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What Motivates a Terrorist? (4 Letters)

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To the Editor:

"Dying to Kill Us," by Robert A. Pape (Op-Ed, Sept. 22), includes important information about terrorist attacks through 2001 but does not reflect newer trends.

Half of the 74 groups currently deemed "terrorist" by the State Department are religious. Of 137 major terrorist incidents in 2002, nearly three-fourths are likely to have involved Islamic groups. At least 188 of 223 suicide attacks since 2001 were undertaken in God's name.

In 1994, only one-fourth of 56 major incidents involved religious groups. In 1997, just 14 of 36 terrorist groups were religious.

More ominously, Islamic jihadi groups are networked in ways that permit "swarming" by many groups homing in on multiple targets, then dispersing to form new swarms.

This is especially prominent since the Iraq war ended. Multiple coordinated suicide attacks across countries and even continents are the adaptive hallmark of Al Qaeda's continued global web-making.

This petrifies democracies but devours its own. Bigger armies and stricter borders can't rend it; drying up popular support for martyrdom may.

SCOTT ATRAN

Ann Arbor, Mich., Sept. 23, 2003

The writer is a research scientist at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and at the University of Michigan.

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To the Editor:

In "Dying to Kill Us" (Op-Ed, Sept. 22), Robert A. Pape rightly points out that "making concessions to political causes supported by terrorists" does not work.

But changing social dynamics and structure has worked in the past. Look at Canada and the Front for the Liberation of Quebec, and Italy and the left-wing terrorists there. Both groups were slowly dealt with not by concessions, but by listening to grievances and making social change.

Building walls, as Mr. Pape recommends, and expelling peoples while ignoring human rights will only add to merited grievances. Any government's lack of respect for the individual leaves those ostracized with no hope for a future, leading to more terrorism.

PATRICIA DEGENNARO

New York, Sept. 23, 2003

The writer is a security and political risk consultant.

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To the Editor:

Re "Dying to Kill Us," by Robert A. Pape (Op-Ed, Sept. 22):

Yes, terrorists around the world have strategic goals. But terrorists are not defined by their goals. They are defined by their use of mass murder as a means to achieve them.

This choice is always rooted in deep ideological hatred, religious or otherwise. It is the only explanation for actions that show such total contempt for human life. Terrorists run on fanaticism the way cars run on gasoline.

STEPHEN DE LAS HERAS

New York, Sept. 22, 2003

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To the Editor:

Just because so many suicidal terrorists in Sri Lanka do not kill because of religion does not mean that the same is true for Islamic jihadists (Op-Ed, Sept. 22).

While it may be true that Osama bin Laden's initial objective was to expel Americans from the Persian Gulf, his ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state and restore the caliphate.

If that is not a religious motive, what is?

And as far as suicide bombers are concerned, their expectation is a place in heaven. This is not religion?

JACK M. POLLOCK

New York, Sept. 23, 2003

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