

Moral (Im)Permissibility of Terrorism and Suicide Attacks

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MORAL (IM)PERMISSIBILITY
OF TERRORISM AND SUICIDE ATTACKS¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and suicide attacks from the perspective of war ethics. On the one hand, terrorism in general is hardly morally justifiable, but it could be permissible – theoretically at least – under exceptional circumstances where a specific set of criteria for justification is met. In reality, however, actual cases of terrorism, past or present, that are considered morally permissible are hard to find. On the other hand, the moral (im)permissibility of suicide attacks may be determined primarily by the *jus in bello* (justice in war) criterion of just war theory, which is one of the dominant approaches in the field of war ethics. *Jus in bello* proposes a general rule (the so-called ‘principle of distinction’) that prohibits attackers from targeting civilians and civilian objects. At the same time, however, it also proposes an exceptional rule (the ‘principle of proportionality in means’) that allows collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects if a given attack is solely aimed at combatants and military objects, and if any damage to civilians and civilian objects is unintentional and proportionate to the military gains the attack brings. I conclude by arguing that terrorism by its nature is hardly ever morally justifiable, whereas a suicide attack solely aimed at military targets could potentially be permissible under certain conditions.

Keywords: war, war ethics, military ethics, terrorism, suicide attack.

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1. Introduction

When looking back at our era from the future, historians and political scientists may characterize the twenty-first century as an age of terrorism. Among our contemporaries, it is often assumed that this age is epitomized by terrorism. We may recall that the twenty-first century began with an unprecedented, repugnant and appallingly spectacular event: the so-called 9/11, a series of suicide attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia that used civil airplanes as *de facto* bombs filled with aero fuel. This kind of multiple suicide attack was unprecedented in terms of the number of victims, the scale of destruction, and the method (*i.e.* hijacking civil-commercial airplanes), although using vehicles including aircraft as a means of terrorism is nothing new. Indeed, cars and trucks have been used as weapons of choice in terrorism for many decades and are frequently used to transport explosives as well as to become the explosive devices themselves. Gordon Graham succinctly points out that ‘the use of terror is the use of particular method, and the distinctive wrongness of terror lies in the method’ (Graham 2008, 137). However, although suicide attacks have been used as a method of terror, they have been used in other, non-terror situations. If this is the case, the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and suicide attacks might be different.

For example, consider the following case: a mastermind of a given attack manipulates a seven-year old girl into bringing a remote-controlled bomb to a crowded bazaar, and then detonates it. This kind of attack is often called a *suicide attack*, although the girl has no intention to commit suicide. It should only be called a suicide attack on the condition that we recognize and agree that this definition is broadly construed. However, this point, although important, seems to be missed in the discussion of moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and suicide attacks.

Taking this into account, the purpose of this article is to examine the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and suicide attacks from the perspective of war ethics, by primarily using the ideas inspired by the *jus in bello* framework of just war theory. The research question is: could terrorism and/or suicide attacks be morally permissible? Tentative conclusions come first: ‘yes and no’. Terrorism by its nature is hardly

ever morally justifiable, whereas a suicide attack could potentially be permissible under certain conditions. In this article, I shall develop these arguments and defend my position.

The article is divided into three sections. In section 2, I briefly examine the definition and morality of *terrorism* and *suicide attacks* and consider the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism. In section 3, I examine ethical issues surrounding suicide attacks, focusing on the moral status of targets. In section 4, I further investigate these, focusing on the moral status of attackers.

2. Definitions and Morality of Terrorism and Suicide Attacks

Terrorism is a word used to cover a variety of situations – too many to allow it to be defined in a neat way. There is no unanimously accepted definition of terrorism as such. However, in order to proceed to our discussion of the ethical issues of terrorism and suicide attacks, we need a working definition. Let us first look at the legal provisions. As an example, according to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004), terrorism is defined as:

criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act...

To quote another provision, Articles 1 and 2 of the UK's Terrorism Act (2000) define terrorism as follows:

- (1) *In this Act "terrorism" means the use or threat of action where:*
 - (a) *the action falls within subsection (2),*
 - (b) *the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and*
 - (c) *the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.*
- (2) *Action falls within this subsection if it:*
 - (a) *involves serious violence against a person,*

- (b) involves serious damage to property,
- (c) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action,
- (d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public, or
- (e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

Since there are many previous studies of terrorism, it might be a Sisyphean task for me to try to extract the features or elements, let alone the essence, of terrorism from these two provisions³. However, what I am doing in this article is not trying to construct an uncontroversial legal definition of terrorism; I am trying to obtain a reasonable working definition of terrorism in order to explore the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and certain forms of suicide attack.

So much for exploring the definition of terrorism from the legal provisions. Let us move onto a *philosophical* characterization of the moral impermissibility of terrorism so that we can obtain a more general idea of terrorism by considering and comparing the legal characterization. Michael Walzer, a political philosopher, argues for the moral impermissibility of terrorism by focusing on victims:

The victims of a terrorist attack are third parties, innocent bystanders; there is no special reason for attacking them; anyone else in a large class of (unrelated) people will do as well. The attack is directed indiscriminately against the entire class... [A terrorist attack] aims at a general vulnerability: Kill these people in order to terrify those. A relatively small number of dead victims makes for a very large number of living and frightened hostages (Walzer 2004, 51).

Although we might need further scrutiny of the detail of Walzer's argument, we can establish that the main characteristic of terrorism is to use intentionally innocent people at random merely as a means in order to achieve the goals the attackers envisage.

³ It is worth noting that, since international organisations and state governments are usually the bodies to define terrorism in domestic law, so-called state terrorism – terrorism conducted by the government against the population residing in its governing sphere and potentially beyond – is not mentioned.

What we can extract from the characteristics of terrorism shared between the legal definitions and Walzer's is a common concern about targeting civilians. Given that, I propose a working definition of terrorism as *an act or a set/series of activities, in time of war or peace, characterized by the following four features:*

- *motivated by political, religious, racial, ethnic, or other ideological causes;*⁴
- *aimed at coercing or exerting influence upon individuals, target groups, populations, and/or institutions to act or refrain from acting, in order to achieve or advance those causes;*
- *using or threatening to use violence against harmless people (i.e. civilians not directly participating in hostilities as well as other noncombatants) or harmless property;*
- *with the intent to cause harm to those immediate targets and intimidate other individuals, target groups, and/or a wider audience, by so doing.*

As with the argument provided by Walzer, one of the defining features of terrorism – targeting civilians – is that it is a *mala in se* prohibited legally and ethically in time of war by both the laws and customs of armed conflict and just war theory. In legal terms, direct and indiscriminate attacks against civilians are prohibited by the Geneva Conventions. Likewise, in terms of war ethics, they are prohibited in *jus in bello* principles of just war theory – namely, the principles of discrimination and proportionality in means. Although these terms are technically only applicable to an act or a series of activities in times of armed conflict, all intuition, common sense, and critical reasoning tell us that protection of civilians also extends to times of peace. In this vein, terrorism, which targets civilians by its very nature, is intrinsically morally wrong and unjustifiable⁵. Thus, if a suicide attack is employed as a method of terrorism, we may consider it morally impermissible.

A suicide attack could be provisionally defined as a *method* of attack that uses physical/kinetic force to kill or maim people, and/or destroy objects, by employing weapons (e.g. handguns, assault rifles, explosives, and knives/machetes), aircraft, vessels, vehicles, or any

⁴ In our time, anti-government revolutionary communism and anarchism, among others, may be considered to be included in *other ideological causes*.

⁵ This is also pointed out by many others. For example, see Whitman (2013, 27).

combination of these, undertaken by human agents, regardless of their own will or intention. This kind of attack could be undertaken by an individual or individuals, systemically or unsystematically, in or outside of the chain of command of armed forces/groups.

A suicide attack is not a suicidal attack *per se*. A typical *suicide attack* has the following four main characteristics:

- 1) the attackers envisage their death as the outcome of their attack and are convinced of the need for their death;
- 2) the attackers are supposed to be prepared for their deaths;⁶
- 3) the attackers do not envisage an escape or have an exit plan; and
- 4) suicide attackers rarely have opportunities to sit at the negotiating table.

On the other hand, a typical *suicidal attack* has the following four main characteristics:

- 1) the attackers' death is envisaged as highly likely but is not part of the plan (allowing for unlikely contingencies, such as the mission being completed but lives spared, or the mission being botched or aborted, so that death itself is not necessarily guaranteed);
- 2) the attackers might envisage a probability (however low) that their lives might somehow be spared during and after the end of the mission;
- 3) the attackers often envisage an escape or have an exit plan from the site once their attacks are finished, aborted, thwarted, or simply fail; and
- 4) the suicidal attackers may potentially be ready to negotiate.

In order further to clarify the difference between suicide attacks and suicidal attacks, let us consider the following case of a hostage-taking situation. If the hostage-takers are on a *suicide* mission to kill people,

⁶ There may be attackers who might botch/abort their mission for moral and psychological reasons such as fear, adhesion to their lives, or reluctance, hesitation, regret, or remorse. In other cases, their attempts are simply thwarted by others due to the lack of their will, capabilities, high security readiness of the defending side. In the meantime, innocent attackers have no opportunity for negotiation since they do not know that they are used as vehicles for the attack. Likewise, their attempts could be thwarted by others, simply due to bad luck or lack of their ability, or a high level of security at the target.

there is little room for negotiation. However, if they are on a *suicidal* mission and have other aims such as propaganda for their cause or ransom rather than just killing people, there could be room for negotiation; for example, securing their safe exit, or the release of hostages in exchange for ransom or prisoners.

However, it is also worth noting that while in hindsight suicidal attacks could eventually result in suicide attacks, at the time of planning or in the initial stages those attacks need not be designed as suicide attacks *per se*, unless their original plan fails or all escape or exit plans are exhausted. In such situations, the attackers might abandon any escape and tactically opt for converting their suicidal attack into a suicide attack, including conducting a fully-prepared-to-die shoot-out, detonating their carry-on explosives, or crashing their aircraft into a target. In this sense, suicidal-turned-suicide attacks may be considered suicide attacks. In this article, therefore, suicide attacks means not only those attacks designed as such but also those that end up as such.

3. Moral Status of Targets in Suicide Attack

According to the *jus in bello* rules of just war theory, if a suicide attack intentionally targets individual civilians, the civilian population, civilian objects, or any combination of these, or is used for an indiscriminate attack, the attack is morally impermissible. If a suicide attack is used solely to target combatants, military objects, or both, and collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects is proportionate to the military gain the attack brings, the attack could be morally permissible (depending on interpretation of 'being proportionate'). Targeting civilians or civilian objects or both is prohibited in times of both war and peace. Indiscriminate attack on civilians or civilian objects is also prohibited. The reason for these prohibitions is the moral status of civilians: civilians are innocent in the sense that they are not taking part in direct hostilities against combatants.

In armed conflict, suicide attacks against combatants and military objects are not acts of terrorism (although some might emotively label them as such). Targeting combatants and military objects is legitimate,

morally permissible conduct in armed conflict on the condition that such an attack satisfies the principle of proportionality in means (*i.e.* collateral damage is not present or is reasonably small compared to the military gains the attack brings). Suicide or not, attacks against combatants are generally morally permissible in armed conflict. Walzer argues that combatants lose their right not to be killed or maimed in exchange for obtaining the privilege of being allowed to kill and maim enemy combatants (Walzer 1977, 137).

An intriguing question concerns the moral status of off-duty soldiers and conscripts. What about half-naked soldiers enjoying a holiday on the beach? What about conscripts who somehow failed to register as conscientious objectors and were deployed in a combat unit at the front line, despite the fact that they deliberately avoid shooting enemy combatants? Their moral status might be different from that of battle-hardened, professional special-forces soldiers in operations in the sense that off-duty soldiers and conscripts are not directly engaged in a kill-or-be-killed activity. Although this line of thought focuses on the side of *doing*, it overlooks the other side, which is *being*. Here, this refers to the fact that off-duty soldiers, conscripts, and special-ops soldiers are all in the chain of command of a given military organization. Killing combatants is evil, and so is killing civilians. However, all other things being equal, killing combatants is less evil than killing civilians when we consider moral status of targets. The number of the deaths does not necessarily matter.

4. Moral Status of (Broadly-Construed) Suicide Attackers⁷

So far, I have argued that terrorism is hardly ever morally permissible by its very nature, although suicide attacks need further consideration. To consider the (im)morality of suicide attacks further, let

⁷ The reason I put the word 'broadly-construed' in the headline of this section is the characteristics of Types 1 and 2 agents do not fit the two of the four main characteristics by which I described a typical suicide attack. However, as I explain in the main text, there is good reasons technically to call Type 1 and 2 agents *broadly-construed suicide attackers* and their attacks *broadly-construed suicide attacks*.

us examine the moral status of the agents who are involved in or carry out the attacks. There are four types:

- Type 1 agents are those who are considered not to be moral agents (*i.e.* who possess no/little ability/capabilities to exercise reason autonomously, such as young children);
- Type 2 agents are those who, without their consent or knowledge, become attackers;
- Type 3 agents are those who are forced to become attackers by those who use them for the attacks; and
- Type 4 agents are those who both understand what they are doing and do it voluntarily.

We can consider the differences of moral status among the four types of agent in terms of their moral responsibility.

Strictly speaking, Type 1 agents could not be called *suicide* attackers. As described in the previous section, in a typical suicide attack the attackers envisage their death as the outcome of their attack and are both convinced of the need and prepared for their deaths. Those attacks by Type 1 (and Type 2) agents do not fit the characteristics of typical suicide attacks because they do not envisage their death as the outcome of their attack; they are not convinced or even aware of the need for their death, or prepared for it. Perhaps those attacks may rather be called *exploitive, forced/framed-death attacks* more precisely, in the sense that the framework of those attacks is such that the masterminds of the attacks simply exploit innocent civilians merely for the means in order to achieve their end, which is killing and maiming of innocent persons and causing fear in the wider population.

However, for the sake of clarifying the moral status of other types of suicide attackers and considering the moral (im)permissibility of those attacks, let us tentatively treat Type 1 agents *broadly-construed suicide attackers* and their attacks suicide ones. Regardless of whether attacks target people or objects of a military nature, a civilian nature, or a mixture of both, Type 1 agents seem to be morally innocent because they possess no or little autonomy in the situation. Type 1 agents cannot understand what they are doing. Therefore, they are not morally responsible for their suicide attacks: they are exploited by the

masterminds of the attacks as a mere means (*e.g.* a human shield and living transport) to achieve the goals others envisage.

For example, a baby is strapped to the front of a van full of explosives, which runs towards a shopping centre packed with people⁸. In this scheme, the baby is a Type 1 agent: a victim – innocent, harmless, and not responsible for the attack. Whether the truck crashes into the market or is destroyed, the baby will certainly be harmed. Should the truck be destroyed before it crashes into the market and the explosive detonated, it might be possible to avoid a casualties. Being morally innocent and harmless, the baby should not be targeted directly in the counter-attack against the imminent and direct threat (the van), although physically closely connected to it. However, it is legitimate to destroy the truck as a counter-measure against the threat, even though such measures could endanger the baby; otherwise the lives of many other shoppers would be put at high risk. In this scheme, in addition to the baby, the shoppers could be considered potential victims. Furthermore, the people who destroyed the truck could also be considered victims if the counter-measure, despite thwarting the attack, causes harm to the baby. They might, for example, suffer remorse for killing the baby.

Imagine another situation. A seven-year-old girl approaches the market. She is carrying a remote-controlled bomb hidden in her bag. Although she does not know or understand what it is, the bomb can be activated by the mobile phone of the operator, who is somewhere nearby but unseen. Soldiers shout at her to stop and try warning shots, but she continues to walk towards the crowd. A mass-casualty situation will inevitably occur if she mingles in the crowd and the bomb is detonated. If the soldiers shoot her, she will fall down and stop. Should the bomb be detonated at the spot where she falls, the likelihood of causing harm to the crowds is zero. The attack would be thwarted and the potential mass-casualty situation prevented. The soldiers shoot her well away from the crowd and the bomb she carries somehow fails to detonate: no one else dies or is injured except the girl, who was injured by gunshots.

⁸ This is a kind of “innocent shield of threat” proposed by Robert Nozick. In Nozick’s words, they are “those innocent persons who are so situated that they will be damaged by the only means available for stopping the aggressor” (Nozick 1974, 35).

In this situation, the agent, morally innocent and not responsible for being unknowingly used as a courier of the explosives, is potentially harmful to the crowd and probably to the soldiers. Just like the baby in the previous example, she is a victim: if she either detonates the bomb in the crowd or is killed or maimed by gunshots, she would certainly be harmed. The soldiers who shoot her are responsible for their conduct, which is aimed at removing/preventing the imminent, direct threat and at the same time causing harm to the girl (if not aimed but intended to incapacitate). In this sense, the soldiers who shoot her could also be considered victims because they are trapped by the masterminds of the attack, who limit the soldiers' options and thereby force them to do harm they would not otherwise do. The soldiers may have no other feasible option but to shoot the innocent girl or allow many in the crowd to be killed or injured. The morally blameworthy people are the masterminds of the attack, because they force the girl to be either killed or maimed with the crowd in the bombing or harmed by the soldiers.

In the case of Type 2 agents, again for the same reason as Type 1 agents, they might not be called suicide attackers, strictly speaking. However, again for the same technical reason as Type 1 agents to be regarded as broadly-construed suicide attackers, Type 2 agents may correctly treated as suicide attackers and their attacks suicide attacks.

The moral status of Type 2 agents seems complicated. They are autonomous: they are capable of deciding, knowing, and understanding what they do, but their moral status depends on and is determined by the causes they accept and the acts they decide to commit. For example, a courier is asked to deliver a bag supposed to contain a couple of bottles of water to patients in need at the hospital, but in fact the bag contains explosives. The courier is told that the bag contains water and believes this. He has no idea that it contains explosives and no means to check the contents. The bag, with the seal of the local health authority, seems in no way suspicious. The person he serves seems to be just an ordinary member of the public, with nothing to arouse suspicion, but is in fact the mastermind behind the attack on the hospital. When the courier arrives at the hospital reception lobby, the mastermind detonates the explosive. The attack is so *successful* (but not morally permissible, of course) that scores of people are killed and injured and the half the building destroyed.

Is the courier morally innocent of terrorism? Yes, because he does not know that he is delivering explosives to be detonated by the mastermind for the purpose of killing and maiming people and destroying objects. Is he harmful to the patients, staff, and visitors at the hospital? Yes, he is harmful. Is he morally responsible for the act of delivering the bag to the hospital? Yes, because he knows it is a bag and he accepts the client's request. However, he is not morally responsible for the attack on the hospital because he does not know the bag contains explosives. Is the courier morally blameable for the death, injuries, and damage? Perhaps not – again, because he does not know the bag's true contents. And perhaps, we might consider the courier to be another victim, unknowingly exploited without consent as a mere means to achieve the goal of targeting the hospital.

In this case, although the most blameworthy person is again the mastermind of the attack who exploits the agent, the question is, do we consider the unknowing agent to be morally blameworthy? I would be inclined to consider 'no', because he is not responsible for the specific operation. Nevertheless, he could be a threat to members of the public as long as he is armed with live weapons. Could he be considered a legitimate target, especially if he is a civilian? Given the nature of Type 2 agents who pose a direct threat, potential or actual, to those targeted and those who defend, they may be considered legitimate targets of attacks by the defending side in order to prevent or reduce the damage they will probably otherwise cause.

Type 3 agents are those who are forced to serve against their will, often under duress, by masterminds who use them for attacks. To examine the moral status of Type 3 agents, it seems useful to consider it by analogy to that of conscripts. Like Type 3 agents, typical conscripts often serve in the armed forces against their will, regardless of their consent, dissent, or silence, and often under duress. However, they are considered legitimate targets of attack on the battlefield as long as they take part in direct hostilities as combatants. This is because, however morally innocent they may be, combatants are potentially harmful to the enemy. Their combatant status, as well as ability to kill or maim their enemies, means that they lose their right not to be targeted in combat. In the same vein, Type 3 agents are also legitimate targets because they are potentially harmful; they have the potential to kill, wound, or destroy their targets.

For example, a peasant is forced to deliver remote-controlled explosives hidden in the cart he uses for transporting agricultural products. He is under duress: the masterminds of the attack – say, members of a militant group – have taken his daughter hostage and threatened to kill her if he does not follow their instructions. The peasant is a civilian, not affiliated with any military organizations or sympathetic to the cause the militants espouse. He happened to be there at the wrong time and place and was coerced to play a role in the scheme the militants envision. Nevertheless, the peasant is fully aware of what he is going to do and his act is intentional: he is now a serious threat to the targets. For the targets – say, members of armed forces on patrol – the peasant is a serious threat to their mission, their lives, and potentially the local population. The moral status of the peasant is similar to that of conscripts. If we subscribe to the argument that attacking conscripts is morally permissible, then we should ascribe as well to the argument that attacking the peasant is morally permissible because he is an actual, not a potential, threat when the soldiers recognize that he is carrying the explosives in his cart. Moral permissibility is judged by a given agent's 'being' (*i.e.* whether someone is in the chain of command or a civilian) and 'doing' (*i.e.* whether someone is armed with intent to harm others or unknowingly exploited by others). In this case, the peasant is deliberately carrying the bomb which targets soldiers. Here the peasant is taking part in direct hostilities and *de facto* in a chain of command. This 'doing' makes him a legitimate target.

Do we consider the peasant is morally blameworthy? I would be inclined to consider 'yes', if he targeted civilians, not a group of soldiers, despite the fact that he acted under coercion. I would also be inclined to consider 'yes', if he attacked a group of soldiers by deception, pretending an innocent, unarmed civilian.

Type 4 agents are those who are self-convinced, who understand the deeds they commit and why they commit them (*e.g.* the causes they attempt to promote, the consequences they may face, and the price they will pay), and voluntarily take part in the enterprise. Compare two cases: voluntary suicide attacks against military objects such as military

aircraft and ships, and those against civilian objects such as airports, train stations, and hospitals.⁹

Here we can see the difference in moral significance between the suicide attacks against US warships by Japanese aircraft in the Asia-Pacific theatre of the Second World War, for example, and the suicide attacks at airports, hospitals, railway stations, restaurants, theatres, markets, and shopping malls in our time. The former case falls within legitimate conduct of war by solely targeting combatants and military objects, whereas the latter is an indiscriminate attack, often intentionally targeting civilians and civilian objects for the purpose of advocating and promoting their cause by causing fear or changing government policy, which is not merely legally prohibited but also morally impermissible; that may amount to an act of terrorism.

⁹ The former case is inspired by the suicide attacks by the former Imperial Japanese Army and Navy aircraft in the pre-organised campaign period; the latter, by suicide attacks conducted in western European cities, among others, in the twenty-first century. At the early and intermediate stages of the Second World War in the Pacific theatre, suicide attacks by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy were often voluntary, unorganized, sporadic, and improvised by individual soldiers rather than planned in advance by higher authority. One such case is a suicide attack by a pilot whose aircraft was hit and damaged by enemy fire and then crashed his aircraft into an enemy ship. At that time, there was no explicit order to crash aircraft into enemy ships, whether or not the aircraft were damaged. This type of suicide attack is a legitimate, morally permissible one, although it could have been an unforeseeable surprise attack for the victims. It might have been seen as odd but legitimate conduct in armed conflict because these attacks were autonomously decided in a limited situation, not forced or coerced but voluntarily undertaken by the pilots. Further, because the attacks targeted military aircraft and ships in air-to-air or air-to-sea combat, no harmless civilians were present. However, once suicide attacks against the Allied Forces were employed as an organized enterprise – first in 1944 and later as the focus of entire military campaigns – they became almost an end in themselves rather than a means to disable enemy forces. The suicide attacks in the post-organized period cannot be considered in the same way as those in the pre-organized. One of the most explicit reasons for the moral difference is that once they formed part of an organized campaign, even though the agents were allegedly selected on a volunteer basis, reasonable doubt remains about how free the pilots were to refuse, since social pressure could be applied in a hierarchical organization, leading to coercion to participate.

I am not defending suicide attacks. What I have tried to do so far is show that we can see a moral difference, although it is a matter of degree, between suicide attacks against military objects and other intentional and indiscriminate attacks aimed at killing and maiming civilians. Suicide attacks employed as a method of terrorism is always, almost always impermissible. However, suicide attacks against combatants and military objects, if they are not the result of coercion, may be permissible.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have considered the moral (im)permissibility of terrorism and suicide attacks from the perspective of war ethics. I have argued that terrorism is almost always morally impermissible, whereas suicide attacks are not. I have shown that some kinds of suicide attacks, conducted by combatants and targeting military objects, are morally permissible. However, other kinds of suicide attack are morally impermissible; for example, a suicide attack employed as a method of terrorism – impermissible simply because it is an act of terrorism. To conclude, terrorism could hardly be morally permissible, whereas the moral (im)permissibility of suicide attacks should be determined by the motives, intentions, and moral status of attackers, the nature of attacks and targets, and the foreseeable consequences (*i.e.* proportionality), actual and potential, the attacks would bring.

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