



“Psychology and Sociology of Suicide Bombers” with Riaz Hassan

By Faeza Abdurazak

Professor Riaz Hassan, Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow and Emeritus Professor at the Department of Sociology, Flinders University, delivered a lecture titled “Psychology and Sociology of Suicide Bombers” on 4 March 2011. This lecture is based on his book entitled *Life as a Weapon*, (Routledge: 2010), a groundbreaking research effort that reveals much about the motivation for suicide bombing and the social background of its undertakers.

As a sociologist who specializes in suicide, Professor Hassan is well-placed to conduct such research from a highly volatile and often misunderstood area of study. His general view of suicide is that it is an exit from an intolerable existential condition. He also explains that some people who commit suicide see it as a sacrifice, and historical examples of this would be Jesus Christ, the martyrs of Cordoba, and the Japanese kamikaze. Suicide can also be used as a weapon, and an example would be present-day suicide bombing which is actually a modern method with ancient roots. The modern phenomenon of suicide bombing began in Lebanon in 1981 and continues to exist today.

The act of suicide can take on multiple forms and hold a different meaning from one doer to another. Professor Hassan focused on suicide as a homicidal killing tool – on how life becomes a weapon. According to Professor Hassan, for the suicide bomber and the terrorist organization that conducts suicide operations, suicide is a means to achieve multiple purposes - community approval, political success, liberation of the homeland, personal redemption or honour, refusal to accept subjugation, revenge, anxiety, defiance, etc.

Professor Hassan studied around 1200 cases of suicide bombing from Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. He compiled these cases into a database which is now the most comprehensive suicide terrorism database in the world. He counted around 350 incidents of suicide bombing from 1981 to 2003, and after the US-led invasion to Iraq in 2003, the situation drastically changed. There were 900 suicide bombings in Iraq alone from 2003 to 2006. This means that we have seen more suicide bombings in Iraq alone since 2003, than in the whole world in the preceding 25 years.

Hassan argues that suicide bombing has become a weapon of choice among terrorist groups because of its lethality and its effectiveness in causing mayhem and fear. He makes a compelling argument of suicide bombing as a psychopathological phenomenon. His extensive empirical research reveals that human beings are rational actors and only resort to extreme measures such as suicide bombing when faced with acute hardship and adversity. Therefore, suicide bombing is but a weapon of the poor and the weak. Societal conditions such as the invasion of one’s homeland by a powerful occupier (e.g. Palestine and Iraq), violations of cultural codes of honour by the occupier against the people of the land, and their humiliation and degradation are the main factors that drive otherwise peaceful and regular human beings towards suicide bombing.

Furthermore, suicide bombing is a response to state repression against non-state, weaker parties who are individuals on the ground without other means of expressing anger and protest. Hassan emphasized that suicide bombers are neither mad nor insane; they are, as explained above, rational actors who have been pushed to the end of their tethers.

Suicide bombing is also mainly driven by political conditions and not religious conviction. Religion is, however, misused by terrorist organizations to recruit suicide bombers because of the strong influence and persuasion that religion has over the people, especially when they are on the verge of desolation and hopelessness. Professor Hassan ends the lecture on two positive notes: 1) despite the number of people blowing themselves up, it is hopeful and inspiring to see how many people who are suffering political and social injustice, such as those who are living in refugee camps under impoverished conditions, are continuing with their lives and do not choose the path of the suicide bombers; and 2) if we can disrupt the supply chain of weapons, suicide bombing can be prevented, whether partially or totally.