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SUICIDE ATTACKS: STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE AND AFGHAN WAR

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Suicide-attacks are one of the most important aspects of modern conflicts. According to Tosini between December 1981 (date of the first suicide-attack) and December 2010 date of the end of the scholar's research there have been 2.713 suicide-attacks worldwide, which have caused about 28.000 deaths. Afghanistan and Iraq play the biggest role: between March 2003 and May 2010 there have been 1321 attacks of this kind in Iraq which have caused more than 13.000 deaths. Since 1981 Afghanistan and Iraq have been reaching 68% of all suicide-bombings and 55% of all casualties together. These figures show how big an impact the suicide tactics had during the Iraq war, in addition suicide tactics continues to have a main role in Islamic State warfare: for example in January 2015 alone we can count 35 suicide-attacks in Iraq. Moreover, suicide-attacks played an important role in other conflicts such as the ones in Lebanon, Israel, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Turkey, Afghanistan, and worldwide attacks can be linked to the global organization of al-Qaeda. Objectives, political and war situations are very different in these countries, thus the various features of suicide bombings make finding a single explanation for this phenomenon difficult.

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A strategic perspective on suicide-attacks

Scholars explain the importance of the suicide phenomenon using sociological, psychological or similar explanations, the present research on the contrary focuses on the changed (and changing) strategic context mainly for two reasons. Firstly, in the last few years the suicide-attacks have become an important tactic on contemporary battlefields, so it is crucial to understand the phenomenon in its war context. Secondly, during the last three decades numerous ideas about how the war has changed have emerged helping us better understand suicide-attacks. The first step in order to use this approach is to recognize that modern terrorism is an "operational method which can be used in a variety of strategies, including a strategy of insurgency"[1]. From our point of view "suicide-attack" is an act of resistance or armed opposition and not as a product of *tout court* terrorism. It is therefore possible to consider terrorism as a "consequence", paying attention to the semantic value of the term and to the meaning in an evaluation that comprises causes that are both political and social, but also military.[2] Nowadays terrorism is a word with a negative meaning; in Afghanistan suicide-attacks mainly aim at military and institutional targets, while non-combatants are indirectly involved, the so called "collateral damages". The organizations or the subjects are terrorists, perpetrators of the shameful and publicly condemned act, which is never justified. We therefore kept a neutral standpoint. This is why we decided to use the words such as "suicide-attacks", "tactics" or "bombings" instead of "suicide terrorism"; "armed opposition" to indicate a phenomenon based on typical actions of guerrilla, "suicide-fighter" instead of "suicide-terrorist" and "armed opposition groups" (but also *mujahidin*, rebels, freedom-fighters) to describe subjects generally called, with a rather partial approach, terrorists.[3]

Our study[4] is thus divided in two parts. The first one is more theoretical and it deals with the strategic debate on how the war is changing. A big set of ideas is about the concept of RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) and generally speaking how the high and information technology have affected

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[1] S. Mets, *Rethinking insurgency*, in P. B. Rich, I. Duyvesteyn (edited by), *The Routledge Handbook of insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 38.

[2] C. Bertolotti, *Shahid. Analisi del terrorismo suicida in Afghanistan,* Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 38.

[3] Authors decided to approach to the study of the phenomenon from the military point of view not adopting terms as "Terrorist" and "Terrorism", largely utilized by scholars and academics in accordance with different specific approaches (psychological, political, sociological, etc).

[4] This is a brief essay of a more elaborate research which will publish on the "Security, Terrorism and Society", *International Journal*, no. 2, September 2015.

war. A parallelism between a suicide bombing and RMA is not new[5], but it is important to underline that the precision of the strike stressed by RMA is a way to obtain the desired result with lower costs, in other words precision optimizes cost-benefit analysis. Suicide-attacks can cause large damage at a low cost because the attacker does not need a specific and long training, the explosive device is relatively simple and the explosive can be found around the theater of war or on the black market. But a suicide-fighter has an advantage compared to a smart bomb as he/she can choose the target based on the current tactical situation. Another common feature between modern weapon systems and suicide bombing is the ability to project force[6]

There are also differences between western ideas linked to RMA and suicide bombings. For example, the entire debate around RMA is concentrated on technology trying to eliminate human dimension from the battlefield. On the contrary, suicide bombings are profoundly tied to the human dimension of war; they are tied to will, determination, hate, violence. This way suicide bombings are more clausewitzian than RMA because those elements represent one of the three elements of the "wonderful trinity" of the war.

Another set of ideas on how war is changing is related to the concept of "irregular conflicts", i.e. conflicts which are not State vs. State, where the weak side tries to found innovative way to fight. In this respect "suicide-attacks" are the product of the limited possibilities (a classic situation in irregular warfare history) of Middle East states and of irregular groups and their analysis of the American (and Israeli) "way of war"[7]. This way we can understand suicide bombings not only as an attack tool but also as a means to exploit weaknesses of Western strategy and western strategic thought.

Finally, it is important to recognize where the suicide-attacks happen because if the weaker side wants to follow an attrition strategy (as it always happens in irregular conflicts) and to establish a credible deterrence capability, he has to fight in areas where the regular armies experienced more problems in the way they operate: urban battlefield. In urban warfare the fighting is very close, in fact the physical

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[5] See for example J.W. Lewis, "Precision Terror: Suicide Bombing as Control Technology", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 19, no. 2, spring 2007, pp. 223-245; B. Hoffam, "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism", *Defeating Terrorism: Shaping the New Security Environment*, R.D. Howard, R.L. Sawyer (eds.), Guidford, CT, McGraw Hill, 2004.

[6] J.W. Lewis, "Precision Terror: Suicide Bombing as Control Technology", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 19, no. 2, spring 2007, pp. 223-245.

[7] I. Brun, "'While You're Busy Making Other Plans' - The 'Other RMA'", *The Journal of Strategic Studies,* vol. 33, no. 4, winter 2010, pp. 535-565.

characteristics of the cities push the two sides closer together compared to a traditional battle on an open battlefield[8] and in "close battle" technological advantages are less crucial. Moreover, in cities there are numerous targets to attack of different nature, for the security forces it is simply impossible to defend every possible target. Another important aspect which helps us understand suicide bombing is again linked to invisibility. A suicide-fighter is a civilian, dressed like a civilian, in a city full of civilians, he/she is only one of thousand or million of people living, walking or driving around.

Suicide-attacks in Afghanistan. A triple way reading of the phenomenon[9]

The second section of the study analyzes the Afghan theater to see the practical results of suicide-attacks. In the last decade, the Armed opposition groups (AOG) have begun employing progressively a new tactic: the suicide-attack, a military technique based on a political strategy. We propose an original approach to data analysis, the «triple way reading method: «Actions-Events-Subjects». Thanks to this innovative process and to the «Afghanistan Suicide Attacks Database» (ASA)[10] – based on more than 34.000 single information data – it is now possible to understand new trends and developments of the phenomenon on strategic, operational and tactical levels.

Following on Pape[11], Moghadam[12] and Tosini's[13] footsteps and on the basis of the field research and the analysis of the gathered data from the ASA database, this theoretical approach is based on the definition which indicates suicide-attack as an offensive action in a context of asymmetrical war, that for its own nature entails the certain death of the

[8] R.H. Scales, "Urban Warfare: A Soldier's View", *Military Review*, January/February 2005, pp. 9-18.

[9] Original article discussed by the Author, Claudio Bertolotti, in occasion of the «International Relations Strat-Group» launch panel (*From Afghanistan to Libya: The "political science" of Western military intervention*) at the annual SISP conference, 13 -15 September 2012, University of Roma Tre. Main chapter of the Author's PhD Thesis entitled «*Suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Military tactic and political strategy between success and failure*» (University of Torino).

[10] ASA, «Afghanistan Suicide attacks» database created by the Author Claudio Bertolotti, contains data concerning 1256 single cases (period 2001-2014).

[11] R. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, Random House, 2005.

[12] A. Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: a critique of Dying to Win"*, Studies in Conflicts & Terrorism*, vol. 29, 2009, pp. 707-729; and A. Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

[13] D. Tosini, *Martiri che uccidono. Il terrorismo suicida nelle nuove guerre*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2012; and D. Tosini, "A Sociological Understanding of Suicide Attacks", *Theory, Culture & Society,* vol. 26, no. 4, July 2009, pp. 67-96.

attacker and the consequences of which could have repercussions on different levels: political, strategic, operational, tactical and psychological.

1. Evolution of the phenomenon, techniques and attack procedures

From the single cases in 2001 and 2002 the number grows and reaches 165 suicide-attacks in 2008 (133 in 2014).

The increased frequency of the actions confirms the enhanced ability and technical expertise (See Fig. 1), and it is proof of how their belief in its benefits from an insurgency strategy perspective has matured. In such context an evolutive process of this phenomenon has emerged and reached 2014 through an amplification of an increasingly more spectacular and structured offensive[14].

In 2008 the commando-units appeared in the Afghan war. A tactic that has proved efficient reaching 12% of the actions in 2009, settling between 22% and 26% in 2013-2014. This is the result of two classic methods of *Suicide Body Born-IED* (SBBIED) and *Suicide Vehicle Born-IED* (SVBIED) alongside the conventional tactics of the armed attack based on the coordination of suicide-fighters supported by close protection units.[15]

FIGURE 1 - Comparison of the attacks SBB-IED, SVB-IED and SC-IED, 2001-2014

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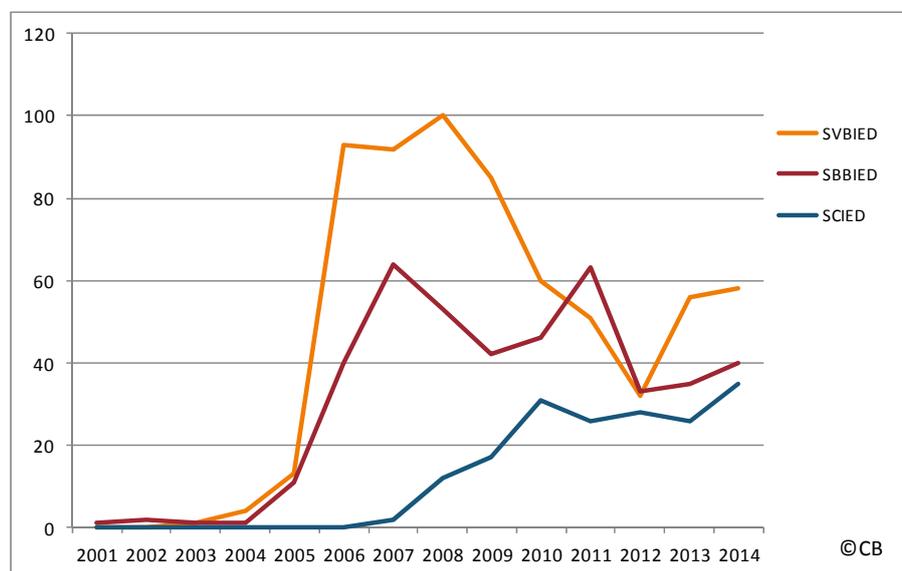
[14] Author's database.

[15] C. Bertolotti, *Shahid. Analisi del terrorismo suicida in Afghanistan*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010; C. Bertolotti, "Attacchi suicidi in Afghanistan", *Eurasia – Rivista di Studi Geopolitici*, no. 1, 2011.

2. A triple way reading: "attacks-events-subjects"

Conventionally, a suicide-attack is an action the success of which is the consequence of a conscious dying of the suicide-fighter. This classic and widely accepted definition might lead to consider a single attack as an isolated event – regardless of the number of suicide-fighters and targets hit. How would one behave in front of the so called multiple attacks (suicide-commandos), against a single or multiple targets simultaneously?

The approach we propose is based on the principle of data compartmentalization, therefore we consider it appropriate to proceed with the analysis of the events observing the phenomenon from three different points of view (cf. Fig 5). Thanks to this triple way reading, the attacks are interpreted and classified on the basis of three categorization processes.

1. The first is the "attacks" category which includes attacks reported at a specific time and circumscribed place, regardless of the number of suicide-fighters and targets hit. It tends to coincide with general information from the media (*open source*).

2. The second is the "events" category which comprises the number of simultaneous single actions that have been strictly coordinated, or linked to the same group, and it includes every single attack that has been carried out simultaneously against different targets.

3. The third category is the "subjects" category. The subjects are the suicide-fighters who carry out the attack(s). Its calculation is not limited to the single/multiple acts (attacks and events), but to the number of suicide-fighters involved.

The results of the data classification are three different outcomes:

1. "Attacks" trend (Fig. 2): This method allows a positive general assessment, when lacking a rational process of categorization, by inserting a simple data in the graph this will give a result corresponding to a significant decrease of suicide-attacks between 2008 and 2012.

This methodology – also used by Pape (cf. CPOST database) – is currently used by NATO and Afghan government organizations and it is functional to the need of presenting this phenomenon in a phase of containment and reduction.

On an analytical level, the result would be potentially incorrect.

1. "Events" trend (Fig. 3): This approach allows the examination of the evolution of suicide-attacks from a different perspective: the one of complexity and operational intensity.

The second approach, that we might call "operational", was inspired by the constructive criticism on Pape's methodology by Moghadam in his analysis of the suicide-attacks phenomenon[16].

The graphic transposition of the data gives a perceptibly different picture compared to the result obtained with the first method (cf Fig. 3).

2. "Subjects" trend (Fig. 4): The third approach takes into account the total number of individuals that take part and carry out suicide-attacks.

The number of would-be suicide-fighters is growing, it even doubles year on year until 2011 with a decrease in 2012 – the year of the operational reduction of foreign troops – and a new increase in 2013-2014: this approach highlights adequately aspects such as individual participation and the insurgency' operational ability (i.e. recruitment). This method has proved to be more functional to research, as it gives a more complete overall picture of the Afghan phenomenon and its potential developments both on a military level and on a social one.

FIGURE 2 - Graphic representation of the "attacks" trend between 2001 and 2014
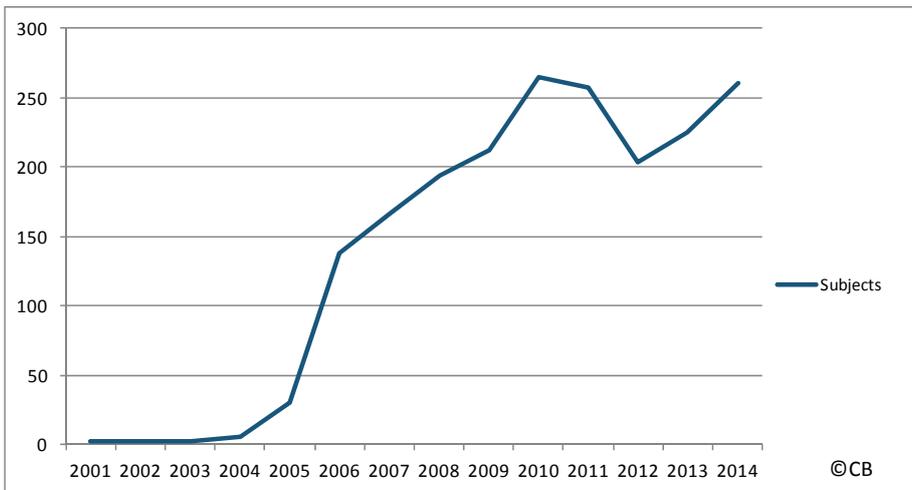

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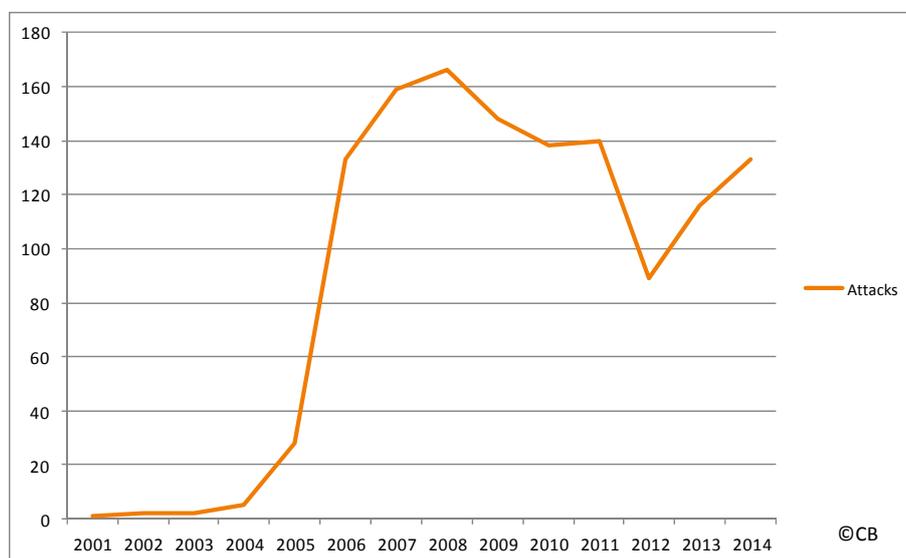
[16] Assaf Moghadam, *Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: a critique of Dying to Win,* in «Studies in Conflicts & Terrorism», Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, December 2005.

FIGURE 3 - "Events" trend graph for the period 2001-2014
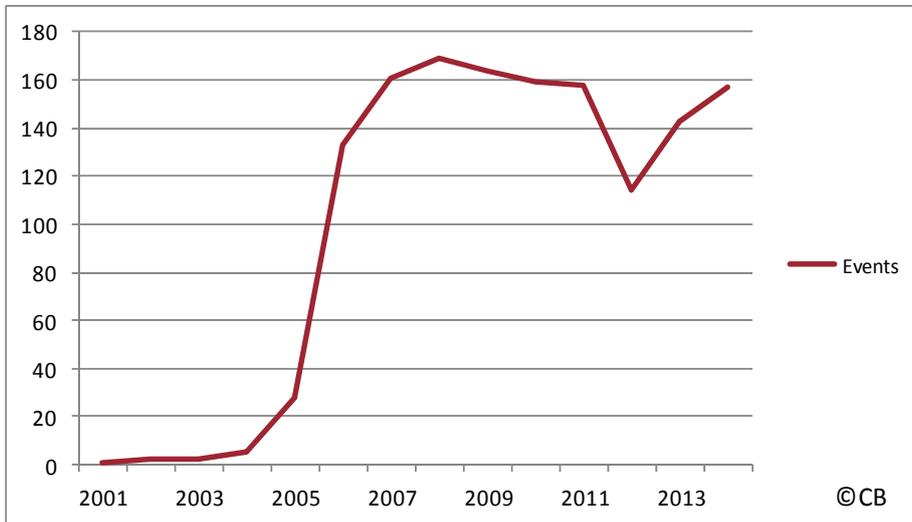
FIGURE 4 - "Subjects" trend graph for the period 2001-2014

The second approach (i.e. "events category") enables a significant contribution to the understanding and definition of the suicide-attacks role on the "operational" level; as regards the reading and analysis of the "strategic" and "social" role of the suicide-attacks and with a third more comprehensive approach, the third method (i.e. "subjects category") contributes significantly to the assessment on the long term (See Fig. 5).

FIGURE 5 - The 2001-2014 "triple way reading": "Attacks", "events", "subjects" trend comparison

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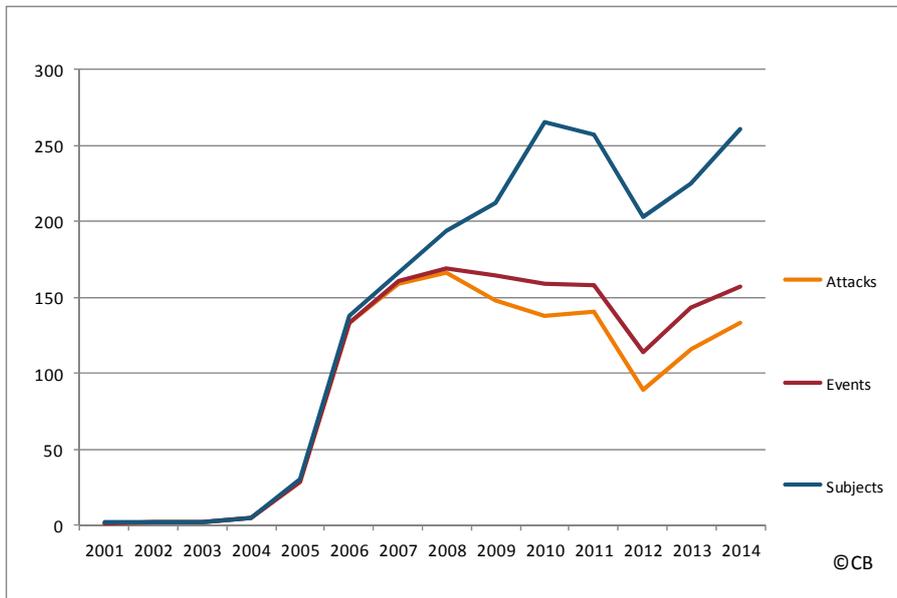
3.   *Failure and success: effects of the suicide-attacks*

From an operational viewpoint, suicide-attacks have proved to be a successful technique. Primarily from a mass-media attention rate perspective, year on year the Afghan AOGs – firstly the Taliban – have managed to direct the media attention on the Afghan war thanks to a rational strategy centered on media-attention grabbing actions; this takes place regardless of the tactical outcome they reach.

Secondarily the Afghan insurgency obtained positive results from an operational perspective. The rational approach emerges from the results obtained on the battlefield where the majority of the attacks reached a tangible goal: the "functional stop" (or "operational stop" – events that had a significant impact on the operational level of the security forces). There have been tangible results and, between 2009 and 2012, the attacks success was relative (functional stop) on average in 78% of the cases (75% in 2014).

Less than half the attacks have hit foreign military targets, needing a high contribution of suicide-fighters for a result that was a relative failure in terms of international forces soldiers' deaths. But what appears as a failure at first sight, actually can prove to be an important goal: the suicide-attack tactic has been capable of conditioning significantly the force-protection measures of the security forces raising the cost of war[17], in

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[17] 45 billion U.S. dollars were used for the MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) project. Besides since 2006 the anti-IED task force has spent further 17 billion dollars in counter-IED activities.

spite of the moderate material and human costs. Therefore it is possible to assert that suicide-attacks tactic is a tactical weapon capable of inflicting significant repercussions and costs.

On a military level, the relevance of the technique is partially significant, it is also evident an increased advantage on the battlefield: ability in recruiting and training would-be suicide-fighters. Lastly, it is evident that suicide-attacks represent a successful political choice on an operational level and from the perspective of its media success. In brief (cf. Fig. 6):

a) On the strategic level, suicide-attacks caught the media attention in 79% of the cases (commandos attracted 100% of media attention); a success that has a great impact on the recruitment campaign of would-be martyrs (Fig. 5).

b) On the operational level, suicide-attacks caused a functional stop to security forces in 8 out of 10 cases (78% on average, 88% in 2012, 75% in 2014), limiting the security forces' operational capabilities and freedom of maneuvering.

c) Lastly, on the tactical level, suicide-attacks do not reach the target on average 42% of cases; evolution of the last examined period of time (2009-2014) shows an improvement trend and an increase of attacks with a positive outcome. The results in 2014 show how a tactical success was reached in 54% of cases while 26% of them were formal failures.

FIGURE 6 - Media attention, Functional Stop and Tactical success: effects of the attacks trend (normalized data on total of attacks)
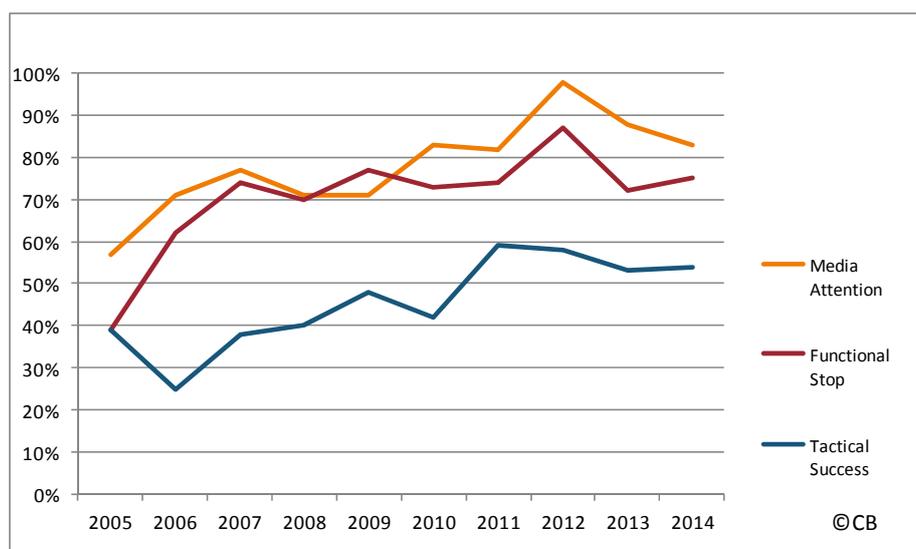
Analysis of available data would attest that suicide-attacks are important as much on an operational level (i.e. reduction of the security forces'

capabilities) as on a media attention level; the latter is exploited for political and propaganda purposes as shown by the media attention statistics both regionally and internationally.

Conclusions

The suicide-attacks strengths are the low costs and the immediate and amplified effects.

The continuous techniques and operational procedures changing and adaptation highlight the strategic rationality of the AOGs, that have been able to counterbalance the medium to long term successes with the collateral damage.

Tactically, the security forces appeared to be concentrated where the AOGs seem less interested in reaching tangible objectives. On the "force protection" front, the delimitation of secured "green areas" is a military countermeasure, with tactical effects in the short term, demonstrating not to take into consideration the political-strategic aspects.

Finally, AOGs registered qualitative results: augment of "functional stop" effect and more media attention (a decrease of international media attention in 2014 should be assessed as consequence of the foreign withdrawal).

This is an important and innovative contribute, applicable to different study-cases and functional to the analysis of the different *modus operandi* and techniques applied in the contemporary asymmetric conflicts, on their effects, results and the possible conclusions.