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IW PERSPECTIVE



The Human Bombs The untold industrial history of suicide bombing

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By Filza Asim

Before God Had Anything to Do with It

On March 13, 1881, a young man named [Ignaty Grinevitsky](#) stood outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and watched his accomplice throw a small bomb at the convoy of Tsar Alexander II. The Tsar stepped out of his carriage, unhurt. Grinevitsky rushed forward and dropped a second bomb at Tsar's feet. Both men died.

The night before the attack, Grinevitsky wrote, *"I shall not live one day, one hour in the bright season of our triumphs, but I believe that with my*

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death I shall do all that it is my duty to do.”

Grinevitsky was not a Muslim jihadist but a left-wing political revolutionary, a member of a group called The People’s Will, a secular organization committed to overthrowing a Tsar they believed had failed Russia’s working poor. Historians record Grinevitsky as the world’s first modern suicide bomber.

Airborne Suicide Bombers from World War II to US-Iran Conflict

According to the National WWII Museum, Japanese forces flew nearly 3,800 [Kamikaze sorties](#) between 1944 and 1945. The practice was most prevalent from the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 to the end of the war. As the war increasingly turned against Japan, military air commanders proposed a desperate new tactic: deliberately crashing aircraft into enemy ships in suicide attacks. The name, Kamikaze, means heavenly (or divine) wind. In addition to the suicide tactic, the planes were sometimes loaded with bombs and extra gasoline tanks before being flown into their targets. The pilots were also young men who offered themselves as volunteers for the missions. The pilots performed a special ceremony of drinking sake and eating rice before flying. They were also given medals and a Katana sword during these ceremonies. The pilots also carried beloved possessions to be treasured upon death.

Kamikaze attacks sank 34 U.S ships and damaged hundreds of others during the war. They inflicted the greatest losses ever suffered by the U.S. Navy in a single battle in Okinawa, killing almost 5,000 men.

The world has not merely witnessed this transformation; it has watched it accelerate in real time. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it introduced a weapon that has since rewritten the operational grammar of modern warfare: the Shahed-136, an Iranian-designed kamikaze drone deployed in mass swarms against Ukrainian cities, power infrastructure and military positions. A single \$400 FPV kamikaze drone can destroy a \$3 million armored vehicle, a cost calculus that has fundamentally inverted the economics of conventional warfare. [By 2025, Russia was launching nearly 3,500 Shahed drone strikes per month against Ukraine, making drone consumption rival artillery shell expenditure](#)

[as a logistics challenge for the first time in recorded military history, according to researchers at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The Shahed drones demonstrated their capability to oversaturate air defenses and inflict painful damage at very low cost, available in large numbers where ballistic missiles are scarce and expensive.](#) The thesis for the irregular warfare community is this: what Japan’s military authorized as a last resort in 1944 has become, eighty years later, a first resort, mass-produced, remotely operated, and available to any state or non-state actor with an Iranian arms dealer’s contact details. Humans have been removed from the guidance system, but the logic has not changed at all.

A Low-Cost High Impact Weapon of Choice

Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago spent years cataloguing 2,200 verified suicide attacks and arrived at a finding that reorders everything: [the average suicide attack kills ten people. The average non-suicide attack kills one.](#) That tenfold difference is not about the explosive; it is about navigation: The human capacity to walk into a crowded space, identify a specific target, and detonate at the precise moment of maximum effect cannot be matched by any piloted drone or guided missile, a difference noted by the [Combating Terrorism Center at West Point](#) in its 2025 analysis of the evolving threat of drone terrorism. You can build a smarter bomb. But you cannot build anything smarter than a human being walking toward a target who already knows its mission. This is the leading explanation as to why suicide attacks have survived 140 years, crossed every ideological boundary, outlasted every counter-terrorism effort, and arrived intact at the twenty-first century.

Suicide bombing, in its most distilled form, is irregular warfare’s most cost-effective instrument. [As the Modern War Institute at West Point notes](#), non-state actors in irregular warfare use suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices in densely populated urban areas to achieve strategic goals that conventional force cannot. The economics are undeniable: [one suicide bomber kills ten people and one shooter kills one.](#) The tenfold return requires no standing army, no supply chain, no air force. It only requires an organization willing to process a human being

into a delivery mechanism. Irregular warfare is often considered a weapon of the weak, yet it can still inflict considerable costs on a strong opponent, and no irregular weapon has ever demonstrated that more consistently than the suicide attack. Today that logic has migrated from the human body to the unmanned system. [The kamikaze drone replicates the cost-effectiveness of the human bomber at industrial scale, a \\$400 FPV drone destroying a \\$3 million armored vehicle](#), available to any non-state actor with access to an illicit arms network. What began with Grinevitsky in 1881 — one body, one target, one political outcome has become the defining cost calculus of modern irregular warfare. The weapon evolved but the logic never did.

The proof of concept was established not in theory but in rubble, specifically in the rubble of a four-story building near [Beirut airport at 6:22 on the morning of October 23, 1983](#). A truck packed with an estimated 12,000 pounds of explosives drove through the front gates of the United States Marine barracks and detonated. Within moments, a second suicide bomber struck the barracks of French paratroopers two miles away. [In total 241 American service members and 58 French soldiers were killed](#). It was the largest loss of life in a single day for the US Marine's Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima during WWII.

Less than four months later, President Ronald Reagan ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Lebanon. A single tactical incident produced a strategic outcome that two years of conventional military presence had failed to achieve.

Invent of Female Suicide Bombers

On May 21, 1991, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was attending a campaign meeting in the southern town of Sriperumbudur in support of a Congress Party candidate in the forthcoming general elections. As he was greeted by a crowd of supporters, an unfamiliar woman presented Gandhi with a flower garland, and while bending down to touch his feet, she detonated the RDX explosive-laden belt tucked below her clothes.

While instances of suicide tactics are evident throughout history, the Tamil Tigers were pioneers

in institutionalizing the practice of female suicide bombings as a dominant tactic during their guerilla warfare against the Sri Lankan government forces between 1983 and 2009. Overall, it is estimated that 40 percent of the suicide attacks perpetrated by the group were conducted by female cadres, also known as "[Freedom Birds](#)." Research shows that female suicide attackers produce an average of 8.4 casualties per attack, compared to 5.3 for males.

[The Tamil tigers of Sri Lanka, a Marxist organization with no religious ideology](#), invented the suicide vest. They pioneered the use of female bombers. [Between the 1980 and 2003, they carried out more suicide attacks than Hamas and Islamic Jihadists combined](#). Women are often less suspected at checkpoints or in public spaces, especially in conservative societies where male security officers hesitate to search women physically. Female bombers generate far more international attention because it violates social expectations about women and violence. [Some studies found women were more frequently motivated by revenge for killed family members, humiliation, coercion, trauma from war and social ostracism](#).

Intoxicated Child Soldiers

Multiple credible organizations, chief among them is [UNICEF](#), documented the systematic use of child soldiers across communal conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. The pattern is consistent and does not vary much by geography or ideology: children are separated from family, subjected to psychological conditioning, exposed to narcotics, and in the most extreme cases, forced to commit violence against their own communities. The drug is not incidental. It is operational, the chemical bridge between a juvenile's innocence and violent assailant.

[UNHCR](#) reported, in Sierra Leone and Liberia's civil wars of the 1990s, children given mixtures of cane juice and gunpowder, marijuana, cocaine and amphetamines before being sent to fight. One former child combatant, identified only as Sayo, told Amnesty International investigators: "*When I go into the battlefields, I smoke enough. That's why I become unafraid of everything.*" When children refused to take drugs before being sent to kill, their commanders had a name for it. They called it technical sabotage.

Boko Haram industrialized this logic into suicide bombing across the Lake Chad Basin. UNICEF observed that the number of children used as suicide bombers rose tenfold in a single year from four in 2014 to forty-four in 2015. Three-quarters of those children were girls. *“In many cases, they might be unaware that they are carrying a bomb,”* [UNICEF’s Manuel Fontaine told CBC News in April 2016](#). By 2017, the number had continued to rise. [Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF’s Regional Director for West and Central Africa](#), stated: “In the first three months of this year, the number of children used in bomb attacks is nearly the same as the whole of last year, this is the worst possible use of children in conflict.”

The logic did not stop at Africa’s borders. [The Taliban adopted and institutionalized the same methodology](#), children sourced from madrasas, sold by families, conditioned through isolation and ideology, and in documented cases, chemically sedated before deployment. That infrastructure, and how it operates, is the subject of the next section.

Child Soldiers and Suicide Bombing School

Stuffed toys languish on a shelf near the building’s entrance. Playground equipment remains dead still beside Taliban uniforms draped over the playpen fence to dry: glaring reminders of the nursery school that existed inside the faded pink walls just 10 days earlier.

[The former school now serves as the new base of the Taliban’s elite special forces unit known as Badri or the “Badri Command.”](#) It is home not only to hardened fighters who roam the grounds clad in camouflage carrying American-made weapons, but also to those training to become suicide — or martyrdom — bombers.

[Suicide attacks in Afghanistan were rare until 2005.](#) Then the Taliban rapidly adopted them as a core war tactic. Since 2014 alone, Taliban suicide attacks caused approximately 6,000 civilian casualties.

The infrastructure behind those numbers had specific addresses. [According to Andrey Serenko, an expert at the Centre for Studies of Modern Afghanistan](#), the

Taliban ran a training facility in Kunduz Province where children aged six to eight were taught to install roadside bombs. In Badghis Province’s Ghormach District, a commander named Mullah Qayyum ran a separate camp preparing children exclusively for suicide missions. Most had been kidnapped or sold by their own parents, some for as little as a [thousand dollars](#).

What those camps produced is on record. On June 26, 2011, an [eight-year-old girl](#) was killed in Uruzgan Province after the Taliban instructed her to carry a bag of explosives to a police checkpoint, it detonated before she arrived. That same year in Kunar Province, a thirteen-year-old boy detonated a vest that killed ten people, five of them schoolchildren.

Despite their transformation from an insurgency into a government charged with caring for a country of 38 million, [suicide bombing remains a key strategy for the Taliban](#). On the fringes of Kabul, tucked away inside a nondescript kindergarten, sits the shadowy Badri Special Forces.

This Command has two parts,” one top Taliban fighter named Hafiz Badry told the [New York Post’s embedded reporter](#). “There are those who train to be special forces fighters and those who train to be special suicide bombers.” Soon after the takeover, the building, adorned with faded pink walls, a play area for children, and soiled stuffed toys, became a suicide school. According to Hafiz, most people want to become a “martyr,” but the selection process is based on pre-requisites, such as completing a “special action” beforehand.

None of this was hidden. When the Taliban retook Kabul in 2021, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced the formal establishment of “martyrdom brigades” uniformed suicide units folded directly into the new Ministry of Defence, paraded through the capital’s streets.

Then there was the boy outside Peshawar. Somewhere between seventeen and nineteen years old. He was found crouched in bushes, the explosive vest still strapped to his chest, trembling. Not with conviction. Not with ideology. The drug his handlers had injected before the mission had worn off.

[Colonel Nadeem, Commandant Dir Operation](#), described the incident to The Express Tribune. “There were six suicide bombers that attacked us in the middle of the night, five of them detonated the explosives strapped to their bodies; however, one was missing till we discovered him hiding in the bushes. He was scared of killing himself because the effect of the drug had ended.”

The most feared weapon in modern asymmetric warfare is not the vest. It is the system that makes the vest possible and the people who built that system are not in the bushes. They never are.

Suicide Bombing as a Terror Economy

For the better part of the last decade, the major theatres of mass political violence, proxy wars across sub-Saharan Africa, sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, the slow and bloody aftermath of the Arab Spring have either ended in ceasefires or seen their scale of violence reduced, with threats remaining localized. However, the decline in violent clashes does not mean the threat has completely disappeared.

When American forces departed from Afghanistan in 2021, the international community shifted its attention from security to humanitarian work. What remained was a governance problem. The Afghan Taliban Regime, operating through decentralized control exercised by warlords and armed militias/factions created an environment that reinforced its own policies and control.

They told the world; they’ll stabilize their policies but instead they reorganized. Its miscalculation is now visible in the enormous flow of weapons moving through the region. During a closed-door meeting of the [UN Security Council Sanctions Committee meeting](#), Taliban representatives reportedly admitted that at least half of the military stockpile, worth more than [\\$7.1 billion](#) seized after the American withdrawal is now unaccounted for — lost, smuggled, sold, or absorbed into illicit networks. Black markets operating through Kandahar and Kabul have steadily circulated these weapons across networks far beyond Afghanistan’s borders. Denmark’s deputy permanent representative to the UN Security Council, Sandra Jensen Landi, publicly confirmed that Tehrik-e-Tal-

iban Pakistan (TTP) continues to receive logistical and material support from the de facto authorities in Kabul.

The weapons did not stop at the border. The reorganization that followed the 2021 post US withdrawal from Afghanistan produced something more dangerous than a better-armed insurgency. Two decades of surviving the world’s most advanced surveillance and strike capabilities have taught these organizations one lesson above all others: the hardest target to hit is not a fortified compound. It is a building the world will not bomb. A school. A nursery. A hospital. A rehabilitation center. [The Badri-linked networks documented recruiting children](#) from nurseries and schools into suicide operations were not developing that logic in isolation. It is the same logic that allowed half a billion dollars’ worth of weapons to disappear into Kandahar’s black markets without a single international accountability mechanism responding. The infrastructure and the impunity are inseparable. One sustains the other. [What was inside the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital on March 16, 2026](#), may never be conclusively established. But the circumstances that made the question unanswerable had history. The country whose schools can convert into recruitment centers for suicide operations is not a country that produces ambiguous buildings by accident. Its drug rehabilitation centers sit on the grounds of former NATO bases and recruits are not far from their training school.

If schools and nurseries could be absorbed into militant infrastructure, could a drug rehabilitation facility within a military compound not follow the same logic? The logic is the same at both the tactical and organizational levels. A suicide bomber disguised as an innocent child exploits society’s reluctance to suspect the vulnerable. A suicide training facility concealed within a school, hospital, or other civilian site exploits the same reluctance to target protected spaces. In each case, the effectiveness of the attack, one bomber, numerous casualties, is compounded by a strategic advantage: the illusion of an illegitimate target, the cloak that conceals the threat. What appears to be a non-threat is a deliberate operational method. The ambiguity is the point. The ambiguity has always been the point.