

# Al-Qaeda and Suicide Terrorism: Vision and Reality

Yoram Schweitzer

## Introduction

Suicide bombings are not a new phenomenon in the annals of contemporary terrorism. Hizbollah in Lebanon was the first to make modern use of this weapon; it was later adopted by other organizations around the world. What characterizes modern suicide terrorism and sets it apart from suicide attacks carried out from the first century until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> is that it is perpetrated by means of explosives carried on the suicide attacker's body or on some type of mobile platform driven by the suicide attacker into his target, which he detonates along with himself.

About fifteen years after suicide terrorism became part of the global terrorism repertoire, al-Qaeda adopted the weapon and made it into its trademark. The organization has refined the technique and given it dramatic significance, such that at times it has proven far more lethal than previous forms of terrorism. The way al-Qaeda operates terrorism, with an emphasis on cultivating and disseminating suicide terrorism, derives from its ideological code and its corresponding administrative operational approach. They are the leitmotif of al-Qaeda's ideological and propaganda rhetoric that propounds its Salafist-jihadist worldview; the rhetoric is then put into practice through terrorism of a particularly dramatic and lethal kind by suicide bombers. Because al-Qaeda sees itself at the forefront of global jihad and a paragon for its affiliates, it seeks to instill among Muslims around the world its militant worldview in general and the proper way to conduct the armed struggle via suicide

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terrorism in particular. At the same time, al-Qaeda does not demand that the entire global jihad community surrender to its authority and heed its commands. On the contrary: al-Qaeda encourages independent action in order to realize together the destiny of the global jihad it preaches.

### Al-Qaeda's Concept of *Istishhad*

Bin Laden's interpretation of Islam's commandments makes the obligation to jihad, including *istishhad* (self-sacrifice), into a fundamental credo. It joins the five traditional precepts incumbent on every Muslim, thereby turning Islamic martyrdom into a supreme al-Qaeda value. In addition to being a particularly effective tactical tool, this weapon has become an organization ideal and trademark, expressing the willingness of Muslim fighters to make the supreme self-sacrifice that – in their minds – God has commanded them to do. The unqualified willingness to sacrifice life represents the moral advantage the Muslim fighter has over his enemies and equals or even exceeds its tactical value. Al-Qaeda, having constructed its organizational ethos on voluntary self-sacrifice and translating this ethos into practice through suicide attacks, has worked hard to instill the principle of *istishhad* among new recruits. As such, it has turned the willingness to sacrifice oneself into the most important trait the organization looks for in its new recruits,<sup>1</sup> and the sacrifice of life on the road to God is described in terms of supreme joy: "We ask of you the joy of beholding your face and we long to meet you under happy circumstances...Take us to you."<sup>2</sup> Bin Laden himself, offering words of encouragement to organization members to adhere to this path – because of its moral importance and its effectiveness in instilling fear in the enemy – has called on those flocking to him "to be diligent in performing suicide missions: these missions, thank God, have become a great source of enemy terror and fear...These are the most important actions."<sup>3</sup> Referring to himself, he said: "I do not fear death. On the contrary, I desire the death of a martyr. My martyrdom would lead to the birth of thousands of Osamas."<sup>4</sup>

The underlying message in the glorification of self-sacrifice is embodied in what has become the motto of would-be *ishtishhadists*: "We love death more than our enemies love life." This message seeks to broadcast the fearlessness of the jihadists in the face of the prospect of losing physical life on this earth, which is in any case temporary, in favor

of the pure everlasting afterlife. The motto implies the depth of belief of the pure Muslim fighters compared to the spiritual weakness, flaccidity, hedonism, and immorality of their enemies. The organization's success in instilling the *ishtishhad* ethos in many of its members and convincing them to volunteer for action was reflected in the testimony of a senior commander who was responsible for dispatching many suicides bombers: "We have never lacked for potential suicides. We have a division called the Suicide Department." When asked if it was still active, he answered yes, and noted: "It will always be active as long as we are in a jihad against the heretics and the Zionists."<sup>5</sup>

According to al-Qaeda, sacrifice on God's behalf will ensure the ultimate victory of Islam against heresy, the victory of spirit over matter, the soul over the body, life beyond this world over everyday reality, and especially good over evil. In its philosophy, sacrifice represents emotional acceptance and moral justification of the act on the part of the suicide terrorists themselves and the organization.

### From Vision to Practice

In order to realize its vision in practice and conduct an active war of jihad through a campaign of suicide attacks, al-Qaeda established a special apparatus called the Unit for Attacks Abroad, responsible for carrying out attacks outside of Afghanistan. This unit is also in charge of cultivating contacts and assisting terrorists who adopted al-Qaeda's operational doctrine but were acting outside the organization, as well as for recruiting new members and training them for operational and logistical missions abroad. The unit is run from Afghanistan and Pakistan and is in touch with its representatives in various locations around the world. The unit, an integral part of the organization's hierarchy, reports directly to the commander of the military unit. It has always been headed by senior members with operational experience and organizational seniority, including Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, the planner and executor of the 9/11 attacks (in custody since March 2003), Mahmad Rabia (killed in 2005), Abu Ubaidah al-Masri (died in 2008, probably of hepatitis), and Abu Sallah al-Somali (killed in 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Though al-Qaeda assisted terrorists already in the early 1990s, it started launching its own independent attacks only in August 1998 – notwithstanding the reputation that attributed to it dozens of terrorist

attacks worldwide. In practice, from 1998 until 2010, the organization carried out a total of about ten attacks, most of which have been suicide attacks. Al-Qaeda has attempted to carry several other attacks in various countries around the world but these were foiled. In addition, the organization was involved in attacks in battle zones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Al-Qaeda assisted indirectly in some of these attacks, while others were perpetrated by al-Qaeda's Taliban associates or al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Several factors account for the relatively low number of al-Qaeda attacks abroad. The first is a policy decision by organization commanders, who prefer to focus on a relatively small number of "boutique attacks," i.e., attacks of particularly high quality, planned with great thoroughness over a significant period of time, in order to ensure their success and to serve as models for emulation by fellow jihadists.

Second, despite al-Qaeda's image thanks to the showcase attacks it carried out and especially because of the sophisticated propaganda machine it developed, in reality the organization is relatively small in terms of its manpower; at its peak, it numbered only a few hundred active members. In addition, the financial resources at its disposal are limited and cannot compare to the means and capabilities available to a state, however small. This means a significant limitation on al-Qaeda's ability to carry out widespread terrorist activity against its enemies.

Third, the organization's involvement in two major war arenas in the last decade, Afghanistan (from late 2001 until 2003) and Iraq (2003-2010), and recently in an intensive, frontal confrontation with reinforced United States and NATO troops in the Af-Pak arena, has forced al-Qaeda's commanders to focus their attention primarily on the organization's survival and has decreased the resources available to terrorist activity outside these arenas of conflict. This is one of the reasons the organization both assists and is increasingly dependent on its close confederates.

Fourth, the senior operational commanders and activists in the Unit for Attacks Abroad, currently responsible for terrorism beyond the Af-Pak arena, are central and repeated targets of attempts to arrest or eliminate them on the part of the armies and security services of many countries around the world. These efforts have often succeeded and several of the organization's commanders and senior operatives are no longer in active positions.

Nonetheless, since 1998 al-Qaeda has carried out a string of deadly showcase attacks, including three suicide attacks before 9/11 and some seven afterwards. However, the several unsuccessful attempts highlight the difficulty the organization finds itself in, and in particular the specifically-designated unit.

The attacks prior to 9/11 include the suicide attacks on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (August 1998), in which 224 people were killed and some 5,000 injured; the suicide attack on the *USS Cole* (October 2000), which killed 17 sailors and injured about 40; and the “proxy” attack – a suicide attack carried out on September 9, 2001 by two people impersonating journalists who blew themselves up, killing Massoud Shah, the leader of the Northern Front, the main opposition to the Afghani Taliban, in order to promote the interests of their Taliban hosts. The assassination of Massoud Shah took place two days before the showcase attack in the United States, and seems to have been designed to prevent an effective response against the Taliban and al-Qaeda by the Northern Front under his command. The 9/11 attacks, carried out as multiple suicide attacks, were innovative in many ways: the strategic aspects of the targets; the number of people killed; the massive economic damage and ramifications, which far exceeded the immediate locales of the actual attacks; and the tactical-operative aspect of combining a number of different lethal patterns, from hijacking planes and sequestering hostages to using fully fueled airplanes as explosives.

After 9/11, the jewel in al-Qaeda’s crown, the organization carried out a number of other suicide attacks. Two were carried out by solo suicides bombers: the first was Nizar Nawar, who detonated explosives near the synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia (2002);<sup>7</sup> the second was Richard Colvin Reid – the “shoe bomber” – whose handlers instructed him to blow himself up while aboard an American Airlines plane before its scheduled landing in the United States by means of explosives hidden in his shoes (December 2001). The other attacks abroad were carried out by terrorist cells recruited, trained, directed, and supervised by senior operators of the Unit for Attacks Abroad. The first was the attack in Kenya in November 2002, which aimed directly at Israeli targets in Mombasa by means of a terrorist network operated by Faizul Harous, a senior operational agent in the Unit for Attacks Abroad, who had previous experience in the area and who commanded the action locally. The attacks in Mombasa were

carried out simultaneously and included the attempted downing of an Arkia passenger plane by missile fire and the explosion of a car bomb driven by two suicide operatives into a hotel frequented by Israeli tourists. In November 2003, a local terrorist cell controlled by the al-Qaeda command carried out two double suicide attacks in Turkey within five days of one another. In Istanbul, two synagogues – Neve Shalom and Beit Israel – were attacked by a truck bomb on November 15. The two synagogues were destroyed; 27 people, including six Jews and the rest Turkish Muslims, were killed and some 300 people were injured. On November 20, two attacks were carried out simultaneously against British targets: two truck bombs exploded near a branch of HSBC and the British Consulate in Istanbul, killing 30, including the British consul general, and injuring 400. Again, most of the victims were Turkish Muslims.<sup>8</sup> In July 2005, a terrorist cell controlled by the Unit for Attacks Abroad and supervised by a senior operator carried out a suicide attack on London's public transportation, targeting three trains and one bus. Fifty-two people were killed in these attacks and dozens were injured. The attack was carried out by three British subjects of Pakistani extraction and another terrorist from Jamaica, who banded together in their hometown of Leeds; after they were trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan, they were sent on their suicide mission.

Additional suicide attacks in Great Britain under al-Qaeda direction were attempted and foiled in 2004-2009. The most prominent among them was the attempt by a local terrorist cell to carry out suicide attacks on at least seven airborne aircraft, but this was foiled in August 2006 in late planning stages.<sup>9</sup> In addition, in recent years al-Qaeda has tried – unsuccessfully – to carry out suicide attacks in the United States several times using recruits who are American citizens of Muslim heritage, and it seems that transportation as a target, such as the operational idea behind the suicide terrorists in London, is preferred, both in the air and in the subway systems.<sup>10</sup>

### **Al-Qaeda Associates Adopt and Emulate the Ishtishhad Model**

The use of suicide attacks has spread and multiplied among the terrorist organizations that have adopted al-Qaeda's Salafist-jihadist philosophy. This was especially apparent in regard to terrorist organizations and networks that cooperated very closely with al-Qaeda, such as Jama'a

Islamiyaa, active in Southeast Asia, which carried out a string of suicide attacks in Indonesia, including the October 12, 2002 attack in Bali, killing 202, and the attack on the Marriott Hotel on August 5, 2003, killing 12 and injuring 150.<sup>11</sup> In addition, terrorist organizations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Maghreb that swore allegiance to Bin Laden and thereafter announced their merger with al-Qaeda and received authorization from the organization's leadership also began launching suicide attacks.

In 2003, a string of suicide attacks began in Saudi Arabia, first against the residences of foreigners working in the kingdom and later directed against the kingdom's security establishment and governmental apparatus. The most recent attack to have been carried out by the united al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemen after the January 2009 official announcement of the merger with al-Qaeda, also called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>12</sup> was directed against the deputy minister of the interior and carried out by a Saudi suicide bomber who arrived for a meeting and then blew himself up using an explosive device hidden in his underwear; the attack failed to kill the intended victim. The organization was likewise responsible for dispatching Abd al-Mutaleb with an explosive device hidden in his underwear who tried blowing himself up while on board an American Airlines plane over Detroit (December 2009). This was the first time the organization operated outside of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and the attack may have been coordinated with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in the Muslim Maghreb, whose unification with al-Qaeda was announced in September 2006,<sup>13</sup> carried out a number of suicide attacks after the merger, some of which were directed at senior government personnel in Algeria and UN facilities operating there; attempts were made to carry out suicide attacks in Morocco as well. Another organization that has sworn allegiance to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda and has been brought into its fold is the Somali al-Shabab. Having received al-Qaeda's blessing, it improved the level and quality of its targets and started carrying out suicide missions, particularly against senior government officials and foreign forces operating in Somalia. This organization took its first steps outside of its home base when it carried out two parallel suicide attacks in Kampala, capital of Uganda, at the end of the final soccer match of the World Cup in South Africa (July 2010).

The two organizations – al-Qaeda in Hajaz and the Somali al-Shabab – which until now did not act against or even threaten Israeli targets



have recently changed their policy, at least at the rhetorical level. Thus the deputy commander of al-Qaeda in Hajaz called for attacking Israel's interests and supporters all over the world, and in particular to block Israel's access to the Red Sea.<sup>14</sup> The leader of al-Shabab announced in November 2009 that his organization has established a special unit – al-Quds Brigades – that will focus on attacking Israeli interests in Africa and send operators to Israel and the Gaza Strip in order to help “oust Israelis from the holy places.”<sup>15</sup>

As a result of their recent conduct, especially with regard to suicide attacks, one should take these organizations' threats seriously. The primary influence of al-Qaeda on the spread of suicide attacks has been felt in the main battlegrounds of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. To date, there have been more than 800 suicide attacks in Iraq (figure 1), most of them carried out by global jihadists and al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq. While the precise number of attacks carried out by these elements is unknown, it appears that at least some of them were carried out by Shiite organizations as part of the ethnic struggle against the Sunni enemy. In addition, the influence of al-Qaeda on the spread of suicide terrorism has been evident in Taliban activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan (figures 2 and 3). In recent years, hundreds of suicide attacks have been carried out in those two countries, where self-sacrifice has become a routine and effective lethal tactic of the organization.

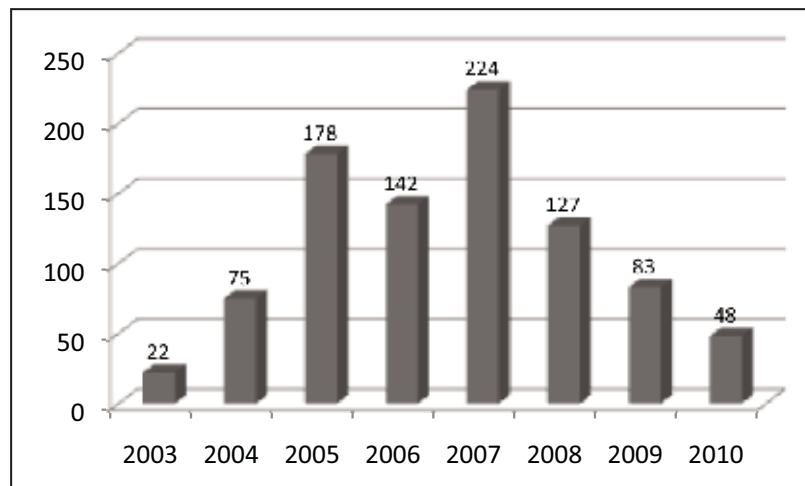
### Conclusion

Since 1998, when al-Qaeda invested in the suicide bombing enterprise, glorifying the attackers as paragons of self-sacrifice on the path to God and making this mode of attack a unifying organizational symbol and value, it turned the use of this method of action into its own leading weapon and the leading weapon of its global jihad affiliates. Al-Qaeda was the organization that turned suicide terrorism from a local problem into an international, border-crossing epidemic. Therefore, from being passive spectators of the “theater of suicide terrorism”<sup>16</sup> occurring in distant locations, many innocent citizens all over the world became unwilling participants and victims.

As an organization that carried out relatively few suicide attacks, it is clear that al-Qaeda's influence on the proliferation of this method far outweighs its nominal contribution to its actual use. One could certainly



**Figure 1. Suicide attacks in Iraq: 2003–August 2010**  
Total: 899

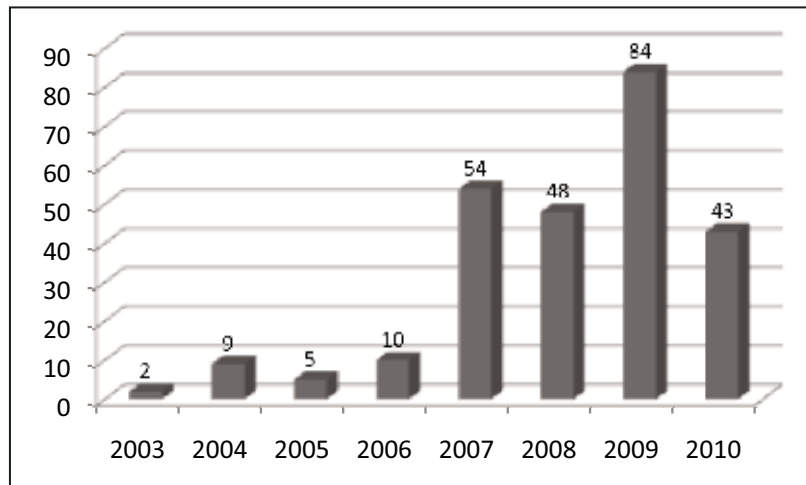


attribute this to the organization's responsibility for the dramatic terrorist attacks on American soil, but it should also be chalked up to the production capabilities of the sophisticated propaganda system it operates professionally and skillfully after its own attacks or the attacks of organizations identified with it, even if these were carried out without prior coordination.

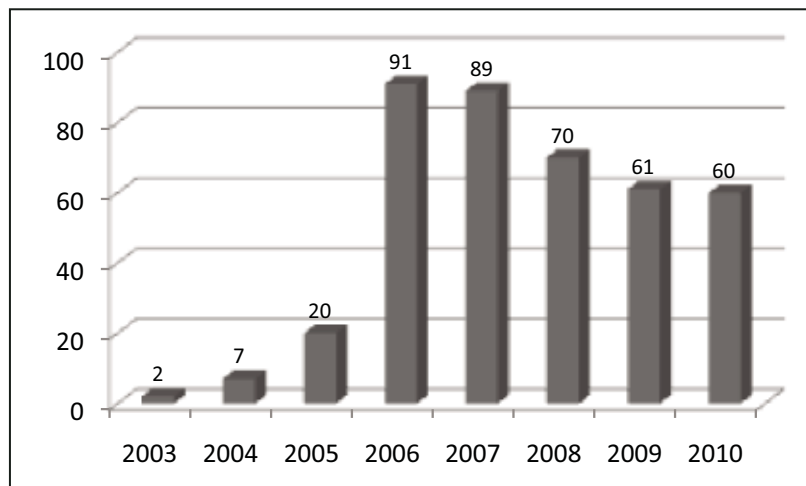
The all-consuming, lethal, non-selective mindset that goes along with *istishhad* as per the Salafist-jihadist interpretation of those working according to the al-Qaeda model seemingly indicates that suicide attacks are likely to continue to be part of the terrorist arenas, locally and internationally, as long as al-Qaeda continues to operate, disseminate its teachings, and support their fulfillment. According to al-Qaeda's well-known doctrine and method of action, it is clear that the organization aspires to ever-higher standards, both in terms of showiness of the operations and in the scope of the ensuing damages, injuries, and deaths. Until this organization and the extremist ideology disseminated by it encounter an appropriate ideological and practical response, the suicide phenomenon is liable to escalate and even spread to other countries that have yet to experience the wrath of al-Qaeda and its associates.

From the Israeli perspective, the resolve of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, especially those that have merged or maintain operational cooperation

**Figure 2.** Suicide attacks in Pakistan: 2002-2010 (August 2010)  
Total: 255



**Figure 3.** Suicide attacks in Afghanistan: 2001-2010 (August 2010)  
Total: 398



with it, to spread the use of suicide attacks to many targets abroad carries a strategic warning. As a result of the suicide attacks already perpetrated by al-Qaeda against Israeli and Jewish targets and the declared desire of the organization and its affiliates to pursue this course, it behooves us to relate to al-Qaeda's intentions with growing seriousness and to prepare for such eventualities, identifying the terrorist organizations and networks that share this intention. In this sense, one may view the showcase attack carried out in November 2009 in Mumbai by the so-called Army of the Pure, associated with al-Qaeda (and carried out not as a classical suicide attack in which the attackers explode along with their targets but rather as an attack of self-sacrifice that ended with the deaths of nine of the ten attackers), as a warning sign and a reminder of the concreteness of this danger.

### Notes

- 1 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 9/11 Commission Report, Washington, United States, 2004, p. 234.
- 2 Abd al Aziz Mukrin, *South al-Jihad*, Vol. 18, June 3, 2004.
- 3 Quoted in Christopher M. Blanchard, "Al-Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology," CRS Report for Congress RL32759 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2005), p. 10.
- 4 "Osama says Taliban Rejected US Billions for Arrest," *Ausaf*, December 28, 1998, pp. 1, 7.
- 5 Fouda Yosri and Nick Fielding, *Masterminds of Terror* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2003), p. 114.
- 6 Aviv Oreg, "Terror Analysis: Al-Qaeda's Special Operations Unit," *Ceift*, April 10, 2008, <http://www.ceift.com/?categoryId=27211&itemId=40843>.
- 7 Chris Hedges, "Tunisian Killed in Synagogue Blast Was Unlikely Convert to Militancy," June 9, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/09/world/tunisian-killed-in-synagogue-blast-was-unlikely-convert-to-militancy.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>.
- 8 "Istanbul Rocked by Double Bombing," *BBC*, November 20, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3222608.stm>.
- 9 Michael Holden and Matthew Jones, "Briton Guilty of Trans-Atlantic Airline Bomb Conspiracy," *Reuters*, December 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5B83VL20091209>.
- 10 "Najibullah Zazi," *New York Times*, February 22, 2010, [http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/z/najibullah\\_zazi/index.html?s=oldest](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/z/najibullah_zazi/index.html?s=oldest); and Claire Suddath, "Bryant Neal Vinas: An American in Al Qaeda," Jul. 24, 2009 <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1912512,00.html#ixzz0wflGPkoO>.

- 11 "Bali Death Toll Set at 202," *BBC*, February 19, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2778923.stm>; Simon Elegant, "A New Wave Of Terror?" August 10, 2003, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,501030818-474520,00.html#ixzz0wfNNxc9E>.
- 12 Abdul Hameed Bakier, "Al-Qaeda Leaders in the Arabian Peninsula Speak Out," *Terrorism Focus* 6, No. 3, January 28, 2009, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=34420](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34420).
- 13 "Profile: Al-Qaeda in North Africa," *BBC*, June 3, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6545855.stm>.
- 14 Sheila MacVicar, "Al Qaeda Bombers Learn from Drug Smugglers: New Technique of Storing Bomb Materials Inside Body Cavity Nearly Kills a Saudi Prince," *CBS Evening News*, September 28, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/09/28/eveningnews/main5347847.shtml>.
- 15 Nick Wadhams, "Suicide Bombing Marks a Grim New Turn for Somalia," *Time*, Thursday, December 3, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1945398,00.html>.
- 16 A paraphrase of the expression coined in the 1970s by Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation, describing terrorism as theater.