

# PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH ADDS NEW PERSPECTIVE ON CAUSES OF TERRORISM

Just nine months after the World Trade Center's twin towers fell in the September 11 attacks, Adam Lankford was a college graduate looking to make a difference in the world. Ten years later, his efforts are making headway in how we understand the psychology of terrorism.

Lankford, an assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences Department of Criminal Justice, is one of a number of scholars who are conducting research on the theory that some suicide bombers' actions are based less on loyalty to a cause and more on them actually being suicidal. His most recent publication in the journal *Aggression and Violent Behavior* is a comparative analysis of rampage shooters in the United States and volunteer suicide bombers in the Middle East.

ists, there are important distinctions. There are some who are suicidal and some that are not, just as in any population. Lankford's research focuses on getting those differences classified, because as he puts it, "It is too simplistic to say that they are all the same and they would all do this, if they were given the order."

But the *Aggression and Violent Behavior* article is only the beginning.

His forthcoming article in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* includes the cases of more than 75 suicide terrorists and a look at the circumstances surrounding their decision to commit suicide. He hopes pursuing this path will help those in the field of criminal justice to better understand how to prevent the attacks of terrorists.



Barbara Reddick

"Terrorists behave more like criminals than we have traditionally assumed." – Dr. Adam Lankford

In his analysis, Lankford cites Israeli scholars who were allowed to interview would-be Palestinian suicide bombers and found that 40 percent of the bombers showed suicidal tendencies and 13 percent had made previous suicide attempts.

Given the name "suicide bombers," it is a reasonable assumption for most that these individuals are suicidal. But on a more complex scale, scholars for the last decade have said suicide bombers are more like ordinary soldiers – they are just brainwashed, indoctrinated or following orders. So they are not suicidal, they are just obedient.

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Lankford has also found that suicide terrorists are often consumed by the very same issues that normal suicidal people go through – personal problems, psychological angst, low self esteem, depression or substance abuse. Lankford is connecting the dots between two previously unconnected areas.

He believes one of the difficulties for previous scholars was that they had an area of expertise, but weren't comfortable going beyond it. "You have terrorism scholars who don't understand suicide and suicide experts who don't understand terrorism," he said. "So what I've done is quickly learned enough about each to be able to make the critical connections."

In terms of the future, Lankford feels he has made progress in the area of suicide terrorism, but there are still other things to consider. For example, it took nearly a decade after 9/11 for scholars to really get to the bottom of these issues.

"Frankly, what I've done could have been done five years ago, if not 10 years ago, so to some degree I have benefitted from the fact that scholars have gotten it wrong for ten years," he said.

Lankford's ultimate goal is to continue to explore new areas and guide his students to the same.

"I like people who are open-minded and question themselves. I need to question myself when I'm doing my research, otherwise 10 years from now, there's going to be some young whippersnapper telling me how wrong I was," he said.

An important distinction in research, he says, is to focus on being accurate, even if it means admitting you are wrong. "Things like being open-minded, critically thinking, thinking creatively, challenging your own assumptions, I think those are important skills, and frankly I want to live in a world with more people like that." ●