinced, by this volume.

Lankford closes out *The Myth of Martyrdom* by presenting a rough game plan. He lays out the different types of suicide-terrorists and offers some suggestions on how they might be stopped. This outline isn’t really actionable, but the value here comes from more accurately diagnosing the problem, rather than delivering a cure.

It should be noted that this is a terribly written book. At times it is almost juvenile. When Lankford wants to poke holes in another researcher's work, he doesn't do a systemic analysis. Instead, he derides it as "gibberish." He has charts and tables to give you the impression that his position is empirical, but it's not. It's as subjective as anything else in psychology.

When Lankford introduces a topic, he has the strange habit of doing so by way of a celebrity anecdote. For instance, he talks about depression by reference to Oprah Winfrey's teenage years. I found this unhelpful in the extreme, as well as borderline inappropriate. Some of his sentences are just howlers. At one point, Lankford writes: "Answers are sexy, and true enlightenment can be almost orgasmic." You might be saying to yourself, I need to judge that sentence in context. And I say you don't. There is no context in the world in which that sentence is anything but garbage.

That said, I think this is an important book, a term I don't use lightly. It presents a new paradigm in which to study suicide terrorism. It is extremely important in this age of San Bernardino and Orlando that the *why* question is answered correctly. If we operate only under the assumption that suicide terrorists are single-minded self-guided missiles, then we will continue wasting time arguing about banning whole groups of people from our shores, or punishing the family members of killers. On the other hand, if we break free of past dogmas, it might be possible to stop some of these attacks before they occur, or to react to them more suitably if they do.

*The Myth of Martyrdom* is not an answer. It is the jumping off point for a larger conversation, one that hopefully avoids any references to orgasmic enlightenment.

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### **Jordan says**

The Myth of Martyrdom challenged a belief I had never once questioned before reading the book: that suicide bombers blow themselves up to become martyrs for their faith. Instead, the author claims, they do so because they are actually suicidal.

There are some weak arguments in the book, but overall Adam Lankford makes a good case. I was convinced that many, if not most, suicide bombers only carry out their attacks because they are seeking to kill themselves in a way that will not be frowned upon by their society. I don't agree with his absolutist claim that suicide is the primary objective in all suicide attacks, however. I think that there is sufficient evidence to show that some suicide killers are truly motivated by religious fervor.

The Myth of Martyrdom is an easy and interesting read with an intriguing premise.

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### **Iesha (In east shade house at...) says**

Received in a Goodreads Giveaway.

In truth, I thought the information in Adam Lankford's book was presented in a very interesting and powerful way. I found the topic about suicide bombers interesting. I found myself overwhelmed by the weight of the information in his book after reading the first few chapters, and sadly, I just couldn't finish reading the book.

I don't think this book is poorly written, in fact, I thought the book was well written. Maybe in the future to come, I will one day pick this book up again, and will finish the book all the way to the end.

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### **Ashley says**

Suicide bombers are actually suicidal. Such a simple concept that, for some reason, has never been discussed as the actual motivation for these terrorists. Dr. Lankford's book "Myth of Martyrdom" challenges the conventional wisdom regarding suicide bombers -- they aren't sacrificial victims of the cause, but potentially just looking for a way 'out' that is acceptable in their society. It's an extremely interesting and important argument that has the potential to change the way we deal with, and prepare, for these types of attacks.

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### **Sheryl Tribble says**

I'd suspected that suicide terrorists were suicidal before, just reading about some of their lives and their statements and things, so I didn't need Lankford to get to that conclusion. Also wasn't surprised to know that suicide terrorists, rampage shooters, and school shooters show such strong similarities, but I was surprised at how different work-place shooters are from all three. And I knew that kamikaze training was brutal but hadn't realized to such an extent.

While we don't have as much evidence as anyone would like, what evidence we have does support Lankford's basic claim. Even if his premise is wrong, teaching people to recognize the signs and to take depression and suicide seriously and to recognize it in family and friends when possible would all be good things.

And apparently there's a need to make it clear that there's nothing heroic about dying in order to kill people; I had not run across the "linear" effect Lankford talks about, where people assume if you do something that's likely to kill you, you must be courageous and heroic. Where I come from, doing stuff that's likely to kill you is considered stupid; it's only heroic if you choose to do it to save others, and even then it's only heroic if there's no other reasonable option.

Clearly, if someone \*wants\* to die, if they're depressed and see no hope and no joy to life, then even dying for others is not really heroic, because in dying they aren't giving up something they highly value. Heroes and martyrs risk what's important to them for the sake of others; suicidal people are giving up something they don't even want. Probably what surprised me most is the percentage of Americans who apparently don't get that.

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### **Dawne says**

The genuinely interesting comparisons between suicide-terrorists and school shooters/rampage killers, as well as the psychological assessment of people who commit these acts, are often bogged down by obnoxious prose, unnecessary name calling (of 'so-called' experts), and weakly organized material. And surprisingly, for a book that purports to imagine differently the internal lives and motivations of these killers, the author has a limited, (i.e. hetero-normative) perspective on sexuality. This becomes problematic as he assesses

Mohammed Atta, who flew the first plane into the World Trade Center, because the author takes at face value the view of family and friends that Atta couldn't attract a woman to marry. So, he just doesn't take far enough the premise that social isolation, a factor in suicides, could have roots in a despair that has nothing to do with dating.

A not-uninteresting book, but one that's both revealing and problematic in its revelations.

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### **Daniel Farquhar says**

A very personal and passionate review of the psychology of suicide terrorism.

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### **Max Balestra says**

If you could read only one book about suicide terrorism, it should be this one.

Adam Lankford very effectively challenges the notion that kamikaze-type terrorists like the 9-11 hijackers choose to sacrifice their lives for an higher cause, arguing instead that most of them are just suicidal. Any cause they embrace is a just an escape from their own unsatisfactory existance, and provides a convenient pretext to kill themselves without suffering the social or religious shame of taking one's own life.

"The myth of martyrdom", where the phenomena of suicidal people killing themselves while killing other people at the same time is reinvented as an acceptable battle tactic or as an extreme form of social protest, Lankford argues, is dangerously misunderstood in the western world.

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### **Heather says**

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

This book argues a point that seems so explicitly obvious and is yet completely brushed aside: suicide terrorists carry out their attacks because they are suicidal, NOT because they are committed to some ideological cause. It provides a refreshing viewpoint, with strong supporting arguments and evidence, to drive the point home. In addition, the author provides a discussion concerning the causes of suicide and what can (and should) be done about it in order to prevent future suicide attacks.

The reading is easy to follow and not difficult to read, but provides quite a few compelling points to consider. Additional research should be done on the topic. Some of the arguments and examples used in the book were questionable, and the author gave off the vibe that he was not willing to consider any other argument or option on the topic. Such an attitude may be dangerous. I highly recommend this book for students of the law, of criminology, of sociology, of psychology, and anyone interested in learning about terrorism. Government officials concerned with national security would do good to pick up this book. It provides a unique and refreshing perspective to a very relevant and important issue of current times.

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