

The University of Chicago

**Nationalist Occupation Theory and the  
Decline in Suicide Terrorism**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, suicide terrorism has become a prominent and disturbing phenomenon, and several theories have been proposed as explanations. This paper employs two prominent explanations, (1) the Islamist Network Theory and (2) the Nationalist Occupation Theory, and aims to test the two concepts and explore their validity in the context of the reason behind suicide terrorism. Using suicide terrorist attack data from 1981 to 2022 acquired from the “Database on Suicide Attacks” from the Chicago Project of Security and Threats, the paper finds strong support for the Nationalist Occupation Theory instead of the Islamist Network Theory. Specifically, the deployment of American Troops and U.S- led intervention and influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and the Middle East and North African region was a significant predictor of increasing trends of suicide terrorism. These findings suggest that grievances related to occupation and perceived injustice, rather than religious ideology, are the primary drivers of suicide terrorism. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers and scholars consider occupation and perceived injustice when attempting to understand and combat suicide terrorism rather than focusing solely on religious or ideological factors.

## **Introduction**

Suicide attacks drastically declined globally by 90 percent between 2015 to 2022 compared to reaching their peak in 2015. This thesis paper examines the phenomenon of Suicide terrorism through accredited theoretical explanations connected to the rise of attacks globally between the 1980s and 2015, and it aims to identify the core logic behind the dramatic decline between 2015 to 2022. Furthermore, identifying circumstances that have led to declining levels

of suicide attacks would likely serve as a barometer for American national security strategy and policy to reduce the occurrence of such deadly tactics organized by terrorist campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

Terrorism is a tactic non-state actors employ to spread fear and terror among a particular population through violent acts. Specifically, the suicide terrorism tactic is a destructive form of terrorism that aims to intimidate opponents with the threat of death or injury and serves as a call to action from its supporters.<sup>2</sup> The suicide attacker must kill themselves to kill others and is backed by rational motivations of organizations to achieve their political goals. Specifically, suicide terrorism is a campaign strategy that targets state policies and coerces its opponents.<sup>3 4</sup>

Suicide terrorism garnered attention during the 1980s and 1990s after causing significant damage and destruction to its targets. However, the targets at the time were limited, mainly in countries such as Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. However, after September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, suicide terrorism became a leading tactic of terrorist organizations with political motivations causing significant damage to the infrastructure and the death of civilians.

From the 1980s to 2022, sixty-two countries have incurred suicide attacks as part of many terrorist organization campaigns resulting in substantial death tolls. Although the targets of these attacks have shifted according to the organization's goals, Iraq has experienced the most suicide attacks after September 11, 2001, compared to the other sixty-one countries two decades after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, after 1995, suicide terrorism occurred within

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Pape, "U.S. Restraint and the Sharp Decline of Suicide Attacks Around the World," accessed March 26, 2023,

[https://cpost.uchicago.edu/publications/u.s\\_restraint\\_and\\_the\\_sharp\\_decline\\_of\\_suicide\\_attacks\\_around\\_the\\_world](https://cpost.uchicago.edu/publications/u.s_restraint_and_the_sharp_decline_of_suicide_attacks_around_the_world).

<sup>2</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. (Crown Publishing Group/Random, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats, "The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT)," CPOST: Chicago Project on Security & Threats, accessed March 30, 2023,

[https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/suicide\\_attacks/database\\_on\\_suicide\\_attacks/](https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/suicide_attacks/database_on_suicide_attacks/).

<sup>4</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.; Pape, Robert A.

countries with little to no history of suicide attacks, i.e., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.<sup>5</sup>

Several eclectic theories account for suicide terrorism which defines the occurrence of suicide attacks. However, this paper focuses on the current debate about the effect of terrorist networks involving the evolution and progression of Salafi Jihadist terrorist organizations on suicide attacks versus the Nationalist theory of suicide terrorism. It is believed that Salafi Jihadist terrorist organizations and their ideology are the primary reason for suicide attacks,<sup>6</sup> specifically, the evolution of the Islamist network of schools, which become the incubation for suicide bombers, involving a religious commitment to terrorist organizations, globally encouraging Islamic fundamentalists to pursue martyrdom and branch out into other organizations, creating a successful network. In contrast, the nationalist theory of suicide terrorism contends that the alien occupation of the homelands of individual terrorists leads to the retaliation of the foreign occupation.<sup>7</sup>

This paper argues that the nationalist theory of suicide terrorism, which depicts suicide attackers' grievances against foreign occupation, is a prominent cause of the recent decline in suicide terrorism. This paper further aims to bridge a decade-long gap in the literature which may reveal declining trends in suicide attacks. This will require tracking and operationalizing terrorist global networks and identifying if the suicide bombers carry an existing relationship to the Salafi Jihadist organization network, predisposing them to carry out a suicide attack and determining

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<sup>5</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 46–78, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.46>.

<sup>6</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 46–78, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.46>; Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (December 1, 2010): 53–94, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00023](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023).

<sup>7</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.

whether the attacker shares a relationship with the Islamist network. Contrastingly, operationalizing the nationalist theory of suicide terrorism requires identifying foreign government occupation and influence on the homelands of terrorists to determine whether suicide attackers are strategically deterring the occupation, which may cause a rise in suicide attacks. The findings in this paper implies that the foreign occupation of countries by the United States through troop deployment is a gross indicator of the rise in suicide attacks – which opposes a large body of scholarship based on the Salafi Jihadist Islamist Network theory. The decline in attacks based on the non-intervention of foreign powers challenges the current scholarship. It would serve as a barometer for future intervention strategies, i.e., offshore balancing and the up-taking of proxy wars.

In the first section, I present the data from the Chicago Project of Security and Threats Database on Suicide Attacks from 1981 to 2022 on suicide attacks to indicate the rise and decline over approximately 42 years. In the second section, I outline contending theories of the reason behind suicide attacks. In the third section, I will present the main argument of the study and the implications of the research. Section four illustrates the data trends in countries with the highest suicide attacks. Finally, section five will discuss the study’s implications for pursuing national strategies that will assist in curbing suicide operations. (Add sections).

## **I. The Rising and Declining Trend of Suicide Terrorism**

The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT), which has kept a universal record of suicide attacks to date, indicates that between 1981 to 2022, there have been 8,238 suicide attacks universally. Beginning in 1981 to 1990, there were 48 attacks which increased to 211 attacks between 1991 to 2000. From 2001 to 2010, suicide attacks rose dramatically, bringing the net total of attacks to 3,146. Between 2011 to 2020, there were 4,939 attacks, doubling the total

number of suicide attacks to 8,085, and from 2021 onwards, there were 251 attacks globally, bringing the overall total up to 8,238 suicide attacks. Despite the drastic increase in suicide attacks between 2003 to 2015, (*Figure 1*) points to a steady decline in suicide attacks from 2016 to 2022, where suicide attack numbers resemble pre-2003 levels.

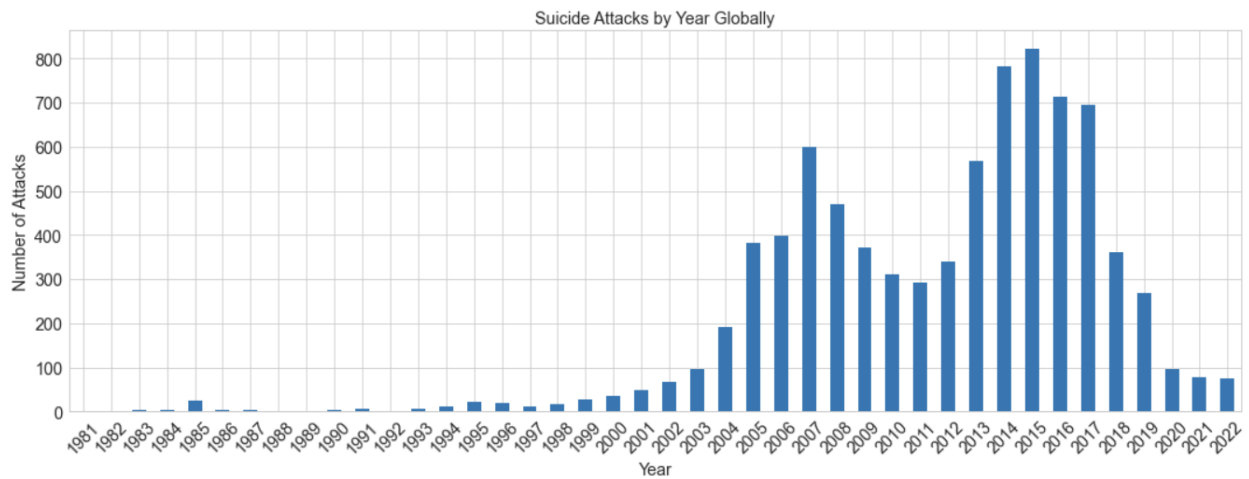


Figure 1 –Total number of suicide attacks between 1981 to 2022.

Between 1981 to 1990, there was a proliferation of suicide missions and a significant rise in the organizations that became prominent in their terrorist activities, with an average of 2.6 organizations carrying out suicide missions. Between 1991 and 2000, an average of 4.2 organizations actively detonated suicide attacks. From 2001 to 2010, there was an average of 17 active organizations – a drastic incline. From 2011 to 2020, there was an average of 28 active organizations; from 2021 onwards, there was an average of 11.5 active organizations.

On average, the number of countries targeted by suicide attacks from 1981-1990 was 1.5 and 4.7 between 1991 and 2000. From 2001 to 2010, an average of 12.7 countries were targeted,

and 20.3 countries from 2011 to 2020. From 2021 onwards, an average of 15 countries experienced suicide attacks.<sup>8</sup>

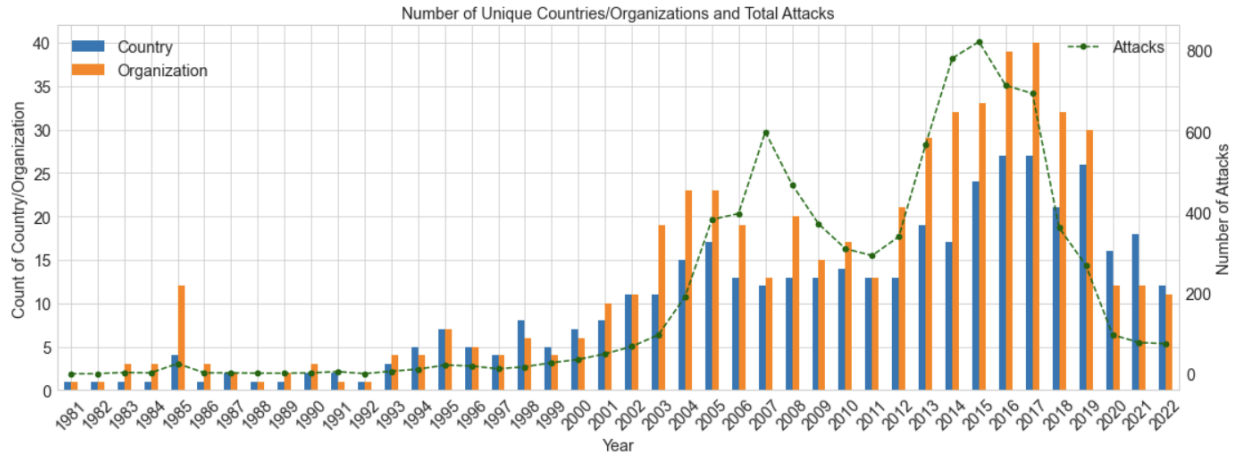


Figure 2 – An average of Active Organizations and countries involved in suicide attacks.

Overall, suicide attacks garnered an enormous toll in terms of casualties, where universally, 8,238 attacks have claimed 63,894 lives leaving 149,019 injured. There were 885 deaths and 782 injured between 1981 to 1990, indicating the lowest levels of the human toll. Astonishingly. From 2008 to 2011, (**Figure 3**) reveals a decline; however, astonishingly, (**Figure**

<sup>8</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats, “The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT).”

3) also indicates the lowest years of suicide attacks compared to pre-2003 numbers, with a significant and steady decline between 2016 to 2022.

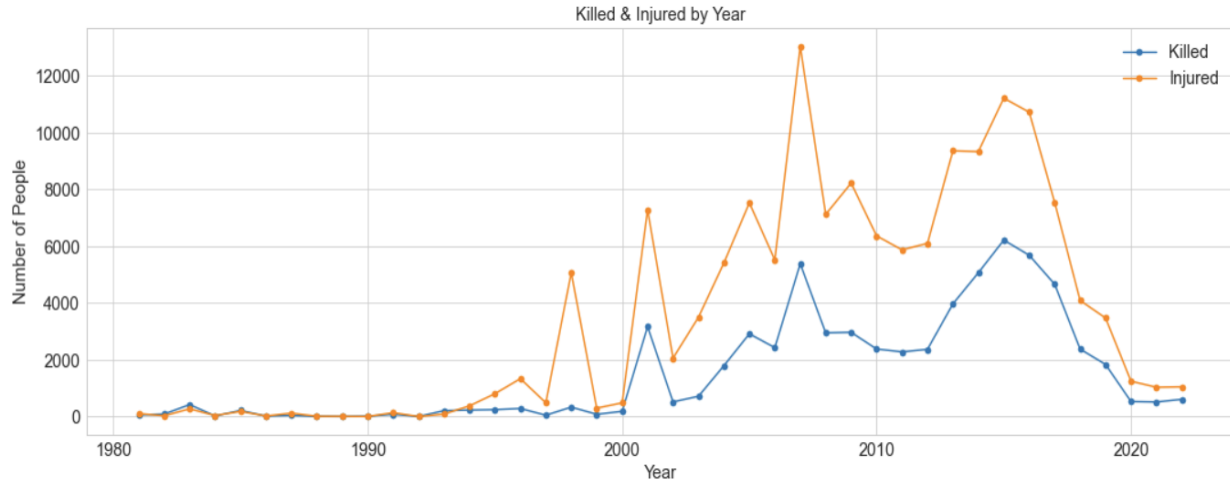


Figure 3 - Number of casualties and injured civilians.

## II. Existing Theories of Suicide Terrorism

Before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, research on suicide terrorism was rare, with barely any explanation of the core reasons behind such attacks or preceding circumstances. Previously, there have been eclectic justifications for the causes of suicide terrorism, which can be divided into four main categories: explanations that concentrate specifically on the suicide attacker,<sup>9</sup> organizational factors,<sup>10</sup> socio-structural causes, and multiple component theories that

<sup>9</sup> David Lester, Bijou Yang, and Mark Lindsay, “Suicide Bombers: Are Psychological Profiles Possible? | Office of Justice Programs,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (July 2004): 283–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100490461033>; Eyad Sarraj and Linda Butler, “Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Despair, and the Need for Hope.,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 4 (2002): 71–76, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.31.4.71>; Anat Berko, *The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers* (Nebraska Press, 2009), <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/potomac-books/9781597973649>.

<sup>10</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.



require an analysis of a variety of variables.<sup>11</sup> This section will account for why a multicomponent theory such as the Salafi Jihadist network theory and Nationalist Occupation theory are crucial elements with a more comprehensive definition encompassing suicide attacks than the existing literature.

Studies concentrating on suicide terrorists suggest that attackers consider themselves altruistic and act selflessly.<sup>12</sup> While most scholars reject the assumption that suicide bombers are irrational actors,<sup>13</sup> they agree that profiling suicide attackers is difficult because of their diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, suicide attackers are not victims of psychopathologies which excludes them from being mentally ill.<sup>14</sup> Literature focusing on suicide attacker motivations explains that the attacker's belief in a common cause, vengeance, a status of martyrdom, and gains in the afterlife may cause an increase in attacks overall.<sup>15</sup> Although scholars have attempted to explain the reasons behind the globalization of suicide terrorism through the suicide attackers' beliefs and choices, there is a wide gap in explanations for specific conditions under which individuals may resort to suicide attacks leading to the lack of literature on potential causes.

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<sup>11</sup> ASSAF MOGHADAM, "The Roots of Suicide Terrorism: A Multi-Causal Approach," in *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism* (Routledge, 2006); Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (United States Institute of Peace, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Ami Pedahzur, Arie Perliger, and Leonard Weinberg, "Altruism and Fatalism: The Characteristics of Palestinian Suicide Terrorists," *Deviant Behavior* 24, no. 4 (July 1, 2003): 405–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713840227>.

<sup>13</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.*; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*; Bruce Hoffman and Gordon H. McCormick, "Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (2004): 243–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100490466498>.

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (February 2005): 3–42; Clark R. McCauley and Mary E. Segal, "Terrorist Individuals and Terrorist Groups: The Normal Psychology of Extreme Behavior," in *Terrorism: Psychological Perspectives*, Series of Psychobiology (Sevilla, Spain: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 1989), 39–64.

<sup>15</sup> Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism*; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003).

Studies on organizational factors focus on theories that argue that terrorist organizations believe that suicide terrorism is the most straightforward, cost-effective, and best means to further their political aims.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, suicide terrorism can tackle opponents while making the terrorist organization stronger with the support of suicide attackers, which can also evoke sympathy for individuals and their stories, causing vast support from local populations.<sup>17</sup> The success of the suicide tactic and its use is because it actually works, and based on its lethality, it is a rational logic that terrorist organizations seek.<sup>18 19</sup> Despite different explanations, scholars agree that suicide terrorism works; it is a tactic of fear, validates organizations, is cost-efficient, and has low-security risks for organizations.<sup>20</sup>

Socio-structural explanations contend that suicide tactics are used where they are socially approved. An example of this can be seen in countries like Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon, where martyrdom is reflected in popular culture and venerated in societies.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, some scholars argue that the suicide terrorism tactic depends on the solid support of the attacker's community.<sup>22</sup> However, this may be valid for some countries as opposed to others.

Counteractively, in some instances of suicide attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, there is

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<sup>16</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "Crenshaw, Martha. "An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism," *Orbis-A Journal of World Affairs* 29, no. 3 (1985): 465–89; Martha Crenshaw, *Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches (From Inside Terrorist Organizations, P 13-31, 1988, David C Rapoport, Ed.* (Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20202305>; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror.*

<sup>18</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.*

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, "Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 1969–86.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism" (The Atlantic Monthly Group, January 1, 2003), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1187.html>; Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.*; Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom.*

<sup>21</sup> Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>22</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror.*

no domestic support for suicide terrorism.<sup>23</sup> In such cases, the support and culture for martyrdom may perhaps exist within the cyberspace realm instead of in real life.<sup>24</sup>

Under the fourth category, scholars attribute a variety of explanations to address the growth of suicide attacks, such as occupation, outbidding, and Salafi Jihadist ideology.<sup>25</sup> Occupation theory argues that suicide terrorism is a response to foreign occupants.<sup>26</sup> Outbidding is a means of vying for a community's endorsement and relative gains compared to competing organizations. Finally, the religious ideology explanation argues that the spread of religious ideology plays a significant role in determining suicide attacks; specifically, Salafi-Jihadist ideology indoctrination has perpetuated most suicide attacks globally.<sup>27</sup>

Outbidding may serve as a phenomenon of local community support, which has been argued previously that in some instances, states may or may not support certain groups depending on the situation. However, regarding the indoctrination of Salaf-Jihadist ideology, a mapping of the Islamist network in 2008 strongly suggests that it plays an enormous role in the call to action to attackers and the spread of values that promote suicide terrorism as a tactic to achieve their goals.<sup>28</sup> Comparatively, the Nationalist Occupation theory has mapped foreign occupation and the number of attacks since 2005, requiring a further add-on to the previous data to validate its explanation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (December 1, 2006): 707–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600561907>.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>26</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.

<sup>27</sup> Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>28</sup> Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters"; Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>29</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. (Crown Publishing Group/Random, 2005).

The following section details the Salafi-Jihadist Ideology and the Nationalist Theory of occupation. Both theories indicate suicide terrorism as either a rational and strategic response to the perceived injustices of foreign actors or an effective way of achieving political goals. Together, these two concepts provide essential insights into the motivations and tactics of extremist groups globally and the spread of networks that produce terrorist organizations.

### **III. Salafi Jihadist Ideology Versus Nationalist Theory of Occupation**

Although religious factors and ideology may influence the beliefs of suicide attackers and organizations, the explanation may serve as a critical element for the occurrence of suicide terrorism; foreign occupation and military presence are strong contenders. Salafi Jihadist ideology is a core component of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization, which created a cult of self-sacrifice and martyrdom that exceeds other logic of suicide terrorism. “Salafi Jihad” is a movement rooted in the Salafism, Wahabism, and Qutubist factions of the Muslim Brotherhood, where they strictly interpret Islamic law, rejecting man-made laws. Salafi Jihadists believe in advocating for the unity of God, elevating Jihad to the same level as the five pillars of Islam, engaging in the ex-communication of other Muslims, and supporting suicide tactics. Salafi Jihadists believe that suicide is the ultimate devotion to venerate God. They claim suicide attacks as martyrdom and Jihad as self-sacrifice and an antithesis to all values the West stands for.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Al-Qaeda is the forebearer of most modern-day terrorist organizations that hold Salafi Jihadist beliefs. The vast growth of the Salafi Jihadist ideology is essential in determining active modern-day networks of suicide terrorism organizations and explaining the suicide tactic.<sup>31</sup> Al-Qaeda’s transition as a prominent organization and its emphasis on suicide

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<sup>30</sup> Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom.”

<sup>31</sup> Jason Burke, “Al Qaeda,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 142 (2004): 18–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4147572>.

tactics as its prime operation strategy depends on three core factors. First, Al-Qaeda's globalization is based on its core doctrine, which involves the vision of Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden's mentor – who referred to Al-Qaeda as an army of Islam that aimed to create warriors to engage the infidels.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the spread of Afghan Arabs that came to Afghanistan after the Soviet Invasion and then dispersed to other countries from 1988 onwards. After the Red Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan, some warriors returned to their home countries, joining local Jihad groups to repel entrenched regimes. In contrast, others moved to Western Europe, where they mobilized and radicalized Muslims, introducing themselves as the vanguard Azzam envisioned. Many resorted to violence to impact foreign regimes and recruit Muslims for the cause and Azzam's vision.<sup>33</sup>

Third, Al-Qaeda made a strategy shift between 1995 to 1996 where they targeted Western countries instead of local Arab ones. The change in strategy was a declaration of war on the United States and to defeat the "Crusader-Zionist" enemy. The 1998 bombings of the United States embassies in Dar-es-salaam, Kenya, Nairobi, and Tanzania were Al-Qaeda's first notable suicide attack demonstrating this new strategic logic.<sup>34</sup> Initially, Al-Qaida's decision to engage in suicide attacks was influenced by the Egyptian group "Al-Jihad," which was led by Ayman Al Zawahiri. Osama Bin Laden further spread virtues of martyrdom throughout his training camps and video addresses to those around him, incentivizing suicide tactics by tying the longing for martyrdom to the verses of the Quran and Hadith.<sup>35</sup> Using God as a cause to gain ultimate

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (December 1, 2010): 53–94, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00023](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023); Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>33</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (Gardners Books, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

<sup>35</sup> Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom."

rewards in the afterlife, Al-Qaeda began its cult-like operations while garnering support from a wide demographic for the Salafi Jihadist ideology. Attackers strongly believe in the Salafi ideals and consider being a suicide attacker as a service to God by targeting the “Infidels.” Moghadam (2009) categorizes organizations that carry out suicide attacks by their respective ideologies, leading to the majority of organizations identifying as Salafi-Jihadist, which strongly suggests that suicide attacks are carried out by organizations that follow the Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

Contrastingly, the Nationalist Occupation Theory argues that suicide terrorism is a response to a foreign occupation where foreign power may control the local government against the wishes of the local communities. The theory states that religion matters mainly in national resistance to foreign occupation, and the leading cause is national liberation. Moreover, it points to the power and controls a foreign government may exert on a local government. Furthermore, the theory suggests that Islamic fundamentals are not to be blamed for the suicide tactic as the highest number of suicide-related attacks have been perpetrated by a non-religious, Marxist-Leninist group, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.<sup>36</sup> However, most scholars disagree and claim that contemporary suicide missions may occur in countries without occupation, and many suicide missions may not be directed at the occupiers. Furthermore, they justify their claim by arguing that Salafi Jihadist suicide missions dominated the first five years post the United States’ invasion of Iraq.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, scholars have not yet analyzed the drastic change in the number of suicide attacks before the intervention of the United States in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the MENA region, where the quantity of suicide attacks was below 100 attacks

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<sup>36</sup> Robert A. Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (August 2003): 343–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540300073X>.

<sup>37</sup> Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom.”

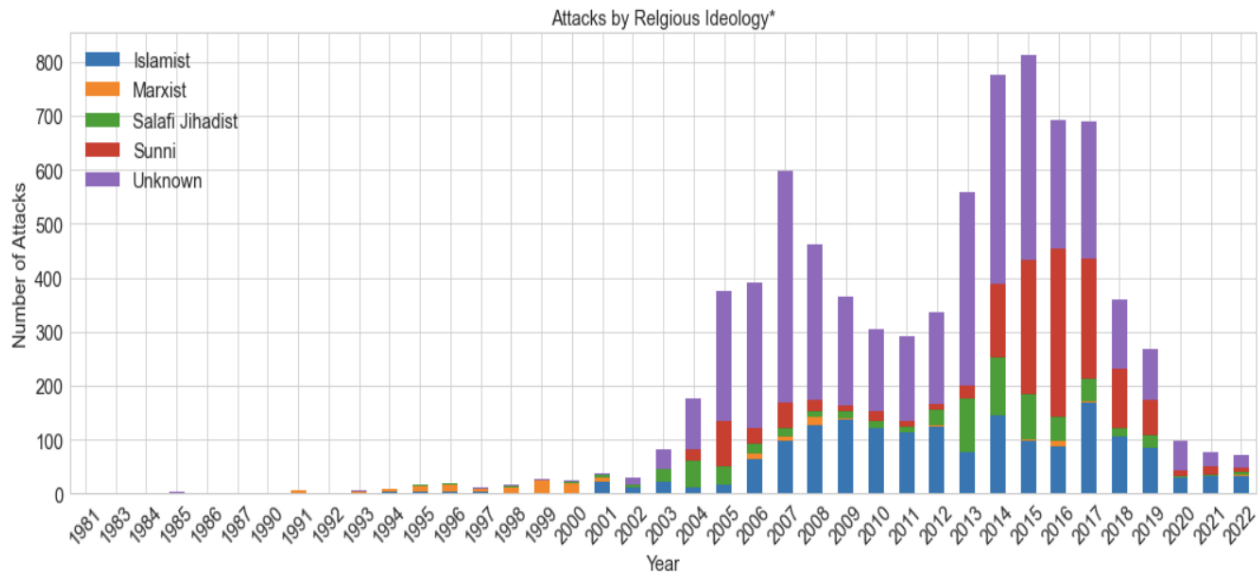
before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and suddenly climbed above 8000 attacks post-intervention by 2022.

In the next section, to analyze the prevalence of Salafi-Jihadist Ideology, the section will first analyze suicide missions by the number of attacks over the years and the prevalent ideology of the terrorist organizations that perpetrate a suicide attack to determine the influence of the Salafi-Jihadist network over the years.

#### **IV. Active Suicide Terrorism Organizations**

Suicide missions were examined through the coding of 173 groups that employed suicide attacks between 1981 to 2022, categorizing organizations by their ideologies as a guiding principle of their actions (*See Figure 10 in the Appendix*). Collectively, 8,238 such attacks occurred in a span of 41 years. (*Figure 4*) displays the top five ideology-based suicide terrorism organizations with a minimum of 100 attacks between 1981 to 2022. The dataset reveals that unknown perpetrators carried out 4,023 attacks, followed by organizations with mainstream Islamic ideology claiming 1,751 attacks. Organizations that followed a Sunni Ideology claimed 1,404 attacks, with most Sunni organizations perpetrating attacks after the 2003 Iraq war and were most active between 2004 and 2022. Salafi-Jihadist organizations claimed 661 attacks, with many claimed attacks occurring between 2014 and 2019. And finally, Marxist organizations claimed 168 attacks between 1991 and 2016, labeling them the least active organization. (*Figure 4*) reveals that Salafi Jihadist networks are scattered and are not significantly involved in the rise of suicide attacks. Instead of showing a drastic increase in attacks by the Salafi-Jihadist Network, contrary to Moghaddam (2009), (*Figure 4*) points to a significant decrease in attacks orchestrated by Salafi-Jihadist organizations between 2015 and 2022. Organizations with a Sunni

ideology dominate other known ideology-led organizations.<sup>38</sup> However, a significant hurdle with the dataset is that many attacks have no claimants, impacting the assumption that the Salafi-Jihadist network is not as prevalent among organizations that perpetrate suicide attacks.



**Figure 4** — The graph includes the top five ideologies with a minimum of 100 attacks. **Furthermore**, to be coded as a Salafi Jihadist, the study draws upon Moghadam’s (2008) criteria with the following characteristics (1) The group’s name indicates its connection or loyalty to Al-Qaida. (2) The group adopted Al-Qaida’s Ideology and the cause of the global Jihadist movement. (3) the group uses violence to depose an Islamic regime to establish an Islamic Caliphate. And lastly, (4) branding of Muslims who do not support their causes as heretics.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Mainstream Islamic groups with no ideological affiliation were combined and categorized under the “Islamist” label, indicating a pan-Islamic category. Organizations believing in Allah as their God, Muhammad as the messenger, and the existence of the caliphate were categorized as “Sunni.” Unclaimed attacks, where the perpetrators were not identified, were categorized under “Unknown.” Lastly, Marxist-Leninist groups were categorized based on communist ideological beliefs as “Marxist.”

The following section investigates foreign intervention or occupation of countries with the highest number of suicide attacks compared to the number of troops deployed by the United States. (**Figure 5**) reveals a graph indicating the rise and decline of suicide attacks in

<sup>38</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats, “The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT),” CPOST: Chicago Project on Security & Threats, accessed March 30, 2023, [https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/suicide\\_attacks/database\\_on\\_suicide\\_attacks/](https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/suicide_attacks/database_on_suicide_attacks/).

<sup>39</sup> Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom.”



Afghanistan compared to the deployment of American troops. Similarly, (*figure 6*) shows Iraq, (*figure 7*) shows Pakistan, and (*figure 8*) shows the Middle Eastern North African region.

## V. Deployment and Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, between 2001 to 2005, there was a steady rise in US deployments. However, in 2004, after the resurfacing of Osama Bin-laden, there was a rise in suicide attacks. In the years following 2006, a remarkable increase in violent terrorism and suicide attacks quintuple. With the Obama administration renewing its commitment to deploy more troops in 2009 to counter violent extremism by launching a US marine offensive to test a new counter-insurgency tactic, suicide attacks remained at large. Between 2011 and 2014, NATO agreed to a transitional power transfer back to the Afghanistan government to reduce US troop deployment. 2014, Obama announced the withdrawal of troops; coincidentally, a sudden decline can be seen in (*Figure 5*) from 2014 to 2015 when the decision was announced. Between 2017-2018, there was a US conflict with the Taliban and an exchange of attacks, and US airstrikes were aimed at opium labs to cut off the financial support of the Taliban. Between 2020 to 2021, the Biden administration engages in dialogue with the Taliban, leading to the US declaration of complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. Taliban declares that US troops must altogether leave for them to discuss peace terms. As the Afghan government collapsed, the Taliban took over, and suicide attacks in post-2021 began to resemble pre-American deployment levels. Furthermore, (*Figure 5*) also illustrates a growing retaliation as spikes in suicide attacks in unison with the increase in US troops and the installation of a new US-backed Afghan government. The trend created a

cycle of escalation until US troops began withdrawing in 2011, leading to decreased suicide attacks.<sup>40</sup>

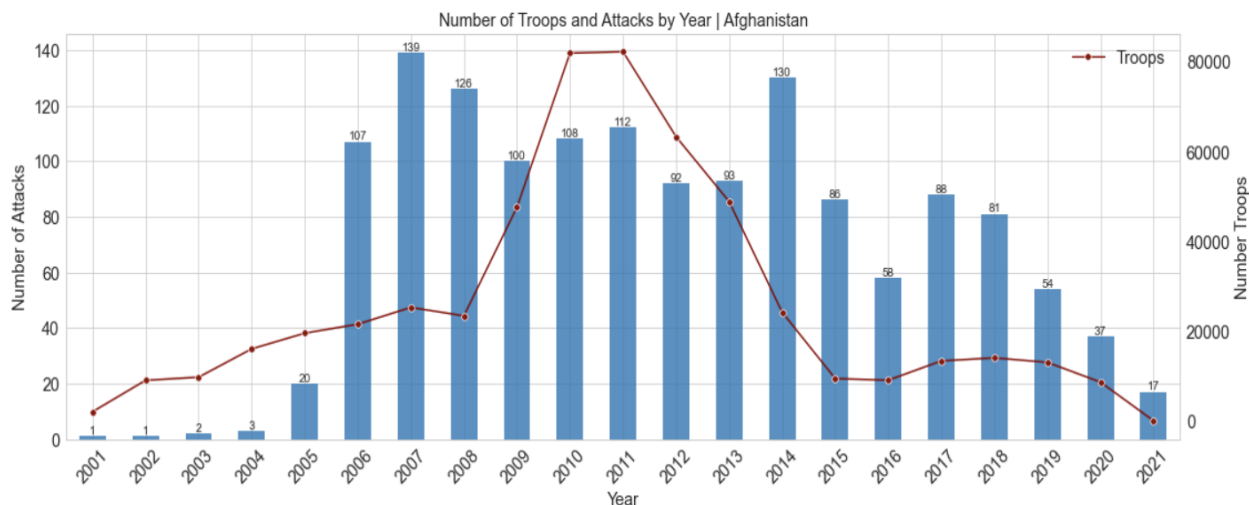


Figure 5— Troop deployments and suicide attacks in Afghanistan

## VI. Deployment and Suicide Attacks in Iraq

In 2003, the American military sent 136,000 troops to invade Iraq, which dethroned Saddam Hussein’s government. From 2003 to 2007, a heavy US military presence in Iraq coincided with a rise in suicide attacks. As US troops were gradually pulled out of Iraq from 2008 onwards, suicide attacks began to decline. Between 2013 and 2018, as US tactics changed from ground to air campaigns to counter ISIL threats, suicide attacks rose drastically. The trend of suicide terrorism decreases drastically with the declining American presence. Moreover, in 2022, there were approximately 2500 US soldiers in Iraq and only four suicide attacks which

<sup>40</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats, “The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT)”;  
Robert A. Pape, “U.S. Restraint and the Sharp Decline of Suicide Attacks Around the World,” accessed March 26, 2023, [https://cpost.uchicago.edu/publications/u.s\\_restraint\\_and\\_the\\_sharp\\_decline\\_of\\_suicide\\_attacks\\_around\\_the\\_world/](https://cpost.uchicago.edu/publications/u.s_restraint_and_the_sharp_decline_of_suicide_attacks_around_the_world/);  
Council on Foreign Relations, “Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

mirror pre-American intervention. Overall, **(Figure 6)** illustrates a spike in suicide attacks based on time intervals signifying American troop deployment.<sup>41</sup>

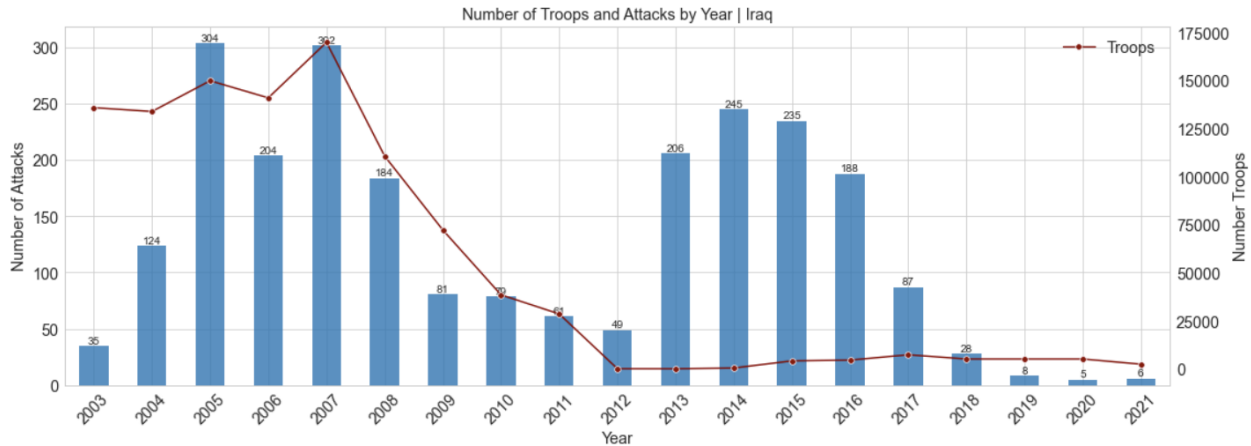


Figure 6: Between 2003 and 2011, The US operated a ground campaign against the AQI. Later, the US resorted to an air campaign that began in mid-2013 and ended in mid-2018; From 2011 to 2019, the number of suicide attacks indicates the rise, peak, and fall of ISIL.<sup>42</sup>

## VII. Deployment and Suicide Attacks in Pakistan

**(Figure 6)** shows that beginning in 1995, there were 28 US soldiers stationed in Pakistan; in 2006, the US deployed 770 troops. The US, under the Bush Administration, waged a drone war on Pakistan which was relatively limited. After 2008 the Obama Administration escalated the drone strikes, which peaked between 2009 to 2010. **(Figure 6)** illustrates a gradual decline in 2016 and displays a significant relationship between the number of US troops deployed and fewer drone strikes influencing the number of suicide attacks.<sup>43</sup> There were approximately 28 total drone strikes during the Bush Administration, 353 drones during Obama Administration, 13 drone strikes during the Trump era, and zero drone strikes during Biden’s administration.<sup>44</sup> The

<sup>41</sup> Robert A. Pape, “U.S. Restraint and the Sharp Decline of Suicide Attacks Around the World”; Michael A. Allen, Michael E. Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain, “U.S. Global Military Deployments, 1950–2020,” 2021; Chicago Project in Security and Threats, “The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT).”

<sup>42</sup> Hanna Duggal, AJLabs, “Iraq War, 20 Years on: Visualising the Impact of the Invasion,” accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/4/5/iraq-war-20-years-on-visualising-the-impact-of-the-invasion>.

<sup>43</sup> New America, “America’s Counterterrorism Wars,” New America, accessed April 10, 2023, <http://newamerica.org/international-security/reports/americas-counterterrorism-wars/>.

<sup>44</sup> New America.

surge of suicide attacks in Pakistan is also attributed to the indirect political influence of American policies towards terrorists. Furthermore, Pakistan’s shared border with Afghanistan is also a key factor where Pakistan is encouraged towards a restrained approach to Afghanistan because of the cross-influencing of terrorist organizations across the border.<sup>45</sup>

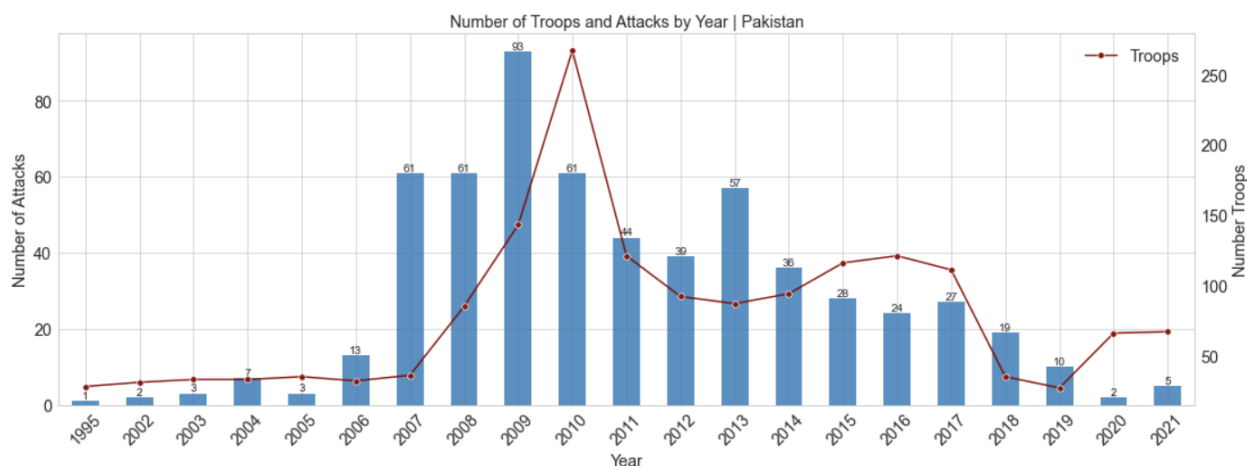


Figure 7: Between 1995 to 2021, the number of US troops deployed in Pakistan imposed over the number of suicide attacks.

### **VIII. Deployment and Suicide Attacks in Sub-Saharan African Countries.**

There have been ongoing counterterrorism efforts in several regions of Africa. For example, in East Africa, Al-Shabaab continues to operate in Somalia and launch attacks in neighboring Kenya. With support from the United States, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali security forces are working to counter this threat. In the Lake Chad region, ISIS-West Africa and Boko Haram’s faction continue to conduct attacks against civilians and security forces, with Nigeria and its neighboring countries working to counter these groups with support from the United States. The broader Sahel region, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has seen an expansion of terrorist groups, with France's Operation Barkhane and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali playing a crucial role in

<sup>45</sup> Robert A. Pape, “U.S. Restraint and the Sharp Decline of Suicide Attacks Around the World.”

countering these groups. Terrorists often manipulate local communal conflicts to further their political and operational goals.<sup>46</sup>

Although Nigeria and Somalia are the countries within the MENA region that are claimants of most attacks in Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a significant decline overall in troop deployment and suicide attacks after 2015; however, there are also domestic factors at play, which may involve failed government interventions and the rise of local militias. For example, in 2006, the African Union Mission in Somalia and five African nations sent 20,000 troops for peacekeeping; however, soon after 2006, there was a rise in suicide attacks.<sup>47</sup> In addition, from 2014 to 2015, US special forces actively trained Nigerian and Chadian soldiers for a counter-offensive strategy against Boko Haram, which indicates a slight increase in US troop deployment and the number of suicide attacks.<sup>48 49</sup>

Overall, Central and Southern Africa witnessed the most terrorist activities in 2019, including attacks by ISIS-linked groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique; comparatively, South Africa saw a decrease in suspected terrorism-related incidents. (*Figure 8*) depicts that the American deployment of troops and suicide attacks from 2015 to 2021 are in unison.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> U.S Department Of State and Bureau of Counter Terrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019,” Chapter 1 -- Country Reports on Terrorism, Africa, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Robert A. Pape, “U.S. Restraint and the Sharp Decline of Suicide Attacks Around the World.”

<sup>48</sup> “U.S. Military Trains African Armies Ahead of Boko Haram Campaign,” *Reuters*, February 25, 2015, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-chad-military-idAFKBN0LT1BM20150225>.

<sup>49</sup> “U.S. Military Trains African Armies Ahead of Boko Haram Campaign.”

<sup>50</sup> U.S Department Of State and Bureau of Counter Terrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019.”

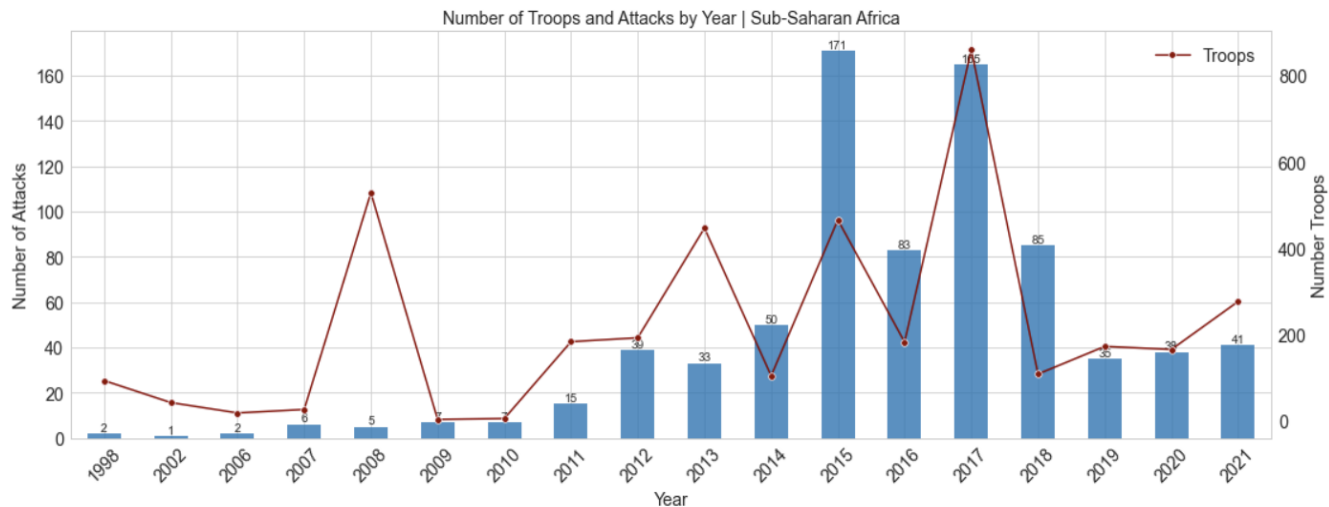


Figure 8: Data displayed is Sub-Saharan African countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, DR Congo, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda.

The following section discusses suicide attacker target aims over the years. (Figure 9) shows the kinds of target casualties that have taken place between 1981 to 2022, along with the number of times similar targets have fallen prey to suicide attacks.

### IX. Targets of Suicide Terrorism Attacks

Target	Number of Attacks
Domestic Government	4627
Unknown	1937
Militia	604
Multinational Organization	479
Foreign Government	443
Security	80
Tribal	52
Domestic Forces	8
NGO	5
Civilian	3

Figure 9: Describes the targets of the suicide attack.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats, “The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT).”

(*Figure 9*) showcases that the number of targets ranging from the militia, multinational, foreign government, security, tribal, domestic forces, NGOs, and civilians combined do not equate to domestic government targets. (*Figure 9*) points to the fact that attackers mainly targeted government targets, which involved 4627 targets.<sup>52</sup> The data also points to grievances that the attackers may have had against the local governments, which were under foreign influence, or the type of regime governing them. Suicide terrorism organizations are presumed to be rational non-state actors, and the target type and numbers indicate a rational strategy and goal of letting the local governments accrue costs over time, aiming to coerce the occupant to leave or for governments to abstain from certain policies.<sup>53</sup>

## **X. Discussion and Conclusion**

Occupation is marked by tensions between the occupying power and the local population, where the occupying power exercises authority over the occupied territory. As a result, people living under occupation suffer the consequences, which can be prolonged. In simpler terms, alien occupation causes harm to the local population due to the persistence of the situation.<sup>54</sup> Scholars of national security, post-conflict societies, and political violence can identify violence as a tactic in contested occupations of divided societies facing conflict. Traditional forces fear losing their power, insurgency forms, and terrorism is used as intimidation. These issues have been observed in various countries such as Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Northern Ireland, as well as in the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Chicago Project in Security and Threats.

<sup>53</sup> Michael C Horowitz, “The Rise and Spread of Suicide Bombing,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2015): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-062813-051049>.

<sup>54</sup> Tristan Ferraro, “Occupation and Other Forms of Administration of Foreign Territory” (International Committee of the Red Cross, March 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Byman, “White Supremacy, Terrorism, and the Failure of Reconstruction in the United States,” *International Security* 46, no. 1 (July 19, 2021): 53–103, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00410](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00410).

Furthermore, Salafi-Jihadist religious ideology may provide context for the rise of suicide terrorism and the proliferation of such organizations. However, Salafi-Jihadist ideology may serve as a part of a multi-component issue. A strong example of countering religious ideology is the case of the Liberation of Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), who were part of a separatist campaign against the Sri Lankan government since the 1980s. The experience of intense trauma and war became a core reason for those who carried out suicide attacks. In the case of the LTTE, there were no promised rewards of the “afterlife,” and they did not believe in going to the afterlife or being indulged in religious ideology.<sup>56</sup>

The analysis in (*Figure 4*) reveals that most attacks were not carried out due to Salafi-Jihadist Ideology. Instead, mainstream Islamic ideology accounted for most suicide attacks between 1981-2022. However, the initial claim that Salafi-Jihadist ideology contributed significantly to suicide missions cannot be wholly debunked as a large portion of suicide attacks remain unclaimed or have been carried out by unknown actors.

In (*Figure 5*), (*Figure 6*), (*Figure 7*), and (*Figure 8*), the analysis of trends strongly suggests that the rise in American troop deployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and the Middle Eastern North African region coincides with an increase in the number of suicide missions. Moreover, a decline in American deployment of troops corresponds to a declining trend of suicide missions in those regions. This analysis endorses Pape’s (2005) view of Occupation, which supports the notion that foreign governments’ occupation of one’s home state can agitate local groups. In response, these groups retaliate and want nothing more than foreign intervention and influence to dissipate.<sup>57</sup> In this case, American troop presence is associated with

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<sup>56</sup> Edited by Diego Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.



their adversaries' pursuing disputes with the higher intensity of suicide tactics. Similarly, a comparison of suicide attackers can be made with the Kamikaze pilots during World War II, where the pilots chose the Japanese tradition of voluntary death, backed by their military training and ideals, which involved loyalty to the defense of their homeland.<sup>58</sup> In the case of suicide attackers, it's their home state that is under foreign influence, or they seek to establish a caliphate. A 2005 study by the US Congressional Research Service confirmed that suicide attacks by Al-Qaida and affiliates were due to the displacement of Islamic culture by the West and American support for countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>59</sup>

In conclusion, there is a complexity of reasons that may account for suicide missions. However, Nationalist Occupation Theory is one essential factor that accounts for the proliferation and decrease of suicide attacks globally. Although there is no evidence that this is entirely the cause of suicide terrorism, as there are a variety of explanations that point to personal motivations, structural and organizational factors, ideological factors, intergroup rivalries, and support, the research analysis of the Nationalist Occupation theory provides a sufficient framework for future research.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Hill, "Kamikaze 1943," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 378.

<sup>59</sup> James A. Piazza, "A Supply-Side View of Suicide Terrorism: A Cross-National Study," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 28–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381607080024>.

## Appendix

Ideology	ID
<b>Unknown</b>	4023
Islamist	1751
Sunni	1404
Salafi Jihadist	661
Marxist	168
Islamist; Separatist	78
Separatist	48
Shia	29
Nationalist	28
Islamist; Nationalist	19
Sunni; Nationalist	13
Sunni; Separatist	13
Government	2
Sikh; Separatist	1

Figure 10: Ideology of organizations and the number of suicide attacks carried out ideology.

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