Life as a Weapon: Making Sense of Suicide Bombings[1]

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In an age when the Western world is preoccupied with fears about weapons of mass destruction in terrorist hands, in many parts of the world terrorist groups are turning to a more basic device as the weapon of choice – the life itself. The use of life as a weapon, or suicide bombing, has become a weapon of choice among many terrorist groups because of its lethality and ability to cause mayhem and fear. Several prominent past and present leaders of Western democracies have often responded to the phenomenon by describing it as a manifestation of Islamic fanaticism explicable only by the irrationality of those who carry them out. The mass media taking cues from such explanations has reinforced this characterisation by stereotyping the perpetrators as psychological impaired and morally deficient uneducated and impoverished individuals.

Such assumptions have fuelled the belief that acts of suicide terrorism such as the September 11 type of attacks can be prevented only through liberalisation and democratisation of Muslim societies. This was a key rationale used by the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and their allies to garner public support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ironically policies based on such assumptions are reinforcing irrational fears and fostering development of foreign and domestic policies which are worsening the situation. Externally imposed polices of

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liberating, liberalisation and democratisation are likely to sharpen religious and ideological divisions in the world, especially in the recipient Muslim countries. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are obvious examples and we can easily add more countries to the list.

Studies by serious scholars, however, show that suicide bombing attacks are linked more to politics than to religion. Religion is used effectively by a number of Islamic radical groups to recruit suicide bombers and to raise operational funds, but the leadership of these groups have secular goals, such as expelling occupying forces from the 'homeland'. Thus, even if some suicide bombers are irrational or fanatical, the leadership of the groups that recruits and directs them is not. Understanding the dynamics of suicide bombings also requires understanding of what drives humans to suicide. In my studies of suicide over the past 40 years I have argued that suicidal behaviour in variety of settings may be used *not as an end in itself, but as a means to achieve multiple ends*, including self-empowerment in the face of powerlessness, redemption in the face of damnation, honour in the face of humiliation. In my opinion, this is central to a more meaningful understanding and explanation of contemporary suicide attacks in the world.

The evidence from the Flinders University Suicide Terrorism Database (FUSTD), the most comprehensive data base of suicide bombings in the world, largely discredits explanations that ascribe the cause to the personality of suicide bombers and which assert that suicide bombings are acts of abhorrent violence perpetrated by psychologically impaired, morally deficient, bizarre, sick, crazy, uneducated and impoverished individuals. The public policies which take cue from such explanations tend to focus on killing, restraining and incarcerating the deranged individuals in order to expunge them from society, and not to focus on societal conditions

which may have given rise to the phenomenon in the first place. The following are some of lessons of the FUSTD and other recent studies which deserve attention.

Suicide bombers are not mad

Apart from one demographic attribute that the majority of suicide bombers tend to be young males, recent studies have failed to find a stable set of demographic, psychological, socioeconomic and religious variables that can be causally linked to suicide bombers' personality or socioeconomic origins. With the exception of a few rare cases, there is no apparent connection between violent militant activity and personality disorders. Typically most suicide bombers are psychologically normal and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities. Labels such as mad, bad, sick, psychologically and morally impaired may be politically, and possibly legally, expedient but they don't advance our understanding of the causes of the phenomenon of suicide bombings which can be used to devise preventative public policies. They in fact impede us from discovering its real nature, purpose and causes.

A strategic weapon, tactic

Suicide bombings are instrumental and strategic weapons used by well organised terrorist groups. These groups represent the weaker party in asymmetrical conflicts that are related to the struggle for greater autonomy or liberation of what they regard as their 'homeland'. The deployment of suicide bombings is mainly determined by their cost effectiveness, versatility, lethality and tactical efficiency in reaching well guarded high value targets. Suicide bombings have high symbolic value because the willingness of the perpetrators to die signals high resolve and dedication to their cause. Among the sympathetic constituencies they serve as symbols of a just struggle; they galvanise popular

support and generate financial support for the organisation and become a source of new recruits for the future suicide missions.

Suicide bombings serve the interests of the sponsoring organisation in two ways: by coercing an adversary to make concessions, and by giving the organisation an advantage over its rival in terms of support from constituencies. From this perspective, understanding the organisation's logic is more important than understanding individual motivations in explaining suicide attacks. Contrary to the popular image that suicide terrorism is an outcome of irrational religious fanaticism, suicide bombing attacks are an intensely political phenomenon.

Driven mainly by politics, not religion

The driving force behind suicide bombings is *politics* and not *religion*, though in some cases religion can play a vital role in recruiting and motivating potential future suicide bombers, particularly when secular ideologies fail to bring about desired changes. Suicide bombing is adopted as the weapon of last resort by the sponsoring organisations after long periods of protest, political agitation and other non violent methods have failed. Between 1981 and 2003 the majority of suicide missions were carried out by secular organisations. In the case of suicide attackers who carried out suicide missions only 43 per cent were religious.

For the individual, participation in a suicide mission is not about dying and killing alone but has a broader significance for achieving multiple purposes. These include gaining community approval, political success, liberation of the homeland; personal redemption and mark of honour, achieving an exalted status of martyr for the survival of the community; signalling unwillingness to accept subjugation, revenge for personal and collective humiliation, a symbol of religious or nationalistic convictions;

guilt, shame, material and religious rewards, escape from intolerable everyday degradations of life under occupation, boredom, anxiety and defiance. Obviously the configurations of these purposes would vary and would be an outcome of the specific circumstances of the political conflict behind the rise of suicide attacks as a tactic and a weapon.

Humiliation aids sub-culture of suicide bombing

Humiliation, revenge and altruism appear to play key roles at the organisational and individual levels in shaping the sub-culture promoting suicide bombings. Humiliation is a complex and intense emotional personal experience in which historically and culturally grounded definitions or perceptions of self-worth, self-respect and dignity are destroyed and revealed as apparently false and illegitimate affectations. The evidence suggests that violence, the everyday degradations of occupation, harsh repression, a sense of collective grievances, torture, the violation of culturally grounded codes of honour and shame, massive economic and social dislocations, anxiety and helplessness are powerful means to inflict humiliation.

Humiliation is different from fear. Fear is an instinctual emotional response to potential danger that can cause physical pain. Humiliation is an emotional process that seeks to discipline the humiliated party's behaviour by attacking and lowering their own and others' perceptions of whether they deserve respect. In Abu Ghraib prison the techniques – forced nudity, simulated sex with another man in front of a female, made to bark like a dog and being photographed doing that – were not intended to inflict physical pain but to create total submission and obedience. These and other actions of the US prison guards at Abu Ghraib were disciplinary practices that worked on what it meant to be an honourable, self-respecting subject in Iraqi society.

These practices did not humiliate the prisoners alone but were felt and seen as humiliating by all Iraqis. It was evident in the reactions that followed the publication of the prisoner abuse photographs. In the months following their release daily suicide bombing attacks in Iraq increased dramatically. Similarly, in Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the counterinsurgency operations involving random house searches, interrogations, arrests and other violations of human dignity are followed by an increase in suicide attacks.

Sometime driven by revenge and retaliation

Humans appear to have an incredibly strong sense of justice, and a desire for revenge is the darker side to this. Psychologists define revenge and vengeance as 'the infliction of harm in return for perceived injury or insult or as simply getting back at another person'. An important element of the desire for vengeance is the surprising willingness of individuals to sacrifice in order to carry out an act of revenge. Revenge has irrational and destructive consequences for the person seeking vengeance as well as for the target. One of them is that the person seeking vengeance is willing to compromise his or her own integrity, social standing and personal safety for the sake of revenge. Why are people willing to pay such high costs, and what ends are served by revenge?

Revenge can fulfil a range of goals, including righting perceived injustices, restoring the self-worth of the vengeful individual and deterring future injustice. It is also a response to the continuous suffering of an aggrieved community. At the heart of the whole process are perceptions of personal harm, unfairness and injustice, and the anger, indignation, and hatred associated with the perceived injustice. Men hold more positive attitudes towards vengeance than women; and young people are more prepared to act in a vengeful manner than older individuals. It is not

surprising, then, to find that most suicide bombers are both young and male.

Personal histories of suicide bombers often contain accounts of encounters with the security forces or rival groups that involved threats, harassment, assaults and even deaths of those near and dear to the bomber. On 4 October 2003, 29 year old Palestinian lawyer Hanadi Jaradat exploded her suicide belt in the Maxim restaurant in Haifa killing 20 people and wounding many more. According to her family, her suicide mission was in revenge for the killing of her brother and her fiancé by the Israeli security forces and in revenge for all the crimes Israel was perpetrating in the West Bank by killing Palestinians and expropriating their lands.

Vengeance through suicide bombing has an additional value: that of making oneself the victim of one's own act, and thereby putting one's tormentors to moral shame. The idea of the suicide bombing, unlike that of an ordinary attack, is, perversely, a moral idea in which the killers, in acting out the drama of being the ultimate victim, claim for their cause the moral high ground.

Altruistically driven action

While suicide is an integral part of suicide bombing, its meaning and nature in this context are strikingly different from 'ordinary' suicide. One of the main differences between the two acts is that in suicide bombing the primary intention of the act is to kill others who have no prior relationship with the suicide bomber, whereas the primary characteristic of suicide is the absence of murderous intent. Suicide bombings fall in the category of altruistic suicidal actions which are distinct from other types of suicidal actions caused by personal catastrophes, hopelessness and psychopathologies which lead people to believe that life is not worth living. Altruistic suicides on the other hand involve valuing

one's life less worthy than that of the group's honour, religion, or some other collective interest. In its very essence altruism is costly action which benefits others. Altruism is a fundamental condition explaining human cooperation for the organisation of society and its cohesiveness.

Altruism can also be socially constructed in communities which have endured massive social and economic dislocations as a result of long, violent and painful conflict with a more powerful enemy. Under such conditions people react to perceived inferiority and the failure of other efforts by valuing and supporting ideals of self sacrifice such as suicide bombing. Religiously and nationalistically coded attitudes towards acceptance of death stemming from long periods of collective suffering, humiliation and powerlessness enable political organisations to give people suicide bombings as an outlet for their feelings of desperation, deprivation, hostility and injustice.

Paradoxically, actions such as suicide bombings invariably provoke a brutal response from the state authorities, because by injecting fear and mayhem in the ordinary rhythms of daily life, they threaten and undermine the state's authority in providing security of life and property and in maintaining social order. And under such conditions the state can legitimately impose *altruistic punishments* to deter future violation of social norms threatening security and social order. But recent studies have shown that altruistic punishments are only effective when they do not violate the norms of *fairness.* Punishments and sanctions seen as unfair, hostile, selfish and vindictive by targeted groups tend to have detrimental effects and instead of promoting compliance they reinforce recipients' resolve to non-compliance.

Countering suicide terrorism

The causes of suicide bombings lie not in individual

psychopathology but in the broader human conditions. Suicide terrorism emerges under certain societal conditions and understanding and knowledge of these conditions is vital for developing appropriate public policies and responses to protect the public from it. Profiling potential suicide bombers and conducting state sanctioned repression do not appear to be proving effective public policies. Profiling is expensive, ineffective and alienating. The state sanctioned repression is a boomerang. Instead of preventing, repression escalates suicide terrorism and where it has succeeded the human and economic costs have created unprecedented humanitarian crises. The success thus may be a temporary reprieve rather than a lasting relief. Two of the most fertile environments for nurturing the subculture of suicide bombings are the refugee camps in Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the dehumanising treatment of prisoners in these and other countries. Strategies for eliminating or at least addressing problems of economic deprivation, humiliation and related collective grievances in concrete and effective ways would have a significant and, in many cases, immediate impact on alleviating the conditions that nurture the subcultures of suicide bombings.

In the final analysis suicide bombings are carried out by community based organisations. Strategies aimed at findings ways to induce communities to abandon such support may isolate terrorist organisations and curtail their activities. But ultimately strategies addressing and lessening the grievances and humiliations of populations that give rise to suicide bombings attacks are required for their elimination. Support for suicide bombing attacks is unlikely to diminish without tangible progress in achieving at least some of the fundamental goals that suicide bombers and those sponsoring and supporting them share.