

What Motivates a Terrorist

By: Scott Atran, Letter to New York Times
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To the Editor:

"Dying to Kill Us," by Robert A. Pape (Op-Ed, Sept. 22), includes important information about terrorist attacks through 2001 but does not reflect newer trends.

Half of the 74 groups currently deemed "terrorist" by the State Department are religious. Of 137 major terrorist incidents in 2002, nearly three-fourths are likely to have involved Islamic groups. At least 188 of 223 suicide attacks since 2001 were undertaken in God's name.

In 1994, only one-fourth of 56 major incidents involved religious groups. In 1997, just 14 of 36 terrorist groups were religious.

More ominously, Islamic jihadi groups are networked in ways that permit "swarming" by many groups homing in on multiple targets, then dispersing to form new swarms.

This is especially prominent since the Iraq war ended. Multiple coordinated suicide attacks across countries and even continents are the adaptive hallmark of Al Qaeda's continued global web-making.

This petrifies democracies but devours its own. Bigger armies and stricter borders can't rend it; drying up popular support for martyrdom may.

SCOTT ATRAN
Ann Arbor, Mich., Sept. 23, 2003