**Suicide bombing**

**Suicide bombing**, an act in which an individual personally delivers explosives and detonates them to inflict the greatest possible damage, killing himself or herself in the process. Suicide bombings are particularly shocking on account of their indiscriminate nature, clearly intending to kill or injure anyone within range of the explosion, the victims being mostly unsuspecting civilians (though political figures and military personnel are frequently the main targets), and because of the evident willingness of the bombers to die by their own hands. Virtually all [suicide](http://www.britannica.com/topic/suicide) bombings are linked to political causes or grievances. Unlike suicidal tactics born of desperation in war, such as Japan’s [kamikaze](http://www.britannica.com/topic/kamikaze) attacks during [World War II](http://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II), suicide bombing is deliberately employed by terrorists for calculated political effect. Indeed, because suicide bombers have the ability to move, avoid security measures, and choose their targets, they have been likened to a human “[smart bomb](http://www.britannica.com/technology/smart-bomb)” (or “poor man’s smart bomb”).

The damage inflicted by suicide bombings is both physical and psychological, and to inflict maximum damage the bombers rely heavily on the element of surprise. Surprise is generated by turning the everyday into a weapon. For instance, suicide bombers often wear their explosives underneath their clothing, carry them in backpacks, or even hide them in bicycle frames. Frequently, to inflict even greater damage, suicide bombers drive vehicles packed with explosives. Bomb sizes have ranged from less than 100 grams (just over three ounces) in the case of the so-called underwear bomber, who attempted to bring down an airliner in the United States in 2009, to more than one ton in a car bombing that killed more than 200 people in Bali, Indon., in 2002.

## The rise of suicide bombing

Accessible and stable high explosives such as [trinitrotoluene](http://www.britannica.com/science/trinitrotoluene) (TNT) have been available for more than a century, but suicide bombing is a more recent phenomenon. Modern suicide bombers can trace their roots to radical 19th-century [anarchists](http://www.britannica.com/topic/anarchism), or “dynamiters,” who espoused a doctrine of action and a “propaganda of the deed.” Few dynamiters, however, sought to destroy themselves with the same weapons that they directed against monarchs and other leaders. Contemporary suicide bombing began in 1981 in [Lebanon](http://www.britannica.com/place/Lebanon). However, it achieved worldwide notoriety in 1983, first with an attack against the U.S. embassy in [Beirut](http://www.britannica.com/place/Beirut) that killed 63 people and then with simultaneous [car bombings of U.S. and French military barracks](http://www.britannica.com/event/1983-Beirut-barracks-bombings), also in Beirut, that killed 299 more. These attacks, mounted by the Shīʿite Islamic group [Hezbollah](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Hezbollah), were credited with forcing the withdrawal of Western military forces from Lebanon.

Since 1983, suicide bombing has become a favourite terrorist tactic of insurgent groups from [Sri Lanka](http://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka) to [Chechnya](http://www.britannica.com/place/Chechnya) to [Afghanistan](http://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan). One indication of this growing preference is the number of attacks, which rose from 1 in 1981 to more than 500 in 2007. The use of suicide bombing has grown for three primary reasons. First, suicide bombing is almost impossible for security forces to prevent. Bombers such as the three second-generation Pakistani Britons and one young immigrant from Jamaica who killed 52 people in the [London bombings of 2005](http://www.britannica.com/event/London-bombings-of-2005) are almost unstoppable once they are committed to die and kill others. Second, suicide bombing generates publicity. Media attention is like oxygen to terrorists, and suicide bombings receive enormous news coverage owing to the willingness of the bombers to die for a cause and the shocking damage inflicted indiscriminately against targets and bystanders alike—as happened in the assassination in 1991 of Indian Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Rajiv-Gandhi) and 16 others by a woman associated with the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-Tigers). Third, a successful suicide bombing requires little expertise and few resources beyond a bomb and someone willing to carry it. Therefore, for groups determined to spread terror, suicide bombing is much more cost-effective than other tactics such as hostage taking, which requires considerably greater investment in resources, planning, and training. Instruction manuals, videos, and other training materials, some of them available online, have allowed groups like the London bombers to construct bombs with little guidance.

## Religion and the question of motivation

The growth in suicide bombing has also been linked with the rise of militant religious-inspired terrorist violence. However, religion is not the sole motivation for suicide bombing. American political scientist Robert Pape argued that, prior to 2003, the group that used suicide bombing the most was the [Tamil Tigers](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-Tigers), a largely secular ethnic separatist group from Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, suicide bombings since 2003 have been mounted almost exclusively by groups espousing religious causes. One compelling explanation for the role of religion involves justification and [persuasion](http://www.britannica.com/topic/persuasion-psychology). As a means to justify indiscriminate killing and to overcome the natural aversion against taking one’s own [life](http://www.britannica.com/topic/life), militant groups (and the religious leaders and interpreters who speak for them) use faith to elevate their causes to religious crusades. In this way the act of suicide bombing becomes not a social or religious aberration but rather a sacred duty and obligation. At various times and for various reasons, communities have been manipulated into sanctifying those “martyred” in suicide bombings and have become a source of new recruits. The reasons can include resentment against a perceived occupier or some other historical and social injustice as well as economic and social incentives for the families of martyrs.

Religion may justify suicide bombing on one level, but on another level the act springs from the motivation of the individual bomber. Studies have shown that many suicide bombers, particularly in developed societies, are not deranged or wild-eyed fanatics with nothing to live for; indeed, a significant number of bombers have come from income and education levels well above their countries’ norms. Another broad trend, noticeable in the numerous suicide bombings in [Iraq](http://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq) and Afghanistan, has been the recruitment of individuals who are physically or mentally ill, impoverished, suggestible, or alienated in some way from their [society](http://www.britannica.com/topic/society). Individual purposes or motivations can range broadly, from revenge for the death of a family member (for instance, the female suicide bombers, or “Black Widows,” in Chechnya) to outrage against an occupying power (for instance, in Iraq or the Palestinian territories) or against some incident (e.g., the abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) to coercion or even the payment of money to one’s family (as has occurred in Afghanistan and elsewhere). Neither altruism nor anomie figures much in such individual calculations.

## Suicide bombing as a [strategic weapon](http://www.britannica.com/technology/strategic-weapons-system)

Militant groups employ suicide bombing not only for the practical reasons described above but also for broader strategic goals. The Canadian political scientist Mia Bloom noted that suicide bombings are frequently part of a competition between groups for legitimacy, as when the Islamic group [Ḥamās](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamas) used the willingness of some of its members to kill themselves in attacks against Israel to claim moral superiority over the ruling political party, [Fatah](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatah), within the Palestinian Authority. Pape, on the other hand, pointed out that suicide bombing can be an effective method to pressure democracies to quit foreign interventions, as happened in the withdrawal of Western forces from Lebanon after 1983 and in India’s decision not to reintroduce military forces into Sri Lanka after Gandhi’s assassination in 1991. Whatever their long-range goals, it is clear that the leaders of some groups, as part of their campaigns to exploit political, social, and economic conditions, utilize suicide bombing in a rational and calculated manner. Yet the success of the tactic does not always translate into success within a strategy of political violence, for suicide bombing is a double-edged sword. If used too frequently and too indiscriminately, it can become less shocking over time and can even alienate the populations that militants need to sustain their long-term struggle. For instance, according to a Pew Global Attitudes study, the very people in Muslim countries who looked favourably upon suicide bombing in 2002, including residents of Lebanon, Indonesia, and Pakistan, clearly expressed their rejection of suicide bombing as a tactic some five years later.

## Confronting suicide bombing

As is noted above, suicide bombing is an effective tactic of political violence in part because it is difficult to stop. Despite the difficulty, states confronting suicide attacks must take measures to prevent them. Such measures can be active or offensive, ranging from aggressive law enforcement (including the profiling of select population and age groups) to violent counterterrorist missions against cells, organizations, and leaders. Other measures can be passive or defensive; these might range from highway checkpoints and screening of airline passengers to legal measures against travel or even to the building of walls and fences in order to control movement. Regardless of what measures are used, they must be balanced against the gravity of the threat, lest they erode the values of the community or society under siege and thus cause more damage than the worst suicide attack. For example, although Israel’s security fence, construction of which began in 2002, effectively reduced suicide bombings within [Israel](http://www.britannica.com/place/Israel), the system of walls and barriers in the [West Bank](http://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bank) significantly reduced international support and sympathy for Israel in its continuing struggle against Palestinian radicals. Within the United States the ability of the [National Security Agency](http://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Security-Agency) to conduct “warrantless wiretapping,” or electronic monitoring of domestic communication, led legislators and civil liberty groups to declare that such powers endanger due process and the personal freedoms guaranteed by law.