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Suicide Attacks in 2014: The Global Picture

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Since the start of the millennium, suicide attacks have become a common mode of operation for many terrorist groups around the world, particularly Sunni Salafist jihadi organizations affiliated with global jihad. For them, suicide attacks are not only an effective tactic for causing death and destruction and sowing terror; they are also a trademark and proof of the willingness of their operatives to sacrifice themselves for the sake of God (*fi sabil Allah*). As in previous years, in 2014 these organizations were responsible for most of the suicide attacks around the world. These attacks disproved (once again) the claim that most suicide attacks are perpetrated against foreign occupiers. In fact, only about 3 percent of all suicide attacks were aimed at foreign armies. Most were directed against governmental or military targets or local security forces, or were perpetrated in the context of religious and sectarian rivalry.

In 2014 there were 592 suicide attacks, a 94 percent increase over the previous year, which caused the deaths of approximately 4,400 people (compared to some 3,200 in 2013).¹ This trend was influenced by three main factors: The turmoil in the Middle East, which causes governmental instability and allows non-state organizations to grow stronger; the meteoric rise of the Islamic State (IS) as an influential player in the region and the world; and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The figures for 2014 include some noteworthy trends:

1. In the Middle East, there was an increase in the number of suicide attacks over 2013. There were about 370 attacks with a death toll of about 2,750 (compared to 163

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¹ It is difficult to gather precise figures concerning suicide attacks in general and those taking place in Syria in particular. Reports of suicide attacks in Syria come mainly from the organizations themselves, which seek to enhance their image and their influence, but in many cases, they are not verified by independent sources. The criterion for including an attack here is a report from more than one source. In addition, the statistics do not include a significant number of suicide attacks that were thwarted.

attacks in 2013 and a death toll of some 1,950). The increase was especially evident in Iraq (271 in 2014 vs. 98 in 2013), Yemen (29 vs. 10), Lebanon (13 vs. 3), and Libya (11 vs. 1). The number of attacks carried out in Syria (41) remained the same. In Egypt, there were 4 suicide attacks (compared with 6 the previous year).

2. There was also an increase in the number of suicide attacks in the non-Arab Muslim world and in Africa. For several years, Afghanistan has been at the top of the list (124 suicide attacks in 2014 compared to 65 the previous year). In Pakistan, where suicide attacks are also common, the figures for 2014 and 2013 were similar (36 vs. 35). The number of attacks in Africa increased, particularly in Nigeria (32 in 2014 as opposed to 3 the previous year) and Somalia (19 vs. 14).
3. There was an increase in suicide attacks by women (15 in 2014 vs. 5 the previous year). Most were in Nigeria (16 blew themselves up in 13 attacks, and another 4 were caught before carrying out the attack). There were also other female suicide bombers, one in Djibouti and one in Kobane in Syria.

The turmoil that has gripped the Middle East since the Arab Spring began in late 2010 continues to fuel instability in many countries in the region, chief among them Iraq, Syria (where the turbulence is spilling over into Lebanon), Libya, and Yemen. IS conquests in Iraq and Syria, followed by the mid-2014 declaration of the Islamic caliphate by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, led to an escalation in violence, including the widespread use of suicide attacks by the group; some 382 suicide bombers participated in these attacks. Indeed, many of the suicide bombers operating in Iraq were foreign IS volunteers. The organization rarely took responsibility for suicide attacks, but presumably it was responsible for the vast majority of the attacks carried out in Iraq.

Seventy-one percent of the attacks in Iraq were directed against the security forces – military checkpoints, bases, police stations, and soldiers. Seventeen percent were aimed at civilian targets. Six percent of all targets were political – government buildings and polling stations – while 3 percent of the attacks were against targets of a religious nature, namely, mosques and mourner tents. The number of suicide attacks in Iraq in 2014 was the highest since 2008 and accounted for 45 percent of all such attacks in the world that year.

Some 420 people died in suicide attacks in Syria, most of which (78 percent) were aimed at security targets. IS took responsibility for 11 attacks in Syria, and Jabhat al-Nusra for 4 (a total of some 36.5 percent of the attacks). There were no claims of responsibility for the other 26 attacks. The conflict continued to spill over from Syria into Lebanon, where 13 suicide attacks took place (as opposed to 3 the year before). Jabhat al-Nusra took responsibility for 7 of the attacks, IS for 2, the Free Sunnis of Baalbek for 2, and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades for one. There was one attack for which no organization claimed responsibility.

In Yemen, 20 of the attacks were against security forces. The other 9, which were carried out against the backdrop of political rivalry and the ethnic-religious divide in the country, were directed against the Shiite population, and in particular, the Houthi community. Most of the attacks in Libya were against security targets, while one was directed at the Parliament and another, in the center of town, was aimed at civilians. In the background is the fighting between Islamists and government forces for control of the state, which has been disintegrating since the fall of the Muammar Qaddafi regime.

In 2014, the number of suicide attacks in Egypt remained relatively small, even though there was a large increase in terrorist activity in the country in general and the Sinai Peninsula in particular, which claimed many victims in the Egyptian security forces. During Operation Protective Edge the Egyptians thwarted an attempt by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis to send a suicide bomber from Sinai to the Kerem Shalom border crossing in Israel as an expression of the group's support for the Palestinians in Gaza. There were also reports in the Israeli media, unconfirmed by Israeli military sources, that Hamas made use of a number of suicide bombers during the fighting against the IDF in the Gaza Strip.

Against the backdrop of the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in late 2014, fighting continues between the Taliban and its partners on the one hand, and the army and NATO forces on the other. Most of the attacks in Afghanistan were directed at local security targets (about 53 percent), foreign security targets (some 14 percent), and civilian targets (about 15 percent). In Pakistan too, most of the suicide attacks were aimed at security targets (some 58 percent), while about 25 percent were directed at civilian targets. These attacks were part of the fierce battle that is raging between the Pakistani government on one side, and the Pakistani Taliban and its affiliates from the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda on the other.

In Africa, attacks by Boko Haram, which declared an Islamic emirate in Nigeria, were especially prominent. (The group was responsible for the abduction of more than 200 school girls who were forced to convert to Islam and are still being held hostage.) The 32 suicide attacks carried out by the group in 2014 accounted for about half of all such attacks it has perpetrated since it had recourse to this method in 2011. About 500 people were killed in Boko Haram suicide attacks in 2014; the female suicide bombers who operated in Nigeria were sent by the organization. The suicide attacks were aimed mainly at civilian targets (59 percent), security targets (25 percent), and Shiite religious targets (12.5 percent).

In 2014, all the suicide attacks in Somali were carried out by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Somali al-Shabab, which claimed responsibility for the vast majority. Most of the attacks were against security targets (52 percent) and political targets (42 percent). Al-Shabab also used a female suicide bomber to carry out an attack in Djibouti. According to the

group, the attack was in response to Djibouti's participation in the forces of the African Union.

In 2013, the military campaign in Mali, which included African Union forces aided by French forces, was the background to a wave of suicide attacks. However, in 2014, there was a marked decline in Mali in suicide attacks.

In conclusion, suicide attacks will likely continue in 2015 and beyond, given the ongoing instability in various countries; the large number of ethnic-religious conflicts; and the strengthening of global jihadi elements, primarily IS and al-Qaeda and its affiliates, which see suicide attacks as a proven means of struggle and an article of faith. Terrorist organizations affiliated with global jihad that use suicide bombers now have a stronger presence in the countries bordering Israel, and Israel must prepare for the possibility that some of their attacks will be directed against it. Such a development could spur Israel's traditional enemies, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other local groups inspired by global jihad and Islamic State, to join in the growing suicide attack phenomenon.

