



U.S. RESTRAINT AND THE SHARP DECLINE OF SUICIDE ATTACKS AROUND THE WORLD

Global trends in suicide attacks from 2000 to 2022 are a crucial barometer for the impact of the U.S. shift to over-the-horizon counterterrorism.

March 2, 2023

Robert A Pape, Ph.D. (Principal Investigator)

Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago

Director, University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST)

Chicago Project on Security and Threats

University of Chicago

Pick Hall Suite 418

5828 S. University Avenue

Chicago, Illinois 60637

<http://cpost.uchicago.edu>

Executive Summary

The world has witnessed a sharp decline in suicide attacks since 2015 to rates unseen for decades. Suicide attacks are the deadliest form of terrorism, and their steep and abrupt downturn is welcome news. Indeed, suicide attacks are returning to pre-U.S. occupation levels in Iraq and Afghanistan, fading away in Pakistan, and falling in Africa. Overall, the data, which is complete through December 31, 2022, shows that the most virulent form of terrorism has greatly diminished, challenging the idea that this danger to America would never end.

The global pattern is important because it bears directly on the debate over the value of “restraint” in American national security strategy. With the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has adopted a more restrained counterterrorism policy – often called “over-the-horizon” or “off-shore balancing” – in the Middle East. This report shows that this more restrained strategy is indeed a highly effective option for meeting the challenge of deadly suicide attacks. However, as the report cautions, the price of restraint is sustained vigilance, judicious use of air power and special forces, and enduring regional engagement.

Introduction

In 2022 suicide attacks around the world fell to their lowest levels since 2002. At their peak in 2015 there were nearly 700 suicide attacks worldwide, with 300 in Iraq and Afghanistan alone. By comparison, in 2022 there were a global total of only 75 suicide attacks, with 14 in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. From 2015 to 2022 suicide attacks are down by about 90 percent globally, and by 95 percent in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What explains this dramatic, across the globe decline? Are these low levels of suicide attacks likely to persist?

Answers to these questions are important because suicide attacks are the deadliest form of terrorism. The efforts that terrorist organizations require to inspire people to kill themselves to kill others makes such attacks an important barometer of the overall terrorist threat.

The global pattern also bears directly on the debate over the value of restraint in American national security strategy. With the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has adopted a national security policy of “restraint” toward the Middle East. Although the term has been used in multiple ways, most agree that the hallmark of U.S. restraint is a less militarized security policy involving a small overseas military footprint limited to intelligence, special forces, and logistical needs

required to fulfill an “over-the-horizon” policy that is flexible enough to respond to threats but does not provoke them.

To be sure, no single explanation could completely account for the behavior of the multitude of terrorist groups – in dozens of countries across the three large regions (the Middle East, South/Central Asia and Africa) – since the modern phenomenon began in the early 1980s. As made clear below, there are many interacting factors, including terrorist network effects, specific local political conditions, as well as the outcome of specific state versus militant group conflicts.

However, one overarching explanation for the huge spike and then equally dramatic decline of suicide attacks is changing U.S. policy. As of 2022, America’s two-decade long war on terrorism against the terror groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State – groups that used suicide attacks to devastating effect against the United States, U.S. forces, and the forces of U.S. allies – has largely come to an end. Today, there are no U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The number in Iraq is just 2,500.

Is this policy of American restraint in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and elsewhere leading to a better or worse future for the security of the United States and its allies? What is at issue is not only whether U.S. military policy contributed to the decline in suicide attacks, but also whether the shift to over-the-horizon counterterrorism can prevent a return of the major suicide terrorist campaigns that threatened the U.S. homeland and devastated the Middle East over the last 20 years.

This report uses trends in global suicide attacks from 2002 to 2022 to present evidence that America’s shift to a posture of restraint has contributed significantly to the stark decline in suicide terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least since Pape’s 2005 study *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005), many have argued the merits of a more restrained approach to counterterrorism over heavy U.S. ground forces and military pressure.¹ Such a policy, the argument goes, could meet the challenge of already mobilized terrorists while reducing the factors that provoke the rise of new

¹ Calls for a more militarily “restrained” US foreign policy, commonplace historically, began to grow markedly since the 1990s, notably: Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 5–48, <https://doi.org/10/dz5zjd>; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014); Emma Ashford, “Strategies of Restraint: Remaking America’s Broken Foreign Policy Essays,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 5 (2021): 128–41. Recent US administrations have adopted elements of restraint, including the Biden administration. In 2019 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Jake Sullivan, now the Biden administration’s national security adviser, wrote, “The U.S. must get better at seeing both the possibilities and the limits of American power.” Jake Sullivan, “What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America,” *The Atlantic*, February 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/yes-america-can-still-lead-the-world/576427/>.

generations of terrorists to take their place. After twenty years, there exists the data, prolonged policy changes and perspective to assess the value of these more restrained approaches to counterterrorism.

This report aims to know whether there is a consistent association between the shift to a more restrained U.S. counterterrorism policy and the recent sharp decline in global suicide attacks and whether the pattern is consistent across regions considering local factors and circumstances that could point in opposite directions. It focuses on the role of U.S. military policy but is not meant as a complete causal analysis and does not seek to identify the relative weight of relevant factors. U.S. military occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq triggered new, large suicide terrorist campaigns. The key test is whether withdrawal can account for the decline of these campaigns, and whether a policy of restraint will see this pattern in the data extend into the future.

Most importantly, the report shows that maintaining a policy of restraint is America's best option for keeping the deadliest terrorist threat that the world has experienced – suicide terrorism – at bay. Contrary to what one might think, restraint is not easy or cheap: it requires constant vigilance, robust intelligence capabilities, forward deployed special forces, judicious use of airpower, and, perhaps most challenging, cooperation with sometimes problematic allies. Nevertheless, if true, restraint signals a viable and effective alternative to a large U.S. military footprint in the Middle East and endless cycles of anti-American terrorism.

Suicide Attack Trends as a Metric for Assessing Restraint

Suicide attacks are a valuable barometer to assess the strategic effectiveness of restraint. Terrorist groups using suicide attacks have been America's principal concern since 19 members of al-Qaeda hijacked and flew commercial airliners into the World Trade Centers and Pentagon, killing about 3,000 innocents and themselves on September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the dramatic rise of anti-American suicide attacks by the Afghan Taliban, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and al-Shabaab and other terrorist groups in Africa, made countering suicide terrorism a central element of America's war on terrorism.

Pape's research over the past two decades shows that a major cause of suicide attack campaigns is foreign military occupation, such as the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq where large fractions of the local populations viewed American military presence not merely as an alliance but as central to maintaining the American-installed governments in power. This research is grounded in data. In 2001, Pape created the first complete database of suicide attacks by non-state actors (e.g., terrorist groups and individuals not affiliated with terrorist groups), covering the period from the first recorded suicide attack in the 1970s up to the present, and later created the University of Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism (now Security and Threats) to track the phenomenon.

CPOST's suicide attack database was first published in the *American Political Science Review* (August 2003) as an appendix to his article on foreign military occupation and suicide attacks, which was the most downloaded article in this flagship journal for three years. It was followed by the rapid growth of academic and policy studies of terrorism, civil war, and non-state violence, as well as his own two books on suicide terrorism, *Dying to Win* (2005) and *Cutting the Fuse* (2009), which recommend "off-shore" balancing" as the best long-term strategy for the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and elsewhere terrorist groups menace American interests. In 2015-17, Pape led a CPOST research team that analyzed the concept he called "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism, producing 15 reports for the Department of Defense that operationalized the concept of "off-shore balancing," examining the likely determinants of success of this strategy for counterterrorism in multiple parts of the world. In 2019, Pape published an article in *Foreign Policy* calling for the shift to "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism in Afghanistan and advised the National Security Council (Counterterrorism) on the details of that approach in August 2019.² Both the Trump and Biden administrations went on to adopt "over-the-horizon" as America's long-term strategy in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Over the last two decades, CPOST's Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT) has provided academics, journalists, and policy makers with the most complete and robust record of suicide attacks worldwide. CPOST maintains student-led research teams to track suicide attacks and update the DSAT on a regular basis. Over the past five years, CPOST expanded the DSAT to include data on alliances and rivalries between militant groups that conduct suicide attacks within and across conflict zones. In 2021, CPOST published its analysis of the diffusion of suicide attacks in armed conflicts and the large role played by networks established by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, in the *Journal of Peace Research*.³ This expanded version of the DSAT is also available online at the CPOST website.

Sharp Decline in Suicide Attacks since 2015, to rates unseen for decades

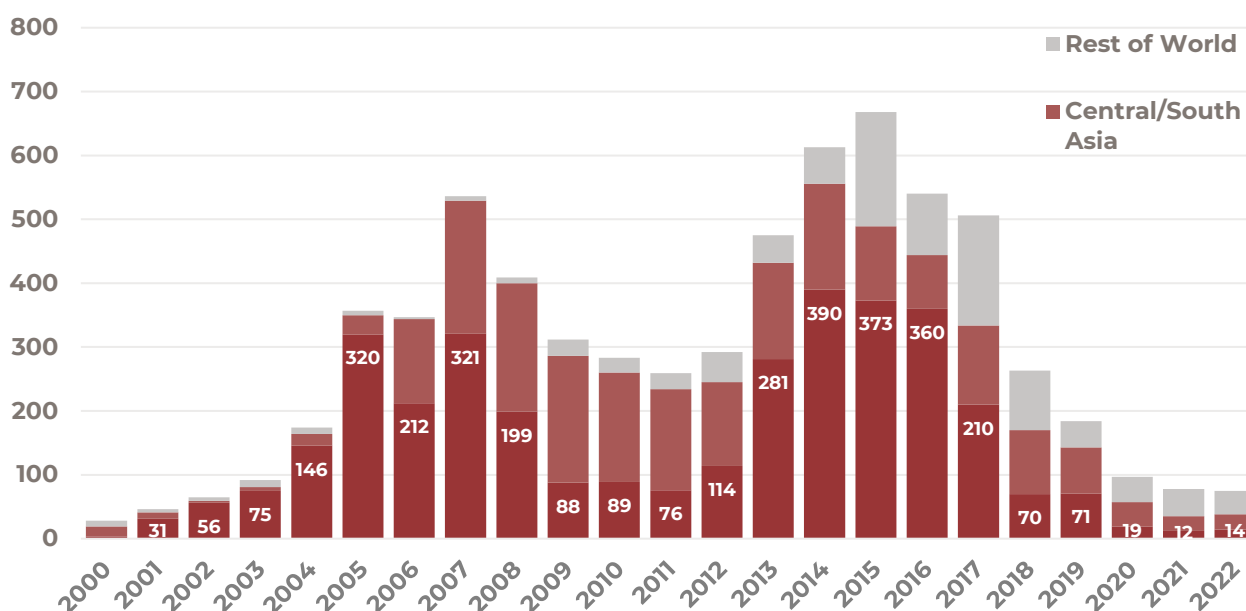
Figure 1 below presents the trajectory of global suicide attacks from 2000 through 2022. The graph shows that not only did the number of suicide attacks dramatically increase after 2002, but also that the vast majority of attacks in the following 20 years have been concentrated in the Middle East and Central Asia, especially Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq and Afghanistan (discussed later) are the two

² Robert Pape, "How to Partner With the Taliban," *Foreign Policy* (blog), August 26, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/26/how-to-partner-with-the-taliban/>.

³ Robert A. Pape, Alejandro Albanez Rivas, and Alexandra C Chinchilla, "Introducing the New CPOST Dataset on Suicide Attacks," *Journal of Peace Research*, April 26, 2021, 0022343320978260, <https://doi.org/10/gkwmwv>.

countries that the U.S. military invaded after 2001 and subsequently occupied with many tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers. During this time the U.S. installed new governments heavily influenced, if not controlled, by the United States – precisely the conditions of foreign military occupation that research shows will generate and sustain sizable anti-American suicide campaigns. The predicted anti-American suicide terrorist campaigns occurred, led first by al-Qaeda in Iraq and later by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

FIGURE 1. MIDDLE EAST SUICIDE ATTACKS IN CONTEXT, 2000-2022



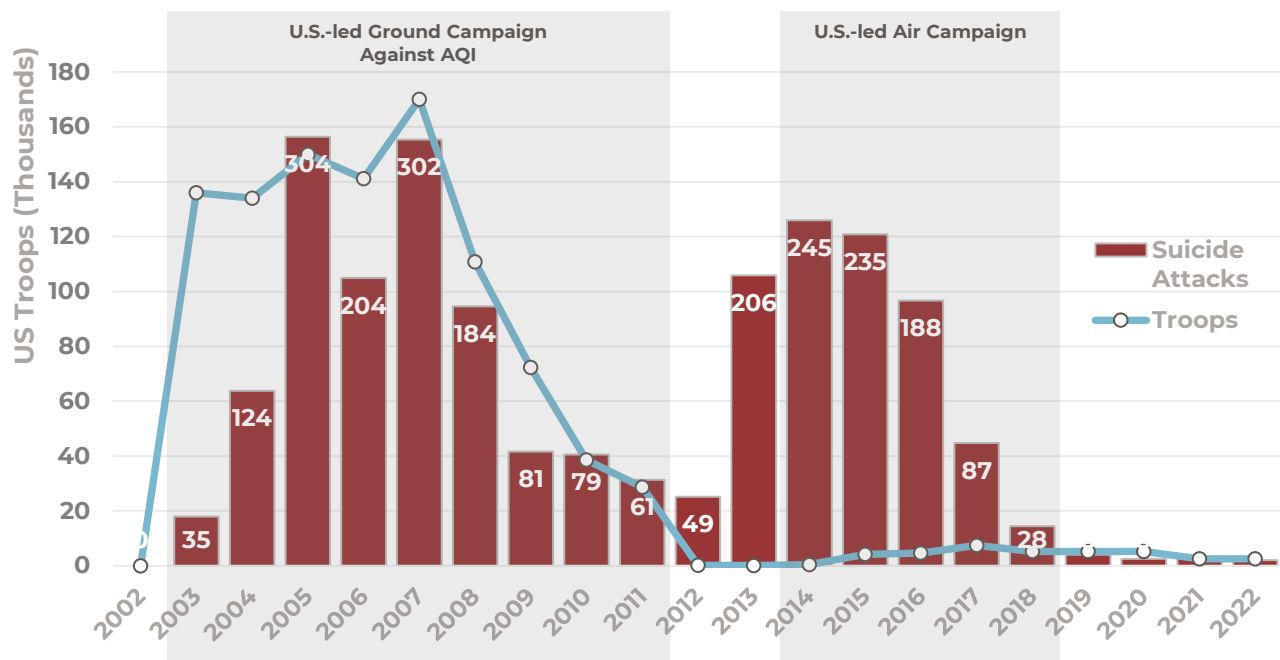
Note: Middle East includes Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen. Central/South Asia includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
Source: CPOST Database on Suicide Attacks

Since the defeat of ISIS as a territorial entity in December 2017, suicide attacks in the Middle East – comprising Iraq, Syria, the Persian Gulf, Israel, and countries in North Africa – are down sharply. From 2018 to 2022, suicide attacks in the Middle East declined by an astonishing 80%. As a subsequent section will show, there were fewer than ten suicide attacks in Afghanistan in 2022. Further, the consistency of the trend over the past five years suggests that we are witnessing a systemically lower level of suicide attacks, not a temporary fluctuation based on local factors during this period.

Suicide Attacks in Iraq Returning to Pre-U.S. Occupation Levels

The association between the American shift to restraint in the Middle East and the decline in suicide terrorism is clear when examining trends in Iraq (Figure 2 below). American military forces invaded Iraq in March 2003 with over 130,000 ground forces, quickly toppled the Saddam Hussein government in April 2003, installed a new constitution and government, and maintained military forces that were widely perceived as controlling the Iraqi government until recent years. Prior to 2003, Iraq had never experienced a suicide attack in its history. With the U.S. invasion, however, suicide attacks rose to significant levels. Then as U.S. troop levels declined, so too did suicide attacks. This trend reversed as ISIS threatened to seize control of the Iraqi government, which was turned back with the help of a limited number of U.S. troops, a major U.S.-led Western air campaign, and ground forces from local allies. Since 2018, the number of suicide attacks in Iraq has declined almost to zero.

FIGURE 2. U.S. MILITARY PRESSURE AND SUICIDE ATTACK TRENDS IN IRAQ, 2002-2022



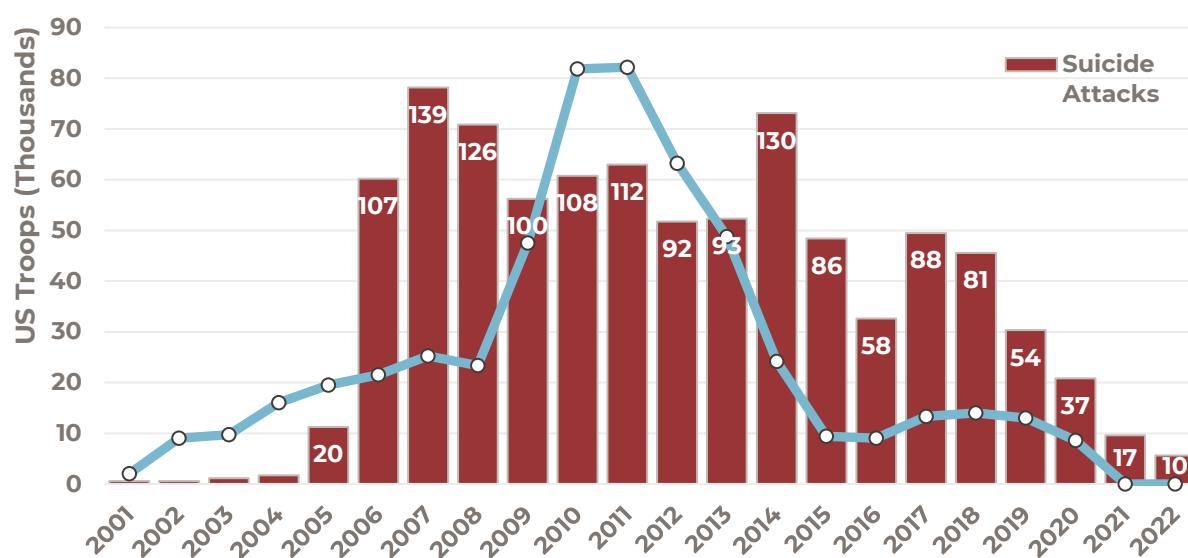
Source: CPOST Database on Suicide Attacks. U.S. troop data from Michael Allen, Michael Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain "U.S. Global Military Deployments, 1950 to 2020," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2021).

Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan Also Returning to Pre-U.S. Occupation Levels

As in Iraq, where the shift in American military posture led to a decline in suicide attacks, Afghanistan reveals the same pattern. In fall 2001, a small contingent of American special forces supported the

Northern Alliance’s military campaign to topple the Afghan Taliban government. The Taliban government had given al-Qaeda a sanctuary from which to plan the 9/11 attacks. The subsequent escalation in the presence of U.S. troops and installation of an American-crafted constitution and new government for Afghanistan created a significant and growing backlash, as these policies were widely perceived by the local population and many others as effectively occupying the country. Indeed, as would become readily apparent to the world in August 2021 when the withdrawal of U.S. troops was quickly followed by the collapse of the Afghan government, the American military had been essential in maintaining the American-installed government in power. As Figure 3 below indicates, prior to 2001 Afghanistan had never experienced a suicide attack. The country had only a handful of suicide attacks from 2001-2004, but then saw a spike upwards beginning in 2005. This spike ultimately created a mutual cycle of escalation as more U.S. troops arrived to quell the Taliban insurgency, which provided more targets for attacks by the Taliban. The yearly number of attacks remained high for more than a decade, but after the number of American troops declined starting in 2011, so too did the number of suicide attacks.

FIGURE 3. U.S. MILITARY PRESSURE AND SUICIDE ATTACK TRENDS IN AFGHANISTAN, 2001-2022



Source: CPOST Database on Suicide Attacks. U.S. troop data from Allen, Flynn, and Machain (2021).

To gauge the policy of restraint in Afghanistan, it is helpful to compare the period before America’s negotiated settlement with the Afghan Taliban in 2020 to the period after. This agreement signaled the U.S.’s clear intention to completely withdraw all military forces from the country. In the three

years after that settlement suicide attacks declined by 73% compared to the previous three years and remained exceedingly low after the return of the Afghan Taliban to power.

To be sure, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was far from the smooth policy shift promised by both the Trump and Biden administrations and resulted in the immediate resumption of power by the Afghan Taliban. This has serious domestic political, economic, and social consequences that do not bode well for the future of democracy and liberalism in the country.

Nonetheless, from the perspective of America's chief strategic interest – reducing anti-American terrorism, particularly suicide attacks – the shift toward a policy of “over-the-horizon” has thus far been a striking success. Indeed, as of early 2023, there have been no serious calls for a return of American ground forces or resumption of a major air campaign against targets in the country. The challenge for the United States regarding Afghanistan and for any restrained counterterrorism policy is to maintain the commitment necessary to continue these positive trends.

What about Pakistan?

For decades, many have argued that local factors, including militant group rivalries and Islamist network effects, have been more important than U.S. military presence as a driving factor of suicide attacks in Pakistan, and for a simple reason: except for possible low footprint drone and special forces bases kept from public view, U.S. military forces have not been stationed in the country. These non-foreign-military presence explanations, however, have always been confounded by the fact that a large U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was engaged in protracted warfare against the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, whose leadership and sanctuaries were across the border in Pakistan. Hence, American counterterrorism strategy for Afghanistan involved large numbers of drone strikes in Pakistan and close cooperation with the Pakistan government and security forces.

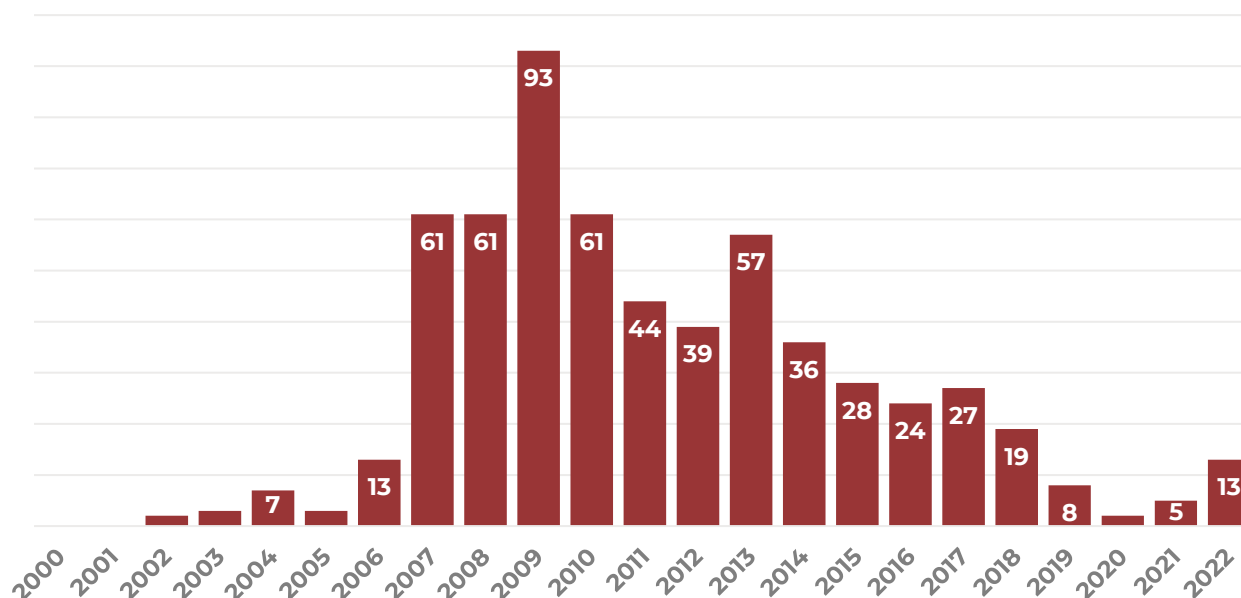
With the benefit of 20 years of data, we can see that trajectory of suicide attacks in Pakistan closely mirrors the trajectory of those attacks – and American military deployment – in Afghanistan. As Figure 4 shows, suicide attacks in Pakistan existed at tiny levels (some years zero) from 2000 to 2005, despite the presence of Islamist networks comprised of thousands in Islamist schools (madrassas) and numerous local terrorist groups. Suicide attacks skyrocketed in 2006 and remained high until 2018, corresponding to significant U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, and U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation against terrorist groups in Pakistan. Since 2018, suicide attacks have fallen back to 2000-2005 levels. If we compare this trajectory to Figure 3 above on Afghanistan, it is clear that the trajectory of suicide attacks in Pakistan follows the changes in the trajectory of the attacks in Afghanistan almost to the exact year.

Overall, although numerous other factors are important, the surge of suicide attacks in Pakistan is probably best thought of as a response to U.S. “indirect occupation” – similar, albeit not identical to, policies of British indirect colonial rule. To be clear, in a traditional military alliance, member countries pursue mutual goals of interest. In this case, that would have meant the United States giving priority to the pursuit of Pakistan’s traditional security objectives of opposing India and supporting militant groups in Kashmir. This did not happen. In an indirect occupation, however, the indirectly occupied country (Pakistan) gives higher priority to the goals of the indirect occupier (the United States). This is the pattern we observe.

In response to American demands after 9/11, Pakistan shifted its strategic priorities toward American goals. Heavy U.S. combat ground forces were not directly involved in exerting military pressure against terrorist groups in the country. Instead, the United States successfully pressured the Pakistani government to expand its priorities from defending the eastern border with India to engaging with militants in the region that borders Afghanistan.

Today, the shift of American policy toward the more restrained policy of “over-the-horizon” in Afghanistan has also meant a more restrained policy regarding Pakistan and effectively the end of indirect occupation in that country. The result has been a decline of suicide attacks in Pakistan.

FIGURE 4. SUICIDE ATTACKS IN PAKISTAN, 2000-2022

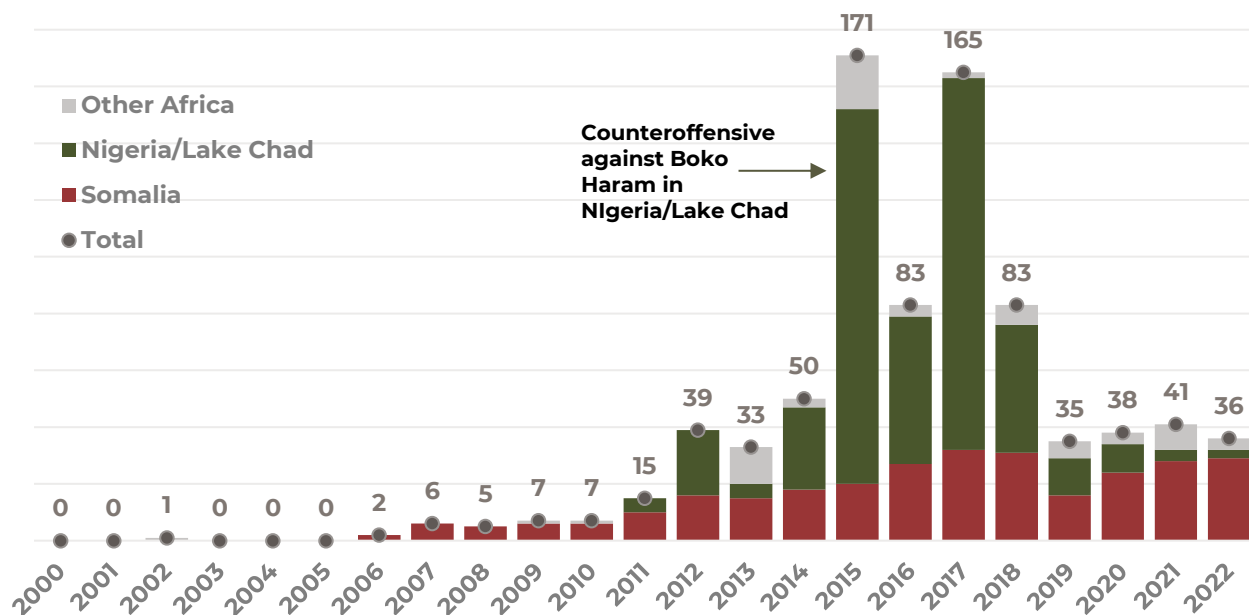


Source: CPOST Database on Suicide Attacks

Suicide Attacks Also Fall in Africa

Interestingly, suicide attacks have not just declined in the Middle East. After reaching a peak in 2015 the number of suicide attacks in Africa has also declined. There are two regions of particular importance. First, is the Lake Chad region, which includes countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, where Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) are the only groups using suicide attacks. Second, is Somalia, where al-Shabaab adopted suicide attacks as a tactic in 2006 and has used them ever since.

FIGURE 5. SUICIDE ATTACKS IN AFRICA, 2000-2022



Note: Africa includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, DR Congo, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. Source: CPOST Database on Suicide Attacks

Suicide attacks in Africa have occurred in response to the presence of foreign troops, although, as elsewhere, other causes also play important roles. As CPOST's 2021 *JPR* article explains, there have been network effects and local factors encouraging suicide attacks independent of the presence of foreign military forces. For instance, al-Shabaab in Somalia typically increases its use of suicide attacks in the months leading up to federal elections to discourage participation on the part of local lawmakers.

An additional reason for the decline of suicide terrorism is the rise of local militias not affiliated to global terror organizations. Militia groups without international affiliations appear less inclined to use

suicide attacks, partly because they must appeal to local populations in ways that IS-affiliates have no need to.

Overall, suicide attacks have decreased most significantly in West Africa. Nigeria and the Lake Chad region had 132 suicide attacks in 2015 but only 3 in 2022, a decline of 98% over the period. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State affiliates have focused on capturing territory in the Sahel region, as well as in Mozambique, which has further contributed to the recent decline in suicide attacks.

Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region

A closer look at Nigeria and the Lake Chad region clarifies the importance of foreign military pressure as a driving force encouraging suicide attacks in this area. Although a small number of suicide attacks occurred before, the dramatic rise of suicide attacks from 2015 to 2017 in West Africa corresponds to foreign military pressure, though not American military pressure.

Boko Haram's initial adoption of suicide terrorism occurred in 2011, when the group carried out several attacks against the political and security targets in Nigeria. As seen in Figure 5 above, however, attacks spiked heavily in 2015. This spike was in response to military pressure. In 2015, Nigerian, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon all intensified military operations against Boko Haram, and the resulting threatened Boko Haram's ability to operate. In 2017, Boko Haram splintered after a leadership dispute, with fighters leaving to form ISWAP. Boko Haram increased their rate of attacks in part as an attempt to retain dominance over this new rival. This effort has not prevented ISWAP from growing in strength, and one explanation for the decline in attacks in the region is strategic preference: perhaps ISWAP's leaders prefer, and have the strength for, conventional military operations.

In general, the case of West Africa confirms that the resort to heavy military pressure by foreign countries entails a serious risk of backlash that can lead suicide attacks to surge to far higher levels. In effect, the next generation provoked by the foreign military pressure can be more threatening than the last, unleashing a cycle of escalation.

Somalia

But there is one place in Africa where suicide attacks have remained relatively constant: Somalia. Since 2020, about 66 percent of all suicide attacks in Africa have occurred in Somalia. As seen above in Figure 5, this is not because the number of suicide attacks in Somalia is dramatically growing, but because suicide attacks have not declined there as fast as they have in other parts of Africa.

As in West Africa, the suicide campaign in Somalia also coincides with foreign military intervention in the country, though not American military intervention. Ethiopian forces entered Somalia in the summer of 2006 and remained in the country until 2009; the first suicide attacks in Somalia were also

in 2006. The following year, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was approved by the United Nations and five African nations—Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia—sent approximately 20,000 troops for peacekeeping and nation building operations. Approximately 20,000 troops remain in Somalia, though AMISOM has technically been dissolved and replaced by a successor mission. Over this period, the size of al-Shabaab’s suicide attack campaign in Somalia has remained relatively stable.

There are year-to-year fluctuations which can be explained by local dynamics. Suicide attacks in Somalia dropped by 63% from 2018 to 2019, a change that may be explained by civilian backlash after a suicide attack in October 2017 killed more than 500 people. Additionally, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, al-Shabaab limited its violent activities in a bid to present itself as a legitimate alternative to the Somali federal government. These declines proved temporary, as attack levels have subsequently risen again.

The failures of the Somali government to make tangible gains against the terror group, as well as their continued reliance on outside actors, has undermined the government’s credibility with civilians and resulted in a stalemate-like situation between the state and al-Shabaab. Somalia faces a particularly pernicious security problem in that it has become reliant on the presence of foreign military support to deal with al-Shabaab. These external partners have difficulty collaborating, and while U.S. airstrikes have proved effective in limiting al-Shabaab's movements, their internal hierarchy appears flexible enough to recover from the loss of leaders.

Conclusion: The Future of Restraint

After 9/11, the American strategy for addressing the threat of global terrorism was an aggressive, boots-on-the-ground approach. After about 10 years, that approach shifted to a highly militarized over-the-horizon strategy. That strategy is marked using mass air power (often by drones) in collaboration with ground offensives by local partners instead of locally deployed American forces. Since 2018, America’s policy has evolved into a far less militarized over-the-horizon policy, consisting of occasional use of air strikes, political and economic support for local ground allies, and ground force presence numbering in the very low thousands (Iraq), about a thousand (Syria), or none at all (Afghanistan and Africa). This policy closely approximates restraint in the region as called for by those advocating that strategy.

Despite fears that restraint would merely be a prelude to a new surge of anti-American terrorism, the data on suicide attacks – the most dangerous type of attack by militant non-state actors – shows that restraint can, in fact, succeed as a U.S. national security strategy against terrorist groups. Although

local and network factors matter, the sharp decline in suicide attacks across all major regions and in virtually every country since 2018 shows that a less militarized strategy is viable.

However, it is important to underscore that success of restraint comes at a price – the price of vigilance. It is crucial to recognize that restraint is not isolationism or a “withdraw and forget” strategy. To be successful, restraint requires strategic surveillance, tactical intelligence, special forces, capacity for flexible response, and working partnerships with local allies.

In the long term, the main risk of restrained counterterrorism is complacency, particularly the belief that current relative success guarantees that terrorist threats will not arise in the future. Indeed, in the last two quarters of 2022, CPOST has seen modest increases in suicide attacks in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria. The contestations around the new Mohammed Shia al-Sudani government in Iraq (October 2022), combined with continued ISIS activity in Northeast Syria, have primed the region for a possible resurgence in suicide attacks. In Africa, al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates have gained strong footholds in the Sahel region, with the Islamic State also expanding its influence in East Africa through the creation of an affiliate in Mozambique. Lastly, the U.S. should continue to monitor the fighting between the Taliban government and the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan, IS-Khorasan, as IS-K continues to attack Taliban and civilian targets.

The U.S. must continue to monitor Iraq and other regions of strategic importance for signs of trouble and be prepared to use the tools of over-the-horizon capabilities to blunt the threat. Although none of these near-term developments is a harbinger of dramatic future increases in the threat of terrorism, any serious American security strategy for counterterrorism must remain both appropriately engaged in the key regions from which anti-American terrorist attacks have emerged and sufficiently flexible to respond effectively if they emerge again.

Even as the United States and its allies remain vigilant, there are powerful lessons from America’s over twenty-year war on terrorism that should guide future policy. Foremost among them is that restraint – consistently following an over-the-horizon strategy that takes advantage of American political, economic, and technological strength to support local allies – is most likely America’s best approach to the dangers of even the most aggressive form of terrorism.

CPOST Data Collection Strategies

CPOST’s Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT) contains specific information for all suicide attacks committed in modern history, from 1982 through 2022. Data is coded for over 70 variables, including information about the location of attacks, the target type, the weapon used, and systematic information on the demographic and general biographical characteristics of suicide attackers. To

ensure the most accurate data, CPOST incorporates a comprehensive 3-step collection process followed by a verification process to identify and confirm suicide attacks. The 3-step process includes the ProQuest database, Google Advanced Search, and regional searches using multiple search engines and social media platforms to locate information not reported in the media. CPOST regularly updates and improves its research methods based on new developments to ensure the data provides the most comprehensive and verifiable list of suicide attacks in the world.

Research Team

Robert Pape, PhD – Principal Investigator

Keven Ruby, PhD – Senior Research Director

Kyle Larson, PhD — Senior Research Associate

Alejandro Albanez Rivas — Associate Director, Data and Research Operations

Sabreena Croteau, PhD Candidate – Deputy Research Director

Student Research Supervisors – Aidan Aronoff, Bertrand Chu, Astrid Weinberg

Research Assistants: Thomas Braun, Eugene DeCosse, Lola Fisher, Ahmed Hamid, Morgane Hamza, Christine Jonglerham, Kacey Marioghae, Nicholas Miller, Blake Stoltenberg

Funding

This report was supported by generous funding from Dr. Ali Al Nuami and Al-Majal Media.