

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch: The Cocktail of Motivations behind Suicide Terrorism

By Elaine Ho
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Sociologist Riaz Hassan has studied the causes of suicide terrorism for over two decades. On 25 August 2014, Professor Hassan, who is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Flinders University and Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, discussed his research findings with a group of 20 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Corporate Associates and IPS researchers. The session was chaired by Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS Senior Research Fellow.

Historical Perspective and Global Trends

Professor Hassan explained the difference between suicide and suicide terrorism, which he described as a modern phenomenon with ancient roots. What drives people to commit suicide is vastly different from what drives people to carry out suicide terrorism. The act of suicide may be done by people who are depressed and is usually carried out without killing anyone else. In suicide bombing, which is a key form of modern suicide terrorism, the act is committed to ensure maximum damage. Based on his research, Professor Hassan shared that each suicide bombing attack kills about 12 persons while each non-suicide bombing attack kills 1.1 persons on average.

The first modern suicide bombing, he said, took place in the 1980s in Beirut against the Iraqi embassy. Subsequently, a wave of suicide campaigns began. From 1981 to 2011, there were 2,297 attacks in 36 countries, killing close to 30,000 people. In that period, the five sites that accounted for 95% of all suicide attacks are Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine and Sri Lanka.

Professor Hassan outlined three preconditions for suicide bombing to occur. The first condition is the presence of conflict between state and non-state actors. The second condition is the state sanctioning the use of violence against non-state actors, especially those who have been imprisoned by law enforcers. The last condition is that non-state actors respond by improvising weapons because they do not have the type of ammunition that the state army possesses. Suicide bombing is thus, the “weapon of the weak”.

Why do some people choose to become suicide bombers? Professor Hassan said that the common perception is that suicide bombers are uneducated, poor, religious fanatics or

psychopaths. That is far from the truth. Suicide bombers recruited by terrorist groups cannot be psychopaths as they would “spill all the secrets when caught and will carry out attacks when the organisation has no need for them”. Instead, suicide bombers are “people who are well-grounded in the community from which they carry out suicide attack,” said Professor Hassan.

The societal conditions that lead people to consider suicide bombing include the occupation of their homeland and a deep sense of humiliation, where the identity of citizens is devalued. This has led him to conclude that suicide bombing is driven by politics, not religion. Religion can be a means by which suicide bombers are recruited, but it is not the starting point to understand the reasons for suicide bombing.

Professor Hassan gave three suggestions to reduce the occurrences of suicide bombing. First, there is a need to find solutions to the conflicts that give rise to this phenomenon. Second, the state should treat prisoners with humanity. Finally, society should do as much as it can to avoid placing people in refugee camps, or at least to ensure that their living conditions are decent enough not to drive them to hate the state.

During the question and answer session, one participant asked if Singapore had anything to watch out for, in terms of its society having the preconditions for people to consider suicide bombing. Professor Hassan said that any modern society, including Singapore, consists of people with sympathies for other groups for a variety of reasons, and thus they cannot be isolated from any sort of violent crime.

Another participant asked what role family ties could play in preventing suicide bombing. Professor Hassan replied that the modern family is a changing phenomenon, where parents may not be informed on what their children are exposed to, making it difficult for them to intervene. On self-radicalisation, Professor Hassan said that this was due to a feeling of isolation from modern society, leading to the identification with a group to face “structural inequalities” together. Implementing appropriate public policies to address inequalities faced by these groups is thus crucial in the fight against suicide terrorism, he said, adding, “Look at the winners and losers from society, if the losers can find some hope, I think you can go some way to stopping them from becoming radical.”

Elaine Ho is an Executive with IPS Social Lab, an independent centre for social indicators research.

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