REVIEW

Chicago Projects on Security & Threats

CPOST
SCIENCE + SECURITY

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
www.cpost.uchicago.edu

Political Violence

January 1 – December 31 2020

INTRODUCTION

The University of Chicago Project on Security & Threats (CPOST) first comprehensive analysis of the Year 2020 analyzes:

- Global trends in political violence`,
- Militant propaganda, with a focus on Arabic propaganda; and the
- Covid 19 impact on global militant violence.

The data and findings from the beginning of January to the end of December 2020 are discussed by Dr. Robert Pape, Professor, University of Chicago Political Science Department and Founding Director of CPOST, a world-class center that has been studying political violence since 2004.

Over Christmas and New Year, CPOST Professors and researchers worked hard to analyze the data for the last quarter of 2020 to give a complete picture of the year. Those familiar with academic research will appreciate the effort involved in developing data and analyses so quickly. However, the times we live in require scientific data and rigorous analysis to help us understand the threats that we face.

The material here is from pre-recorded material and discussions with Professor Pape and CPOST senior researchers recorded during a live streaming event on January 27, 2021.
It can be seen here: https://vimeo.com/510360212

Dr. ROBERT PAPE

Robert Pape is a professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and founder and director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST).

He is an American political scientist who studies national and international security affairs, American and international political violence, social media propaganda, and terrorism.

Dr Pape Pape is the **Founding Director of CPOST** (originally, Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism), which he is the founded after presenting preliminary data on his research into suicide terrorism in the American Political Science Review in 2003.
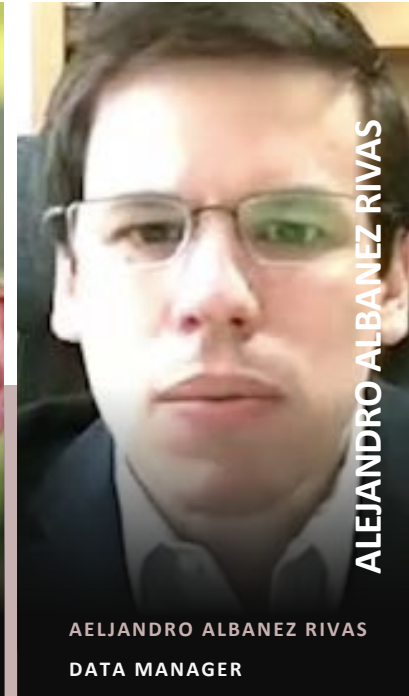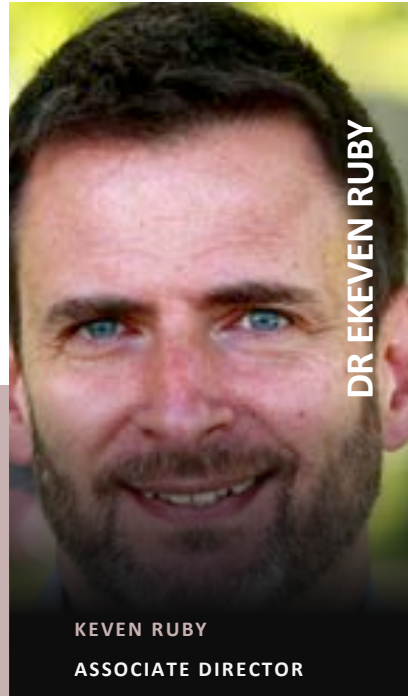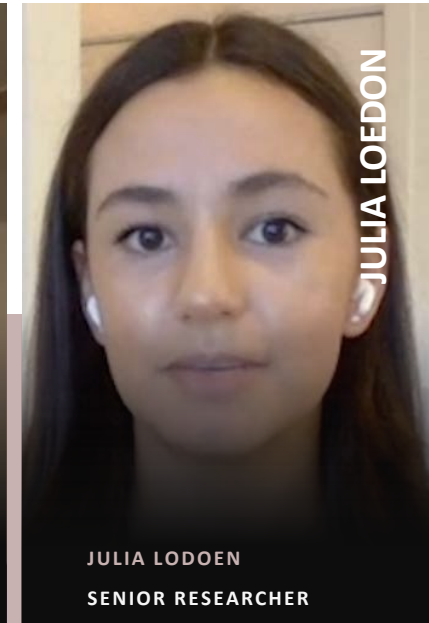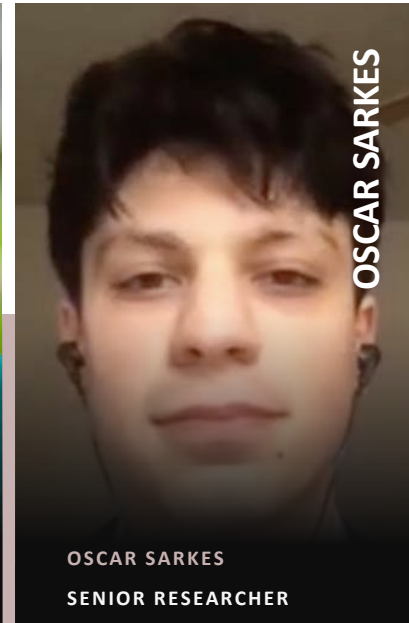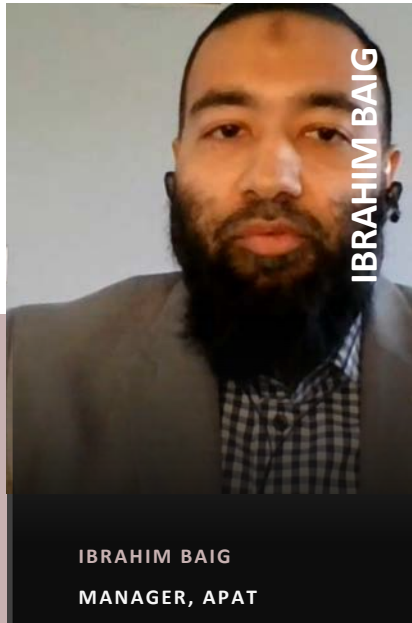
SPECIAL GUEST

H.E. Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi

H.E. Dr. Ali Al-Nuaimi is Chairman of Hedayah, a Member of the UAE Federal National Council for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and Chairman of the Defense Affairs, Interior & Foreign Affairs Committee at the Council. Dr. Al Nuaimi is a leading international expert on Extremism and Education. He has more than thirty years of outstanding academic and professional achievements in Government, Non-Government, and Private sectors within the United Arab Emirates and abroad.

CPOST gratefully acknowledges the support of the United Arab Emirates for its support.

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Global Trends

The media is saturated with images of political violence and unrest, portraying political violence as a growing global phenomenon. However, the data at a more granular level shows a very different aggregate picture and far more nuanced local findings for both non-suicide and suicide attacks.

For non-suicide attacks, CPOST took the data from the **Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)** then combined it with **the CPOST Suicide Attack Database (DSAT)** CPOST has been collecting data for over the past 16 years.

The focus here is mainly on four regions:
- The Middle East
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- North Africa, and
- South-Central Asia, which includes Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Of course, CPOST only has access to open-source information. Over the years, it has developed protocols and systems in multiple ways to test the data, which means the data is more transparent, verifiable, and reliable, offering a really high level of confidence in counting methodology and subsequent findings. In terms of regional variations in 2020 with non-suicide political violence or all political violence in general, all four regions saw attacks fall on aggregate by 5%.

That fall was sharp in the first six months and rose again in the next six months.

Attack trends

A closer look shows that:
- The Middle East was flat following the general trend down in the first six months and then rising in the second six months.
- South Central Asia dropped a drastic 45%, falling sharply in the first six months and then a sharp increase in the second six months.
- North Africa meanwhile rose 13%; a significant change and something of a reversal of that general trend.
- Sub-Saharan Africa rose every quarter to a 33% increase over the year, which is very different from the past for that particular region.

Suicide attacks saw a global drop of 47% with:
- The Middle East down 72%
- South Central Asia down 51%
- North Africa down 70%
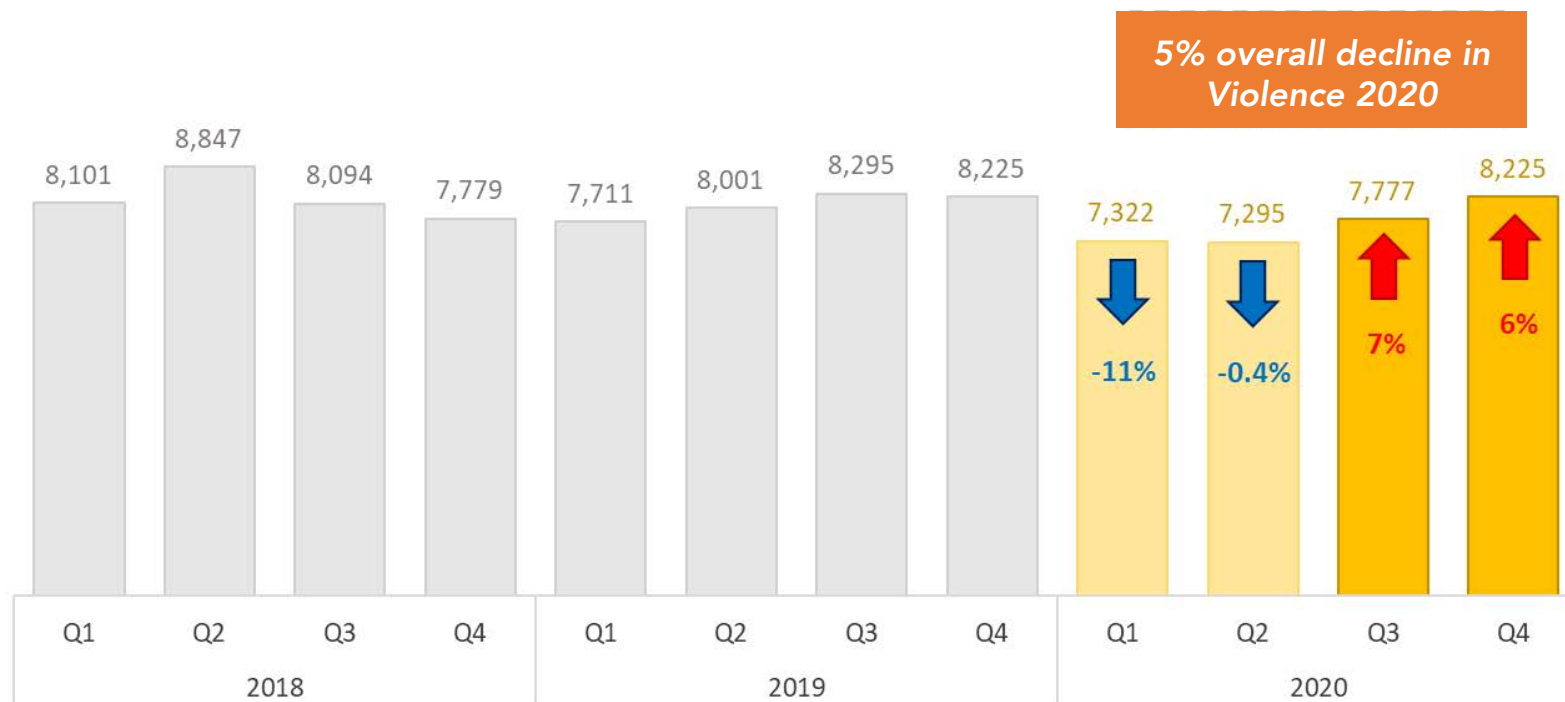- Sub-Saharan Africa has back the trend by rising 11%.

Suicide attacks have been falling consistently from 2016 onwards. Although that reduction in the first half of 2020 could be partly attributed to the pandemic, it is perhaps best seen as a pandemic accelerating an existing trend. The diminishing of attacks started to change after the second half of 2020. There were increases and evolving patterns and distributions. Drilling deeper down into the data reveals three main areas of interest:
- Differentials between regions
- The connection between suicide terrorism and civil wars and
- The growing power of militant networks.
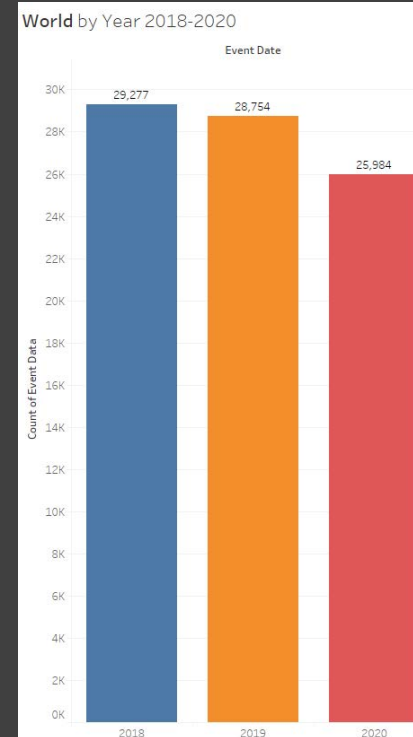
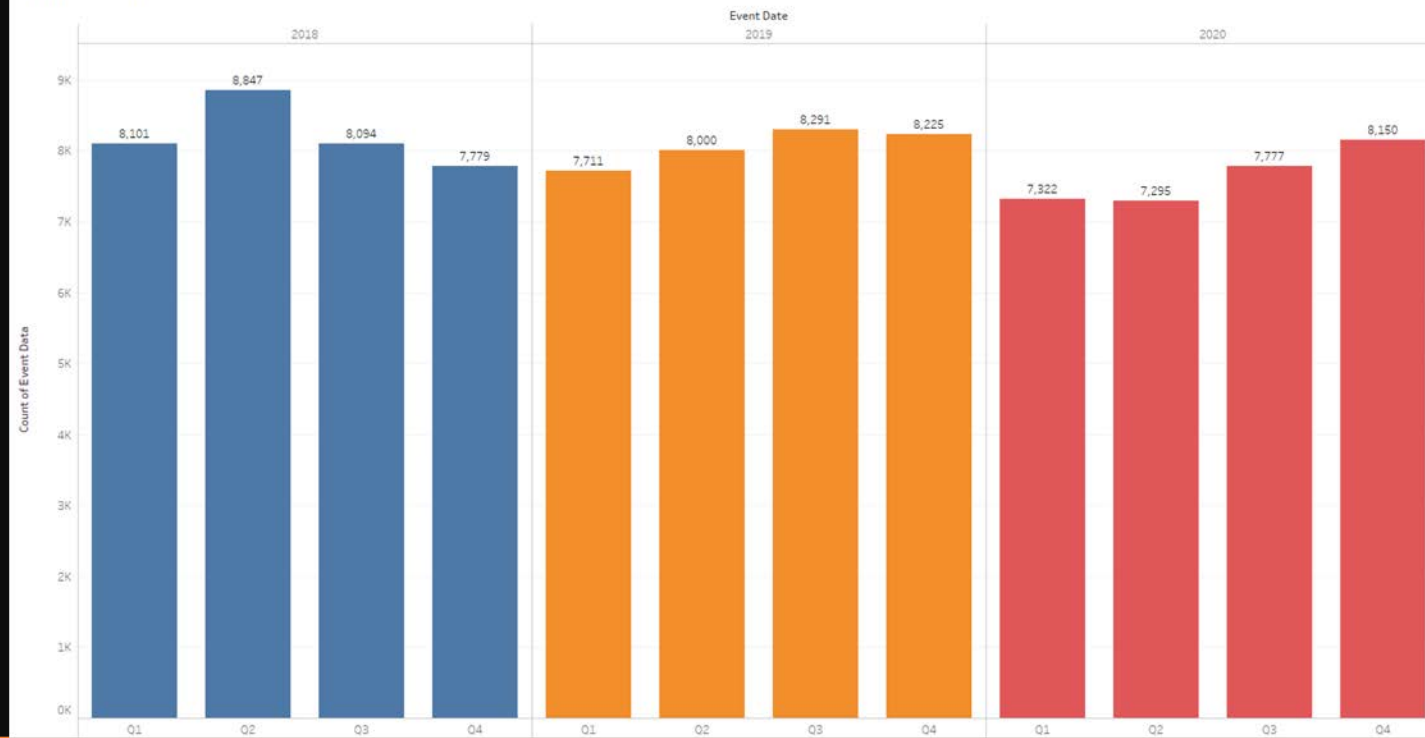Global Aggregate Political Violence 2018-2020

All Political Violence
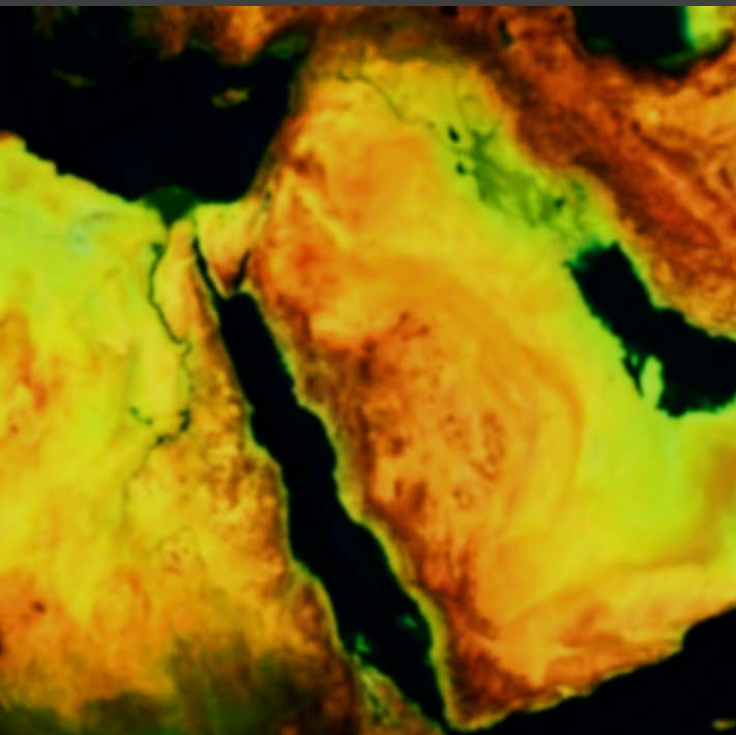Regions of Interest by quarter 2018-2020

5% overall decline in Violence 2020

	2018				2019				2020			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	8,101	8,847	8,094	7,779	7,711	8,001	8,295	8,225	7,322	7,295	7,777	8,225
									-11%	-0.4%	7%	6%

Source: *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*

Global
Political
Violence
By Quarter

World by Quarter 2018-2020

Event Date

2018   2019   2020

Count of Event Data

8,101 | 8,847 | 8,094 | 7,779 | 7,711 | 8,000 | 8,291 | 8,225 | 7,322 | 7,295 | 7,777 | 8,150
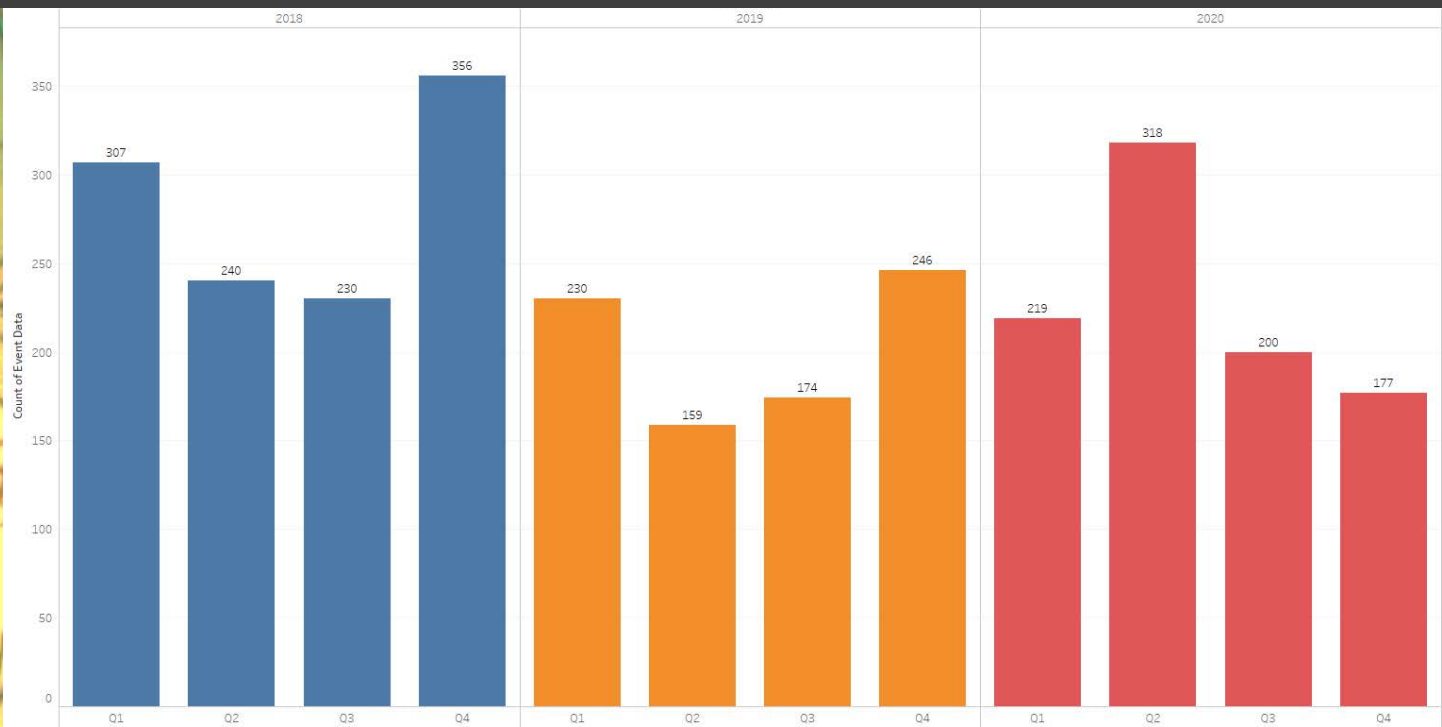
Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 | Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 | Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4

Middle East by Quarter 2018-2020
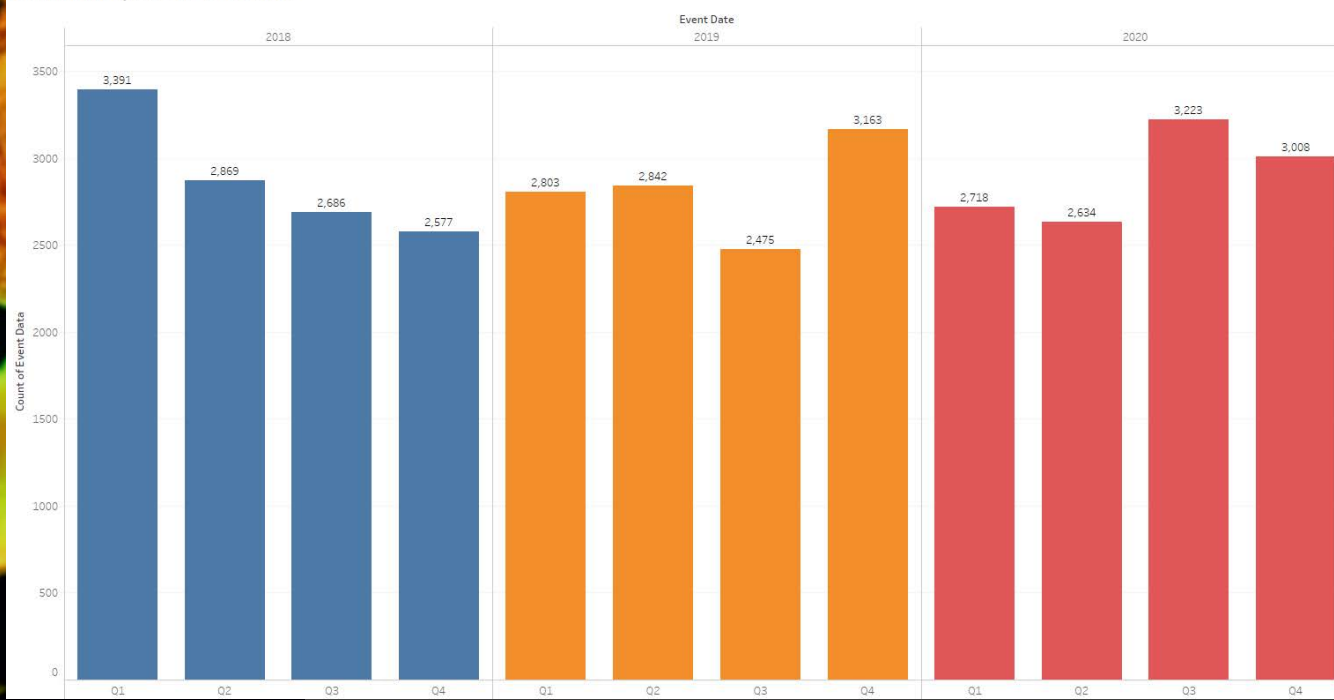
The Middle East

Political Violence by Quarter

North Africa

Political Violence By Quarter
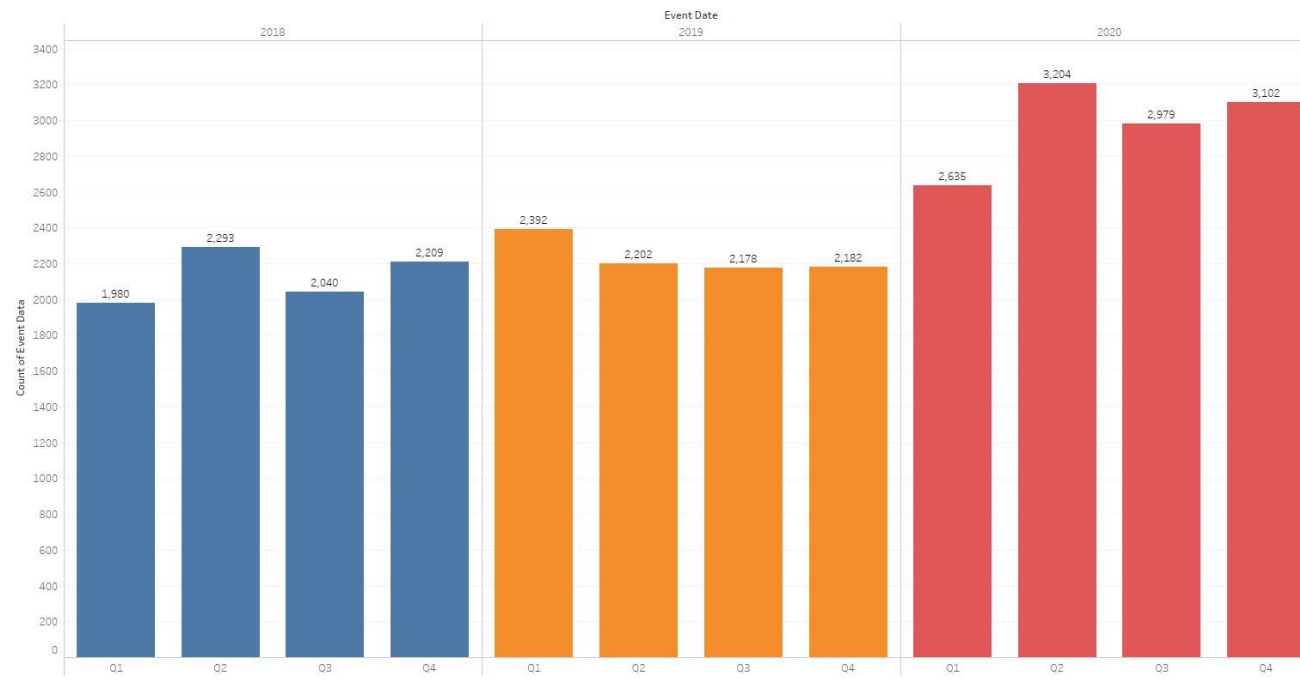
Sub-Sahara

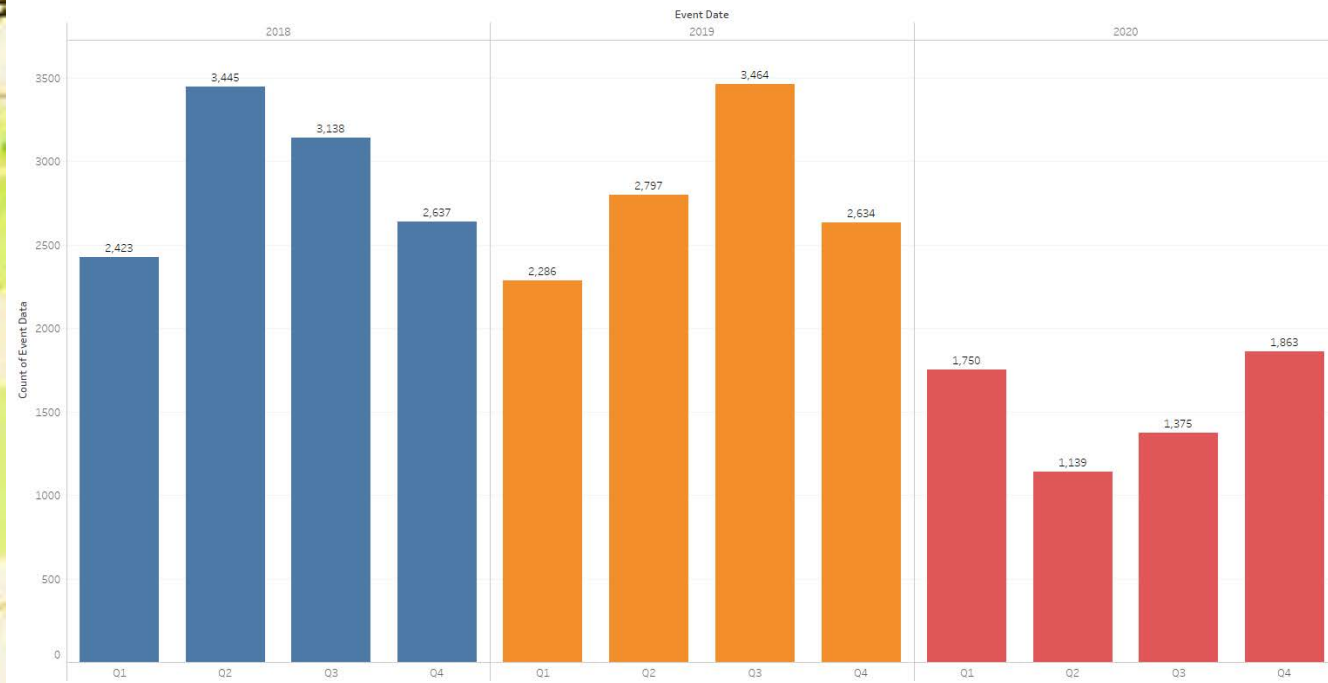Political Violence By Quarter

South Central ASIA

Political Violence By Quarter

SUICIDE ATTACKS

With suicide attacks, therefore, the data shows:

- The Middle East diminishing.
- Afghanistan pretty much stable and remaining number one in suicide attacks and
- African countries such as Nigeria and Somalia are coming up in the ranks.

This means that as the United States has withdrawn from The Middle East, suicide attacks are clearly diminishing and have been for some time. It is also a fact that a great deal has been invested in counterterrorism efforts, such as intelligence and counter violent extremism operations. When it comes to prevention, it is hard to demonstrate a link to success. In any event, suicide attacks still remain the deadliest form of political violence and are, therefore, worthy of continued study. They are also like a primary cancer and can metastasize in unforeseen ways, especially when you consider their connections to civil wars and the growth and changing nature of terror networks.

+ CIVIL WAR

There is evidence when a civil war has a thousand battle deaths in a year, suicide attacks are around 10% more likely to occur that year and the following year.

A core reason why conflict and suicide terrorism are so closely linked is that global suicide attack organizations facilitate suicide attack campaigns. For example, in these situations, the Islamic state contributes to the spread of suicide attacks stirring conflicts through support to its affiliates. While it is clear that intense conflicts are likely to provide the impetus for suicide attacks, more research is needed to determine whether or not suicide attacks increase the chance that a conflict will escalate from low to high intensity in the first place. If there is a relationship between suicide attacks and conflict escalation, that will obviously be valuable as a predictive tool as civil wars unfold.
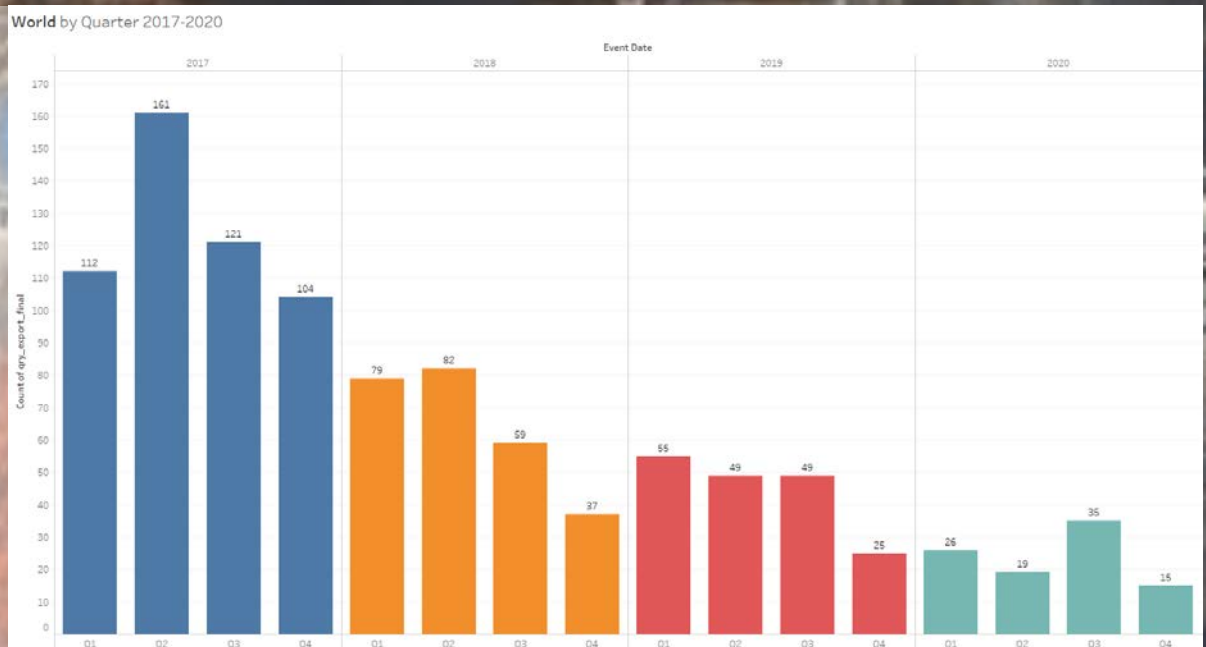
+ DIGITAL SPREAD

Thanks to digital technologies and the ability to communicate across encrypted channels, the reach of terror networks means that ISIS is not just a hub for attacks; they are a leading hub by far for facilitating suicide attacks by local groups. They are not only able to provide information and training before an attack happens, but they are also able to glorify attacks after they occur.

> " Everybody knows that ISIS is a network; everybody knows they carry out suicide attacks. Research shows that ISIS as a network is becoming as deadly as it was as an attack organization.
>
> **Prof. Robert Pape**

Global Suicide Attacks By Quarter 2017 - 2020

World by Quarter 2017-2020

Event Date

2017   2018   2019   2020

Count of qry_export_final
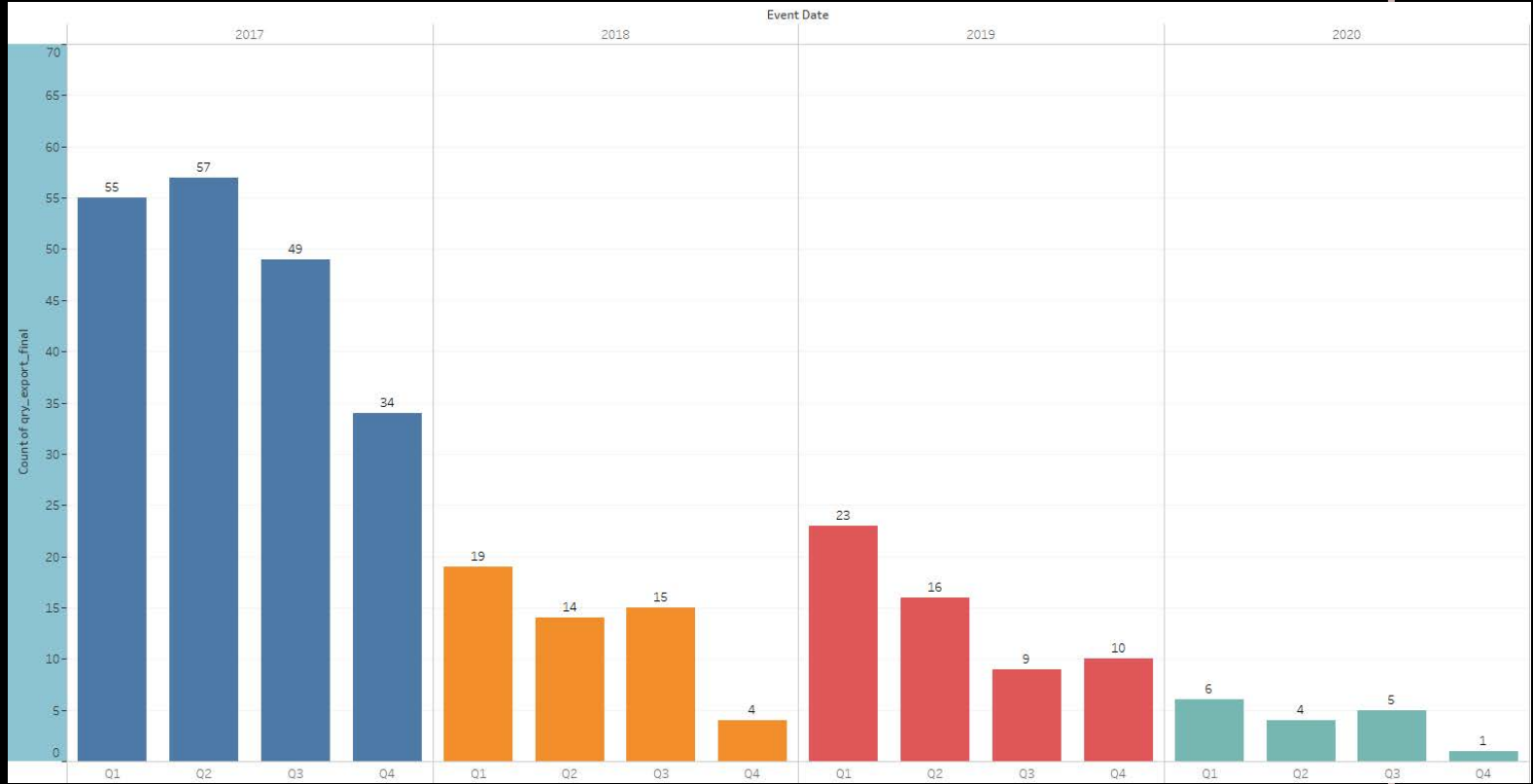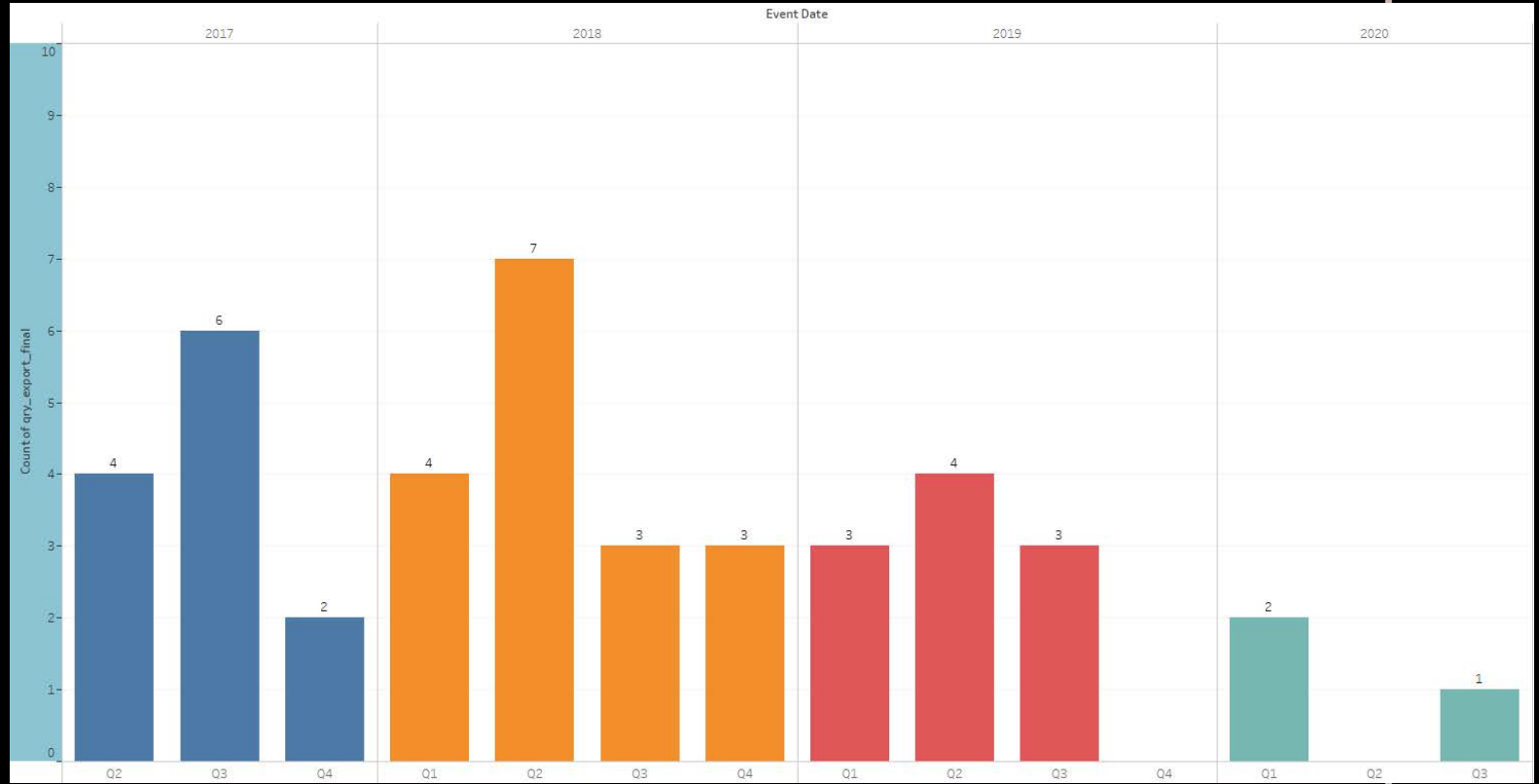
Suicide Attacks Sub-Saharan Afrcia
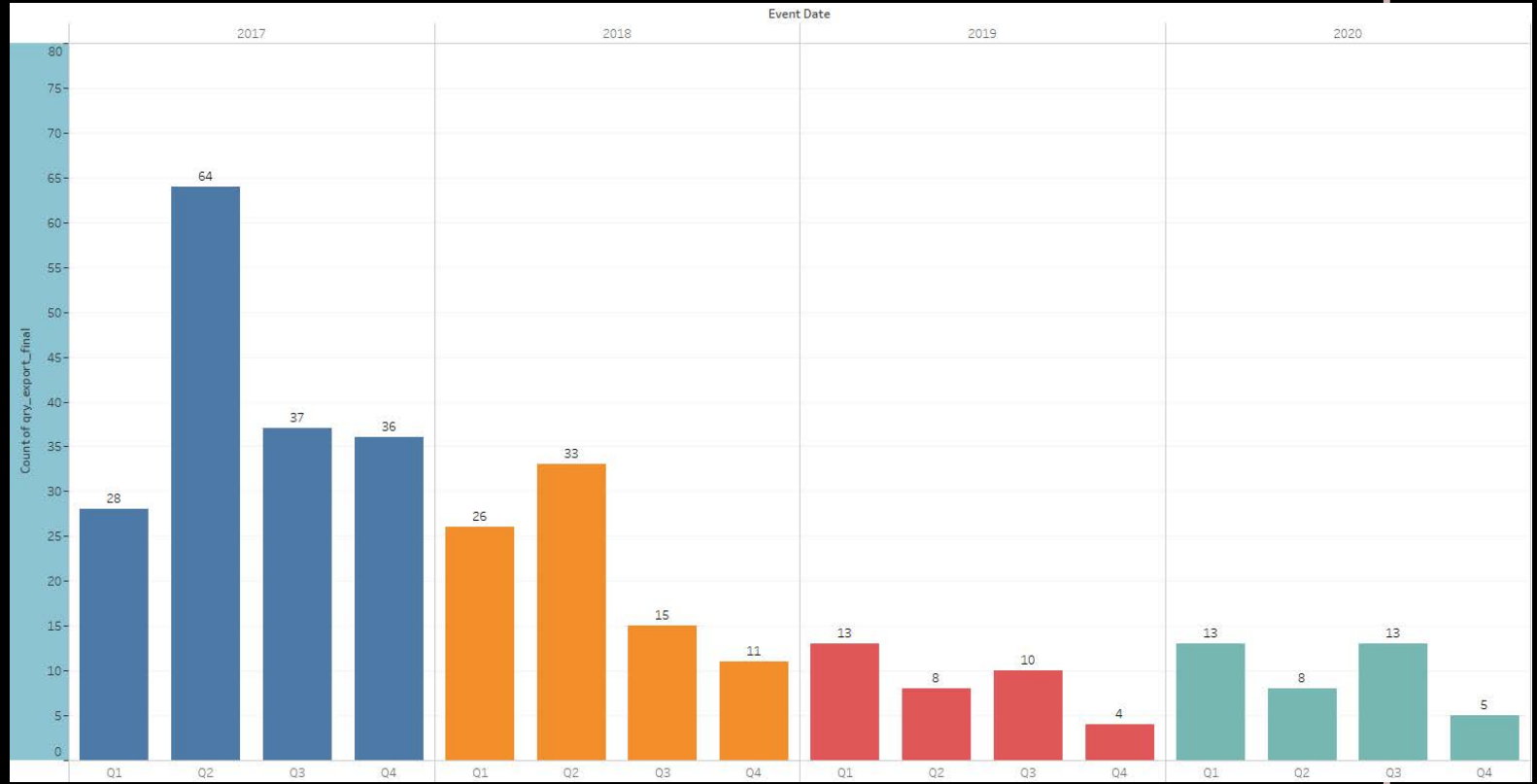
Suicide Attacks

South-Central Asia

Event Date

	2017				2018				2019				2020			

2017: Q1 29, Q2 36, Q3 29, Q4 32
2018: Q1 30, Q2 28, Q3 26, Q4 19
2019: Q1 16, Q2 21, Q3 27, Q4 11
2020: Q1 5, Q2 7, Q3 16, Q4 9

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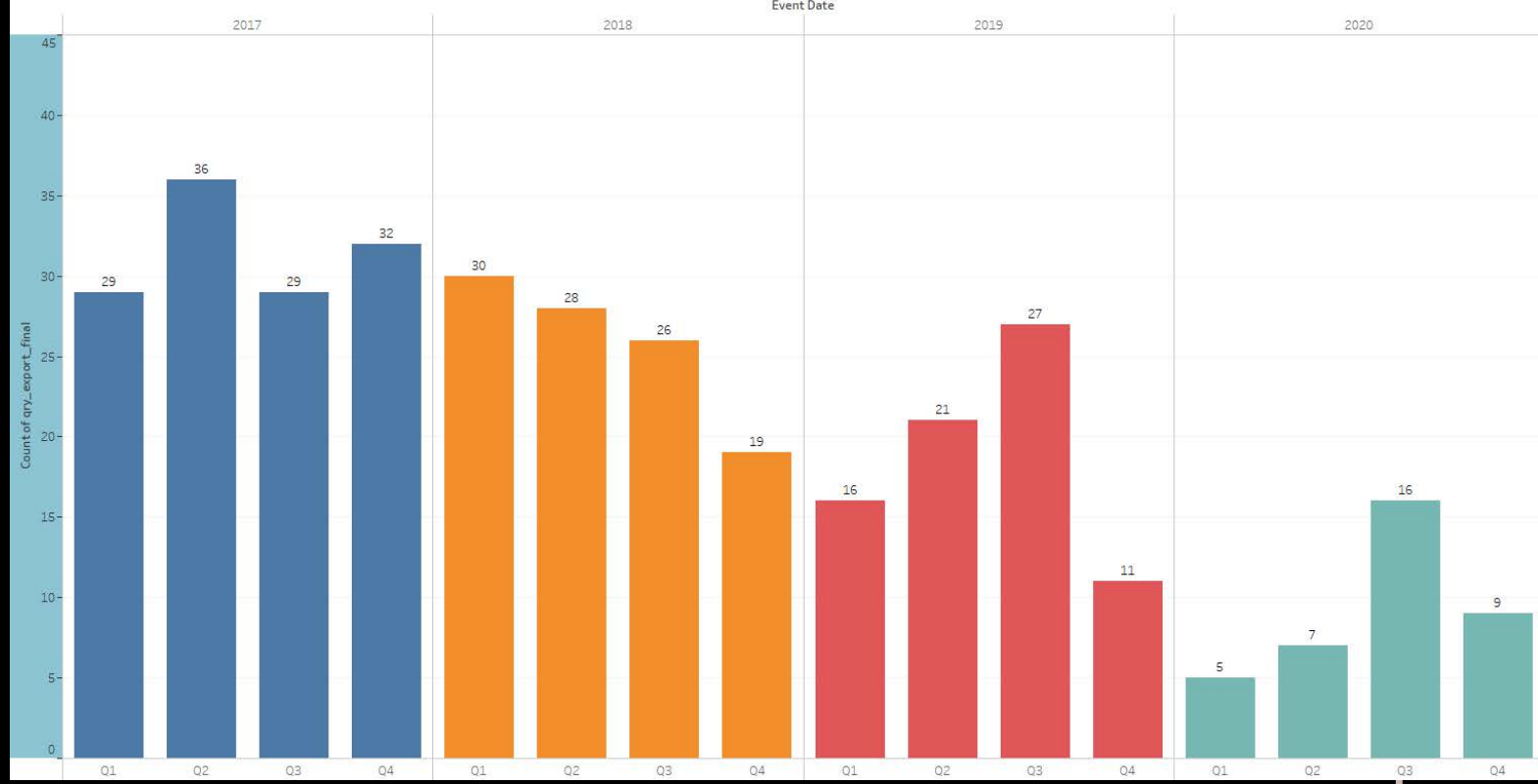
Situation

Except for Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, 2020 was a down year for militant violence, a down year for suicide attacks, and a down year for non-suicide attacks.

 Looking more closely at the data, Africa was the overwhelming exception to this growth big picture as a whole. In Sub-Saharan Africa, while many things are happening to drive up violence and it can't be reduced to a single factor, a central element is ISIS in competition — not with states but with Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, especially those backed by Al-Qaeda. Fighting between ISIS-affiliated groups and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, and that's driving up violence.

 A time-map of violence shows just a few dots in 2016 in Burkina Faso, which unfolds to dense clusters as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Islamic State in the Greater Sahara or (ISGS), in a pattern rarely before, similar competition between to Al Nusra and ISIS in Syria.

The trend in political violence could well be more significant in 2021 than in 2020.

Outlook

Looking more closely at 2020 quarterly data, it is a dark picture for 2021. Violence in 2020 generally went down in the first 6 months and then in those same regions where it went down rose in the second six months. As such, 2021 could see a continuation of that trend upwards. Although 2020 was a down year for militant violence overall, 2021 could well reverse that trend, and government organizations worldwide need to be prepared for that rise and uptake.
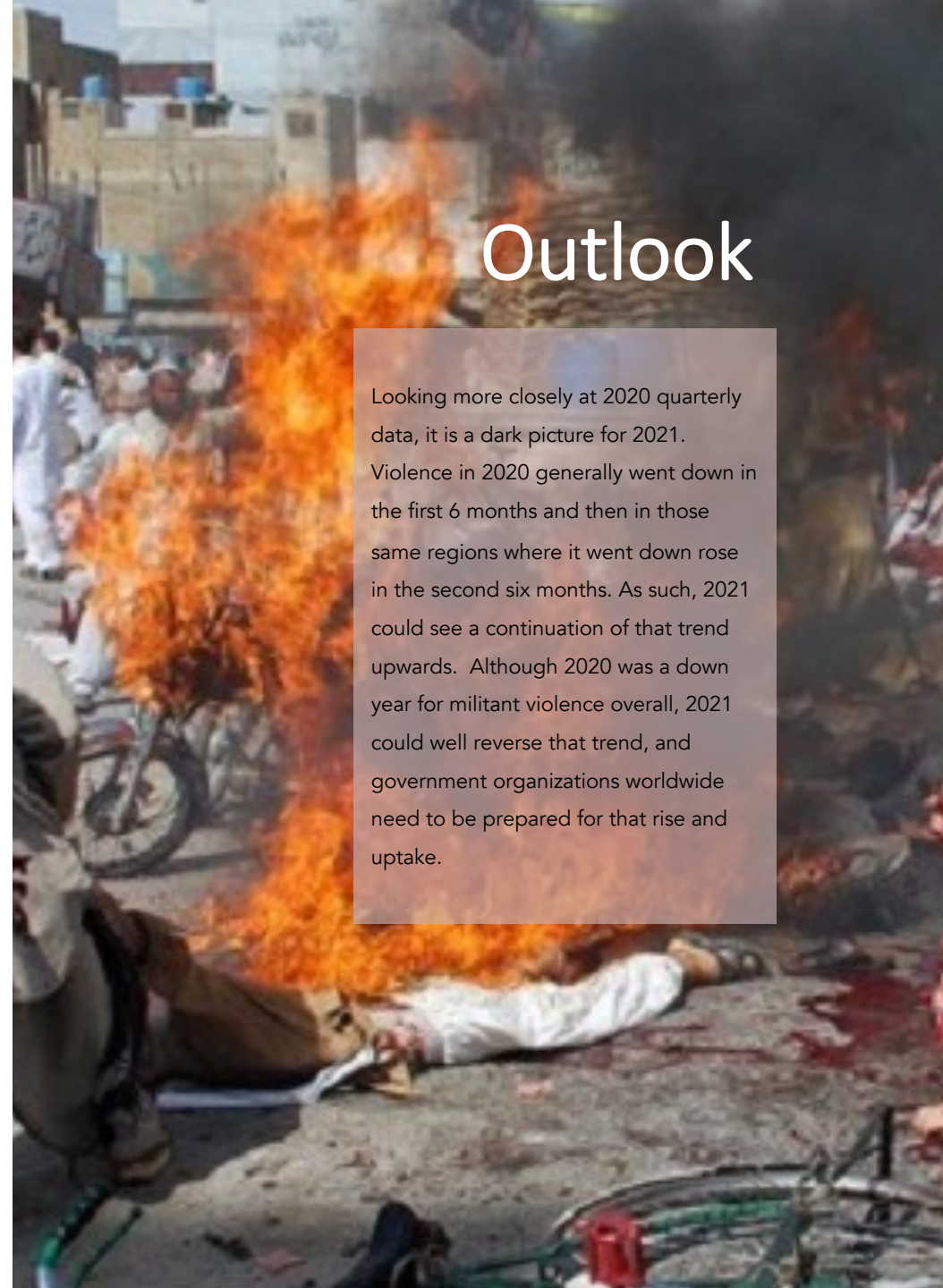
Inter-group conflict over time

2020

Burkina Faso & Mali

2016

Burkina Faso & Mali
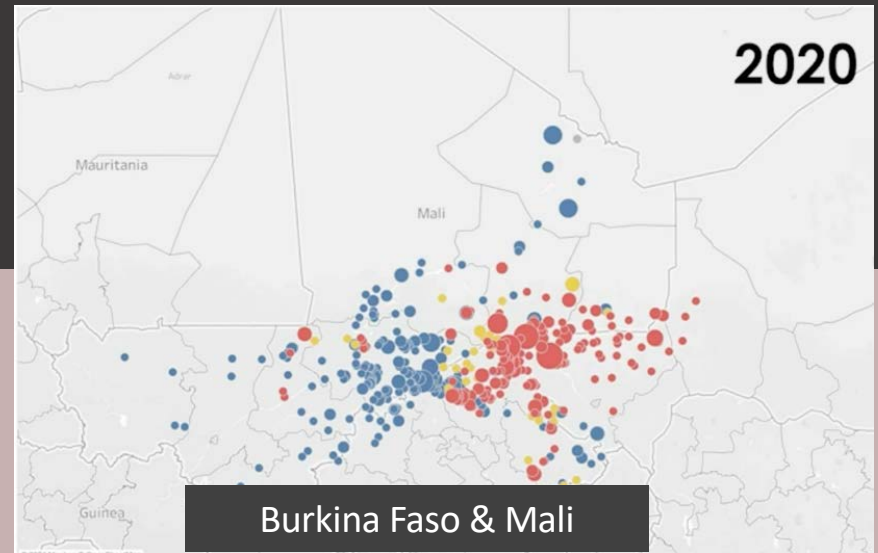
PROPAGANDA

Propaganda plays an integral role in militant strategies. CPOST has been researching this area for over a decade and a half. Last Year, CPOST established the world's first Arabic Propaganda Analyses Team (APAT). The Center also conducted research into the neuroscience of propaganda. Currently, it examines three critical aspects:

- How propaganda works
- How propaganda is connected to strategy and
- What CPOST is learning from Arabic Propaganda.

Whether right-wing or Jihadist, Militant Propaganda is often seen by commentators and scholars to be motivated primarily by ideology or expressions of identity. Of course, identity and ideology are crucial, but they are not as important as the strategic context in which the group formulates its propaganda strategy. Groups adapt their propaganda to the specific strategic circumstances they operate in, explaining propaganda messaging changes over time.

With ISIS, CPOST tracked the weight of different narratives:
In 2013 and 2014, as ISIS was rising, its propaganda privileged immigration to Iraq and Syria.

From 2014 to 2016, as ISIS started to lose ground, its mobilizing message privileged attacks even within home countries, rather than immigration. Religious content is also being used strategically. APAT has systematically tracked the use of Quran verses and Hadiths in propaganda material to understand how verses change from period to period.

UNDERSTANDING PROPAGANDA & HOW IT WORKS

CPOST systematically analyzes the content of militant videos and their narrative structures. Using neuroscience CPOST is building on its research to examine how narratives affect a viewer's brain. Last Year, CPOST also launched an Arabic Propaganda Analysis Team (APAT), discovering new narratives at play.

CPOST is moving from merely monitoring propaganda and tracking themes in militant materials to understanding more tightly the strategic purposes, how they change and how they fit with the external circumstances of the group, which would be helpful to anticipate changes and also the real impact of propaganda, i.e., how and the why it actually influences the behavior of people.

The systematic analysis of Arabic Propaganda connects to the systematic research already conducted on narratives in Western-directed propaganda, which helps understand both better. It also helps to identify the aspects of propaganda efforts that are truly special.

Building on this research, CPOST has gone a step further, using neuroscience tools to track how different propaganda narratives activate other parts of the brain. For example, heroic narratives stimulate parts of the brain associated with persuasion. This is opening new frontiers helping understand what it is about propaganda narratives that make them truly engaging. For example, is it emotion, or is it a combination of emotion and cognitive processing?

SHAPING NARRATIVES

Through the mobilizing action, militant groups recognize that not all people are motivated in the same way; they go beyond producing different language versions to developing narratives appealing to different types of people. With Western-directed Propaganda, narratives address people depending on their ties to the Muslim community. For those with weak ties, such as new converts, there is greater use of the 'heroic' narrative, which appeals to glory and personal empowerment. To a person with strong ties, the 'social' narrative focuses on protecting a community they love.

APAT has identified other narratives that rarely if ever, appear in Western Propaganda:

- A 'religious rewards' narrative addresses rewards that the individual can look forward to in the after-life.
- A 'coercive' narrative, tailored to groups in local countries such as Syria and Iraq, seeks to punish defectors from the group, people spying in their groups or fighting for rivals.

COUNTER-NARRATIVE

This work CPOST is doing will be enormously useful in several ways because it now has a scientific baseline. For example, with the first scientific basis for measuring the impact of a counter-narrative, rather than relying on guesswork, it is possible to see whether a counter-narrative is doing more harm than good.

A counter-narrative of one type could simultaneously stimulate other areas of the brain and have unintended consequences. With sound scientific understanding, this could also be used to assess the potential of other CVE solutions, such as social programs.

CHANGES

The main change in propaganda with militant groups in the last five to seven years has been the sophisticated use of narratives. Militant groups have always been adopters of technology, and so is nothing new. What is new is going beyond themes and lectures to the use of sophisticated narratives that target a demographic audience; they can be used to deeply connect with that demographic audience in ways that themes and lectures simply do not work as well.

To understand the impact of narrative, it is essential to see that narratives create an imagined role-play — the technical term is narrative transportation — where audiences imagine themselves as characters in the narrative or in the plot. CPOST not only analyzed thousands of militant videos in its Militant Propaganda Archive (MPA) for the narratives, it went further by investigating how people react to different narratives.

'Heroic' narrative

One of the most prominent Western-directed narratives is the 'heroic' narrative, which looks a lot like a Hollywood blockbuster movie narrative. After both Americans and Muslims in the West watched 'heroic' narrative videos, the more individuals are transported or imagine themselves in the videos, the more they tilt towards positive reactions for recruitment material related to militant groups. This is an important new finding and is the basis of a report in scientific reports CPOST has already published and will be publishing more. This is the beginning of creating a scientific baseline line to truly understand the impact that narratives have on militant behavior.

STRATEGIC

Arabic Propaganda differs to that targeted to the Western audience in not using 'heroic' narratives. Instead, 'religious rewards' narratives in which the potential recruits promise rewards in the after-life are used.

Another narrative increasingly prominent is the 'strategic' narrative, which concentrates on military success and superiority.

In 2020, APAT discovered more about the strategic use of narratives in the Arabic videos and, in particular, in ISIS videos. By analyzing over five hundred Arabic ISIS videos so far, CPOST discovered ISIS has changed the purpose of its propaganda over time.

By systematically tracking narratives in the first several years of ISIS, establishing itself as a Caliphate, it privileged recruitment and mobilizing new recruits. In the later years, its propaganda shifted dramatically toward portraying the myth of strategic success. It continued depicting the myth of strategic success more and more, even as it continued losing ground.

Understanding how the group's strategic circumstances are guiding its strategy is turning out to produce valuable results not just for the past, but it helps understand what to expect about groups in the future.

SCRIPTURAL REASONING

The use of religious scriptures in ISIS propaganda has a much more strategic role than might have been thought or assumed before. CPOST has started a tremendous undertaking to analyze the use of Quranic verses and Hadiths in the propaganda, which is already bearing fruit. Among the findings, the vast majority of verses used are targeting current soldiers within the group. It seems that it is much more of a strategic role than the often assumed religious function.

APAT is the first real capability to conduct systematic analysis of Arabic Propaganda across groups. In its three quarters, the team focused on ISIS. In the future, it is necessary to spread beyond ISIS to study the patterns in Arabic Propaganda in other militant groups.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH

DR Ali commented that videos have more impact — more so than more than the printed material — on the youth within the Muslim world. Video clips distributed through encrypted channels, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and other social media, has an enormous impact on the youth because of the way that they utilize verses of the Quran, sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), and stories that win the hearts and the minds of the young people. It is vital to understand the mindset of the Muslim youth to understand the impact. More work is needed on this issue, especially video, to develop compelling counter-narratives.
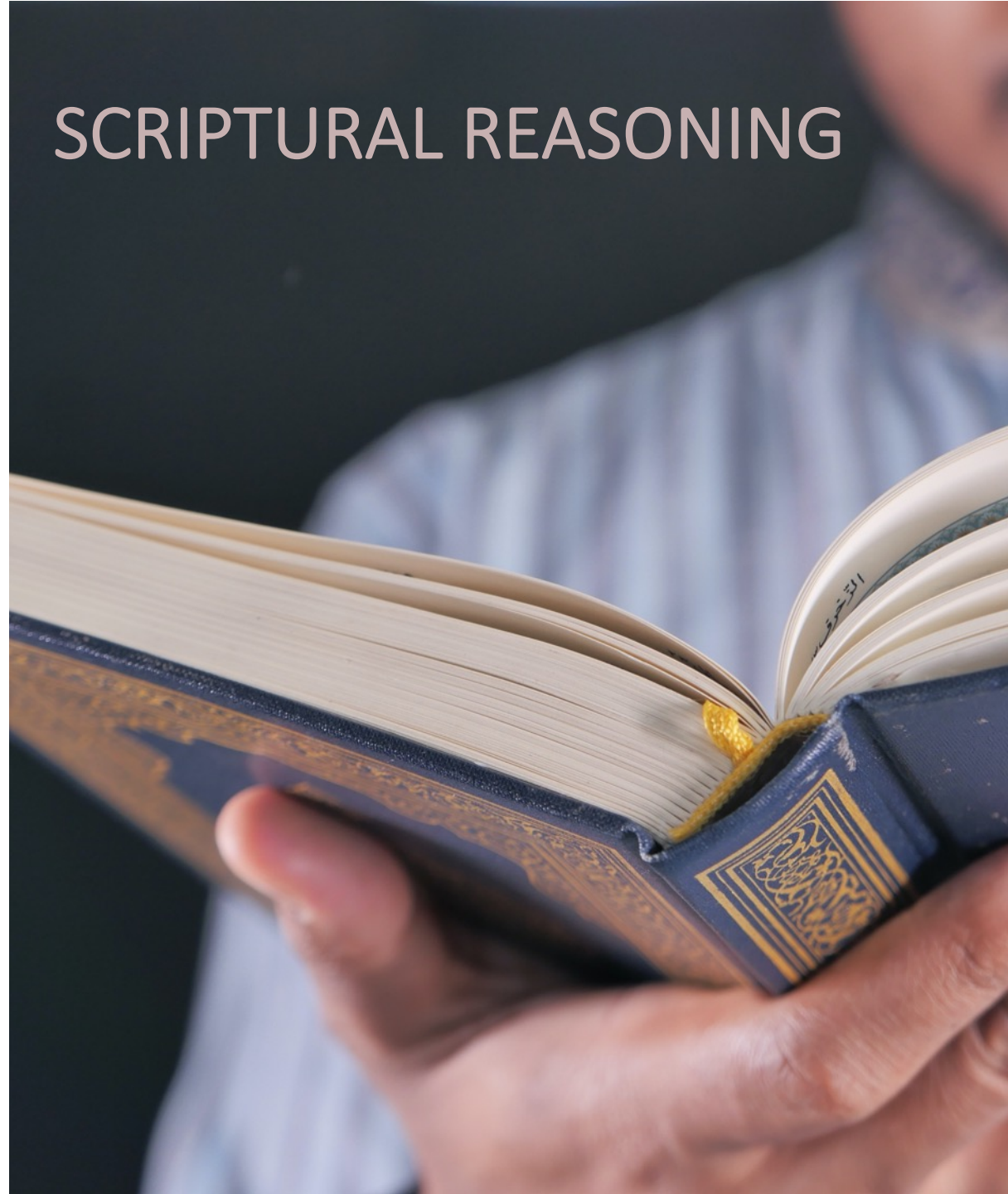
PANDEMIC

CPOST is tracking the messaging on Covid in print and video and basically. In the beginning, ISIS mirrored World Health Organisation guidelines somewhat closely, such as washing hands and wearing a mask, then adding religious discourse, such as making sure to pray five times a day. Practical advice coupled with ensuring God is on your side helps combat the Coronavirus.

Over time, as the Coronavirus became a more significant issue, messaging started talking about it more as a Divine punishment on apocalyptic scales. The core notion is that the United States has been bombing, torturing, and killing Muslims as part of the Crusaders' war against Muslims. Now God is on the Muslim's side, and the West is getting wiped out by Covid. Coronavirus is hitting Muslim countries hard and, in some cases, worse than it is hitting the United States, was largely ignored in the later messaging. Instead, Americans and Europeans sheltering in their homes were compared to Muslims being forced to shelter in their homes during air attacks. The strong implication is that God hit back at the Crusaders back for what the Crusaders had done to the Muslim community.

SHOCK ANALYSIS

CPOST analyzed the impact of Covid 19 on militant violence not just by doing a trend analysis but by conducting a shock analysis that aims to understand the discreet effect of the shock of Covid 19 separate from all other factors that are driving violence in the trends.

The value in performing a shock analysis is to isolate the effects of a shock from broader trends or other causes that might account for any emerging pattern.

Many scholars have looked at the relationship between disasters and violence. Natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes are strongly linked to increases in violence by militant groups in the short term.

The difference between a pandemic and a tsunami is the time it takes for the effects to play out. For example, in the 2006 Indian Ocean tsunami, the damage was not confined only to that one day; within a week or two, however, all of the parties had a sense of what damage had been done and began working to restore it. With Covid, about a year ago, the U.S. had its first fatality, and a year later is passing 400,000 deaths. The difference between the two events is that a pandemic would have to be equivalent to a tsunami where the real damage occurred a year after the water first drew out.

SHOCK ANALYSIS

Analyzing militant violence in 139 countries for the year 2020, on aggregate across the world, Covid 19 reduced militant violence between 8 and 10 percent after the first month a country reports its first Covid 19 fatality. As the pandemic carries on, however, we are going to see in the longer-term greater violence.

That claim is based mostly on the literature on the effects of poverty and violence, then looking at the impact of different types of disasters. Poverty and violence tend to go together — although the connection is not clear or easy to understand — our assumption is that as this drags on the economic, the social and phycological effects will lead to greater levels of violence.

Violence is down in the short term, say, the first six months a country experiences Covid 19 because just like states, militant groups are having to assess the virus's impact. Some countries are experiencing quite a dramatic pre- and post-Covid decline in political violence, in particular:

- Colombia down 35%
- South Sudan down 47%
- Syria down 18%
- Yemen down 11%

Other countries have actually seen an increase:

- Libya up 19%
- Nigeria up 48%

Out of the 139 countries, 10 countries show an increase in violence. The majority of these are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Overall given the slow-rolling nature of Covid as a disaster, the initial effect of diminishing militant violence is significant but relatively modest. After some time — about six months or so —those effects from Covid will lessen, and there will be a return to the previous levels of violence before Covid. It is vital to see that the dips in the first half of 2020 are already starting to reverse in the second half of 2020 — this may mean 2021 will be a dangerous year for militant violence.
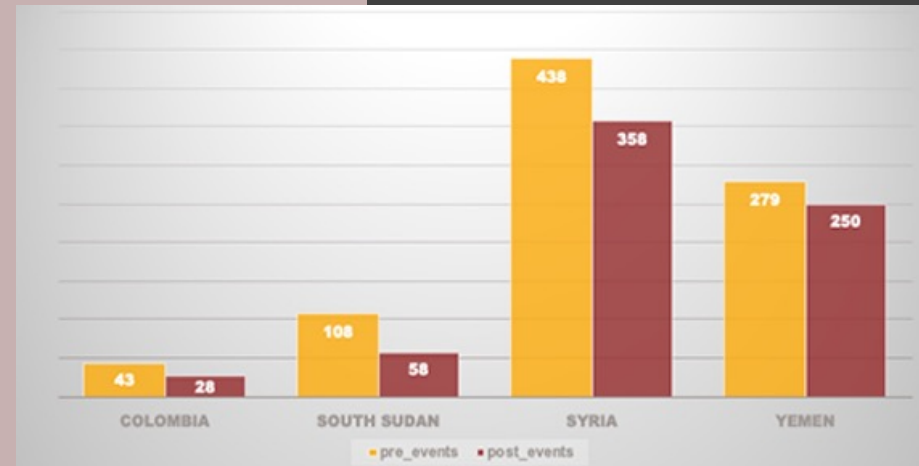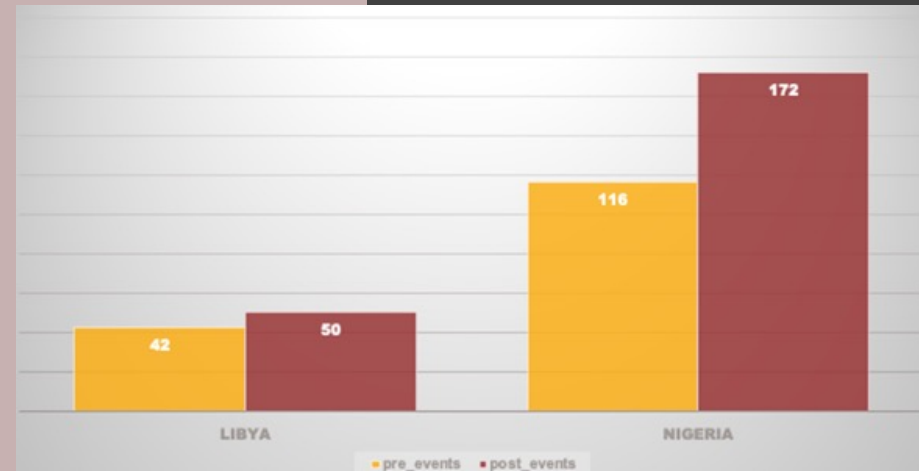
Treating Covid as a shock means identifying the discreet impact that Covid has on militant violence. In addition to understanding the past, doing so helps get a better grip on the future, i.e., enable better forecasting in the following year when the shock diminishes.

Two examples are discussed: Afghanistant and Iraq.
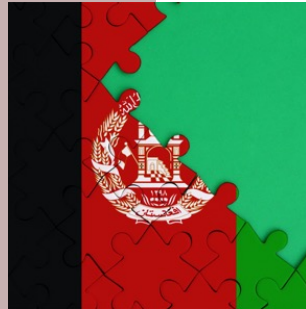
Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, 2020 saw not just one but two shocks that affected militant violence: Covid and the peace process.

Their impact lessened during the second half of 2020, which is likely to continue in 2021. This forecasts severe violence towards the Afghani Government. The shock analysis reveals dire consequences for Afghanistan.

Declining violence in Afghanistan during the first half of 2020 was mostly due to seasonal factors combined with the Taliban and U.S. peace talks and Covid. With rising violence in the second half of the year, the concern is whether the Afghan Government can adapt or if the Taliban is better equipped for a post-Covid world. The analogy would be the Najibullah government after the Soviets pulled out in 1989. The worrying thing for most analysts is that the current government does not seem particularly capable of adapting, leading to more violence in 2021.

Iraq

Iraq faces similar problems. The challenge in most cases is that, once the immediate impact of the shock for all parties is known, the question is how fast they adapt afterward. Indeed, to look at ISIS and its evolution, it has proven to be very resilient and capable of adapting. The new government is trying to make changes. All Iraqi governments, post-2003, found it hard to overcome sectarian differences, diverse ethnic factors, and political divisions, not to mention divisive elements within those divisions. The overarching concern is that the Iraqi Government is less capable of adapting to the post-Covid world than is ISIS.

Propaganda reponse

One of the most notable propaganda messaging trends is that Covid featured far more heavily in the first half of 2020 than the second. For example, in the first six months, ISIS, Al-Qaida central, and Al-Qaida Arabian Peninsula produced 33 video and print Coivd items, compared to nine for the second half. In late August onwards, the focus shifted to the likes of the UAE normalization agreement, the France attacks, and the propaganda campaign flowing on from those attacks.

Prof. Pape commented several changes are happening in the region. One of the significant macro changes, which started in 2020 and is likely to continue for the next several years, is that it will not be possible to rely on the U.S. government for help, especially with CVE efforts. The United States is already looking inward in terms of the U.S. Government, which means that non-government sources of knowledge, such as universities, NGOs, and international organizations, will be more crucial in the future. This will become important not just for individual countries but also for the international community as a whole and probably one of the most significant changes since 9/11 that will evolve over the next several years.

LOOKING AHEAD

LOOKING AHEAD

Dr. Ali pointed out that most people are fed up with fights, hate, extremism, and terrorism and are looking to live like other nations like other societies and other communities. If there had been a peace treaty between the UAE and Israel 15 or 20 years ago, millions of people would have taken to the streets demonstrating in many Arab capitals. This year, any negative response was negligible. The region is changing, says Dr. Ali, and the focus should be optimistic. Instead of focusing on countering extremism, it is more important to promote peaceful coexistence, values, prevention, engagement with NGOs, and empowering women. Religious and community leaders need to be proactive and have the courage to take the current opportunity to change the region and the world by promoting peace for everyone in the region and in the world.

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