

Shifting Trends in Suicide Attacks

By Assaf Moghadam

SUICIDE ATTACKS HAVE existed for centuries, and have been carried out by a diverse multitude of individuals, groups and communities.¹ Historical examples ranging from the biblical Samson to the medieval Ismaili Shi'a Assassins, and from the anarchist Narodnaya Volya to the Japanese kamikaze, demonstrate that suicide attacks are carried out by a variety of religious traditions and secular groups, and by state and non-state actors alike.² The inception of the modern phenomenon of suicide "terrorism"—the deliberate use of this modus operandi by sub-state actors in pursuit of political goals—is usually dated at the early 1980s. It was then, in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps successfully instilled the notion of martyrdom for the sake of God into the self-awareness of individuals who formed or joined Hizb Allah, an umbrella organization of Shi'a groups that became the first modern organization to utilize this tactic systematically. Hizb Allah's successful use of the tactic was soon copied, first by other militant Lebanese groups, and subsequently by Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and several Palestinian groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). These select groups were the most prominent perpetrators of suicide attacks in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the final two decades of the 20th century, however, most suicide attacks in the first decade of the 21st century have been employed by al-Qa`ida and associated movements that have adopted a Salafi-jihadi ideology.

This article presents findings from a recently updated database of 1,944

suicide attacks carried out between 1981 and June 2008, some of which support the above arguments.³ Three particularly important findings stand out. First, Salafi-jihadi groups continue to be the most active perpetrators of suicide attacks, underscoring the intimate relationship between Salafi-jihadi ideology and suicide attacks. Second, the last three years have witnessed a steady shift in the number of suicide attacks away from Iraq and toward Pakistan and Afghanistan, suggesting that the Afghan-Pakistani region is becoming the new epicenter of suicide attacks. Third, the data suggest that if current trends continue, the overall number of suicide attacks in 2008 will decrease. This latter finding is all the more important since this would be the first decline in the number of suicide attacks in more than a decade.

General Trends in Suicide Attacks: 1981-June 2008

According to the data set, 51 organizations were responsible for the 1,944 suicide attacks conducted worldwide from 1981 to June 2008. These attacks claimed 70,884 casualties. Of these, 21,167 individuals were killed, and 49,717 were injured. The average suicide attack in that period killed close to 11 people and injured between 25 and 26.

The present decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in suicide attacks. More than 10 times as many suicide attacks (1,779) took place from 2000 to June 2008 than the 165 that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s combined. As shown in Figure 1, after the millennium there has been a substantial increase in suicide attacks, from 37 in 2000 to 535 in 2007. In that time period, every year produced more suicide attacks than the previous year. Interestingly, trends for 2008 suggest a decrease in the number of attacks.

During the first half of 2008, there were 198 suicide attacks, suggesting less than a total of 400 attacks for the year if current trends continue. Indeed, if these trends persist, it will be the first time in a decade that the number of suicide attacks in a given year will decline relative to the year prior.

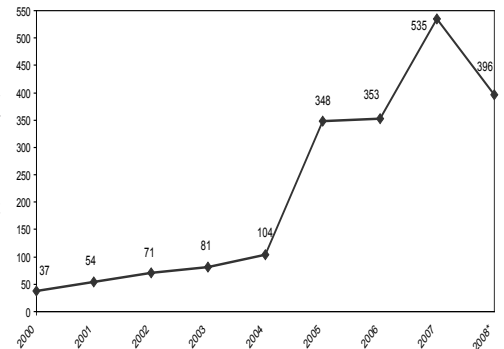


Figure 1. Number of suicide missions worldwide (1998-2008). The number of attacks for 2008 assumes trends as of June 2008 will continue.

In terms of countries targeted by this modus operandi, Iraq is on top of the list. According to the present data set, Iraq accounts for 1,067 suicide attacks in the period under review—a number that accounts for more than half (54.8%) of all suicide attacks since 1981. The sheer volume in which this tactic has struck Iraq is even more impressive since no suicide attacks were recorded in Iraq prior to the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003.

Afghanistan is the second most frequently targeted country, with 264 attacks, accounting for 13.6% of all incidents. It has recently overtaken Israel, the target of 188 (9.7%) suicide missions. Sri Lanka (110/5.7%), Pakistan (94/4.8%), and Russia (37/1.9%) are the next most prominently targeted countries.⁴ Together, these seven most frequently targeted states account for more than 90% of targets of all suicide attacks in the last 27 years.

As a result of the large number of suicide attacks in Iraq and Israel, the Middle East is the region that has

1 The terms "suicide missions," "suicide attacks," and "suicide operations" are used interchangeably. The term "suicide missions" is drawn from Diego Gambetta, *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 For a historical overview of suicide attacks and their precursors, see Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 7-26.

3 The data set combines data from the Suicide Terrorism Database collected by the National Security Studies Center at the University of Haifa, Israel, and the National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System. Although the resulting data set is among the most extensive databases on suicide attacks, no claims are made about its completion. Indeed, it is a certainty that the actual number of suicide attacks in the period from 1981 to June 2008 is higher than the number presented here. Copies of the data set are available upon request. For inquiries, please contact the author at assaf.moghadam@usma.edu.

4 Although the present data set lists only 110 suicide attacks in Sri Lanka, the actual number of attacks that have taken place in the country is likely far higher. Part of the reason for this mismatch appears to be that many suicide attacks that have taken place in Sri Lanka during the late 1990s have not been reported in the Western press, and have thus eluded inclusion in the publicly available databases on suicide attacks.

witnessed most suicide attacks (1,316) to date, accounting for more than two-thirds of all incidents from 1981 to June 2008. It is followed by Asia (exclusive of the Middle East), with 551 (28.3%) attacks, most of them in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Africa (38/1.9%) and Europe (31/1.6%) are next, followed by North America and Latin America, which suffered four suicide attacks (0.2%) each.

By far, the most dramatic trend related to the location of suicide attacks is the gradual shift of incidents from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Between July 2007 and June 2008, the last one-year period for which data on suicide attacks are available, 58.2% of suicide attacks struck Iraq, and 36.6% struck Afghanistan and Pakistan. This compares to a much wider gap between suicide attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan in the preceding year (July 2006 to June 2007), when 69.3% of attacks took place in Iraq, and 25.1% in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A still greater discrepancy was evident between July 2005 and June 2006, with 72.1% of all suicide attacks in that year occurring in Iraq, and only 13.5% in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is in Pakistan where the steepest increase in suicide attacks is visible: they increased from 3.14% of the global total in the period between July 2006 and June 2007 to 12.9% in the following year.

Salafi-Jihadi Ideology and Suicide Attacks

Since 1981, 91.5% (1,779) of all suicide attacks have been executed in the current decade. Of these, the identity of the perpetrators is known in 674 cases. A coding of the groups responsible based on their ideological orientation suggests that the most dominant perpetrators of this tactic in the present decade are groups that have adopted a Salafi-jihadi ideology.⁵ Thus, of the 674 suicide attacks in which the identity of the responsible group has been ascertained, 305 (45.4%) were conducted by Salafi-

jihadi groups, 109 (16.2%) by groups with a combined mainstream Islamist/nationalist-separatist orientation,⁶ and 84 (12.5%) by groups with a strictly nationalist-separatist orientation. In addition, 163 (24.2%) attacks were conducted by “Hybrid” groups that appear to have adopted elements of Salafi-jihadi ideology in addition to other, especially ethno-nationalist and separatist reasons. Chechen groups and the Taliban are examples of groups coded in this way.⁷ Surprisingly, groups adhering to Shi’ism—the Muslim sect most directly identified with the notion of martyrdom—are responsible for less than one percent of suicide attacks in the present decade.⁸

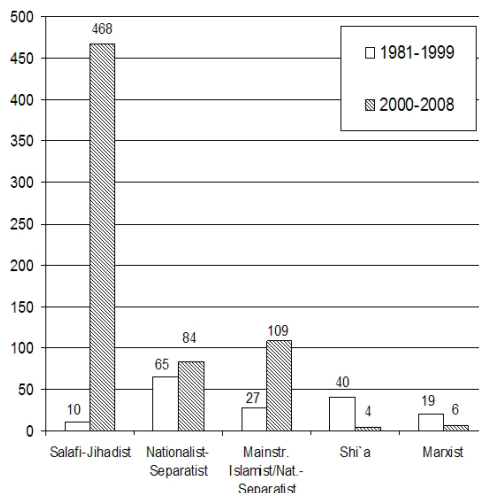


Figure 2. Suicide missions by ideological orientation of the responsible groups. The “Salafi-Jihadist” bar includes “Hybrid” groups.

According to the above analysis, Salafi-jihadi and “Hybrid” groups account for nearly 70% (468) of all suicide attacks in the present decade. By comparison, Salafi-jihadi groups were responsible for less than six percent (nine attacks) of suicide attacks during the previous two decades combined. As shown in Figure 2, during the 1980s and 1990s nationalist-separatist groups (65/39.3%), Shi`a groups (40/24.2%), mainstream Islamist/nationalist-separatist groups (27/16.3%), and even Marxist groups (19/11.5%) were far more active than Salafi-jihadi

groups in staging suicide attacks.

The dominance of Salafi-jihadi groups among contemporary terrorist groups employing suicide attacks matters for a critical reason: Salafi-jihadis are far more lethal than other groups conducting suicide attacks. In the present decade, for example, suicide attacks by Salafi-jihadi and “Hybrid” groups have killed 7.5 times as many people, and have wounded 2.5 times as many individuals as have attacks by all other ideological groups combined. On average, each suicide attack by a Salafi-jihadi group kills almost 23 people and injures more than 46 people—more than attacks by any other ideological group. Whereas Salafi-jihadi groups are responsible for about 16% of all suicide attacks between 1981 and June 2008, they are the cause of a third of all individuals killed by this tactic in that timeframe, and 29% of those wounded.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of suicide attacks has undergone a number of fundamental shifts in the last decade of its modern history, which began in the early 1980s. Suicide attacks during the 1980s and 1990s were carried out mostly by groups that adhered to a nationalist-separatist, mainstream Islamist, Shi`a, or Marxist agenda. The past decade, however, has witnessed not only a dramatic increase in the number of suicide attacks, but also the advent and dominance of Salafi-jihadi suicide operations. The inescapable conclusion of these findings is that whereas the Salafi-jihad may not explain the emergence of suicide attacks in the first place, it is fundamental to the recent globalization of this tactic and must be part of any serious attempt to explain its spread across nearly every region of the world. The findings also suggest that attempts to counter the scourge of suicide attacks must include counter-ideological measures to be successful.

Although recent figures for 2008 indicating a possible decline in the number of suicide attacks are encouraging, it is far too early for the United States and its allies to become complacent about this potential trend. While it is true that the occurrence of suicide attacks—especially in Iraq—has decreased, the United States and its friends should be wary of a further

5 For details on the coding of groups in the data set, see the Appendix in Assaf Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom,” *International Security* 33:3 (2008). For a discussion of the Salafi-jihad, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:3 (2006): pp. 207-239. For a discussion of the nature of the Salafi-jihad as an ideology, see Assaf Moghadam, “The Salafi Jihad as a Religious Ideology,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:3 (2008): pp. 14-16.

6 Mainstream Islamist groups include those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Hamas. These groups differ from Salafi-jihadi groups in that they participate in the political process.

7 For more information, see Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom.”

8 Shi`a groups were responsible for a much higher percentage of suicide attacks (24%) during the 1980s and 1990s.

increase in the use of this tactic in places where Salafi-jihadis are establishing a new foothold or are maintaining a viable presence. Given the symbiotic relationship between Salafi-jihadi ideology and suicide attacks, it is not surprising that in recent years suicide attacks have emerged in the same areas that have witnessed a growing presence of Salafi-jihadis, such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, or where established Salafi-jihadi cells have adopted the al-Qa`ida brand, as in Algeria.⁹ The case of Algeria is particularly instructive because eight out of the 10 suicide attacks in the country from 1995 to June 2008 have taken place after the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) officially joined al-Qa`ida and renamed itself al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb.

It is important for the United States and other real or potential victims of suicide missions to keep a watchful eye on the current and future development of Salafi-jihadi cells. Adherents of this ideology are sworn enemies of the United States, its allies, and indeed the vast majority of Muslims in the world who refuse to adopt the tenets guiding al-Qa`ida. Additionally, monitoring the migration of Salafi-jihadi cells is imperative to predict future hotspots for suicide attacks.

Dr. Assaf Moghadam is Assistant Professor and Senior Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and research fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He is the author, most recently, of The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and "Motives for Martyrdom," International Security, Winter 2008/2009.

⁹ For more on the relationship between Salafi-jihadi ideology and suicide attacks, see Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*.