0. Summary of Proposed Research

Since World War II, intrastate warfare has largely replaced interstate warfare as the primary form of collective violence globally, reversing the trend of the preceding three centuries. Civilian casualties have dramatically increased because of the many civil wars, guerrilla wars, terrorist attacks, and instances of attempted ethnic cleansing and genocide perpetrated by militias, mercenaries, paramilitaries, holy warriors, and the like.

Suicide terrorism (or “martyrdom” as it is called by some of its practitioners) is the most recent addition to the insurgent arsenal and its incidence has increased over the last two decades. To North Americans, who experienced a massive incident of suicide terrorism in 2001 and understand its destructive potential, it is an especially frightening form of collective violence. Not surprisingly, therefore, suicide terrorism has attracted much scholarly attention. Social scientists have sought to discover its causes and offer policy prescriptions aimed at minimizing its incidence.

Despite the scholarly attention it has attracted, the study of suicide terrorism is deficient because it largely fails to take into account the sociological context in which this form of collective violence is embedded. Analysts tend to explain suicide terrorism as the result of the individual characteristics of suicide bombers, the cultural factors that increase the probability they will commit such violent acts, and the presumably rational strategizing that leads them to conclude that suicide terrorism often pays. Yet such explanations oversimplify the motivations of suicide terrorists, fail to capture the dynamics of suicide terror campaigns, and erroneously seek to explain political variables with cultural constants. They also recommend policies that often do not produce the desired results and in some cases produce effects that are the exact opposite of those that are intended. These policies usually focus on some combination of defence (e.g., surveillance, screening) and offence (infiltration, elimination) instead of recognizing the need to change state-insurgent relations as a prelude to minimizing suicide terrorism.

The proposed research seeks to overcome these deficiencies by focusing on the region of the world that has recently been most prone to suicide terrorist attacks – Israel and the Occupied Territories during a period that witnessed the highest incidence of suicide terrorism in modern history and considerable variation in incidence over time. It will analyze the second intifada, or uprising of Palestinians against the Israeli state, which began in September, 2000 and continues to the present (although to provide the necessary background the analysis will extend back to the mid-1990s, when suicide terrorism was first used in the region on a wide scale).

The research will demonstrate the inadequacies of extant explanations by applying the recently proposed “interactionist” theory of collective violence to the study of suicide terrorism for the first time (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001; Tilly, 2003). Uniquely, this research will: (1) provide a more complete analysis of the etiology and dynamics of suicide terror than previous accounts by recognizing that many actors – including the Israeli state, leaders of insurgent organizations, rank-and-file members of those organizations, Israeli vigilante groups, and public opinion on both sides of the conflict – have independent effects on the outbreak, escalation, and de-escalation of suicide terror campaigns; (2) contribute theoretically to the development of interactionism by identifying the social circumstances leading insurgents to choose one form of collective violence over another and the specific causal mechanisms involved in the emergence of suicide terrorism as a political tactic and a culturally acceptable practice; (3) demonstrate how macro-structural forces and meso-structural causal mechanisms are linked to individual motives in the emergence of suicide terror campaigns; and (4) make research-based policy recommendations for minimizing suicide terrorism in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.