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Table of contents

Focus: Grandi Eventi

Suicide Attacks:
Strategy, from the Afghan War to Syraq and Mediterranean region.
A triple way to read the asymmetric threats

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Key Words

Parole chiave

Suicide attacks are one of the most important aspects of modern conflicts. According to Tosini (2009; 2012) 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 first seven years of the Iraq war. Moreover, suicide attacks played an important role in other conflicts such as the ones in Lebanon, Israel, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Turkey, which were carried out by PKK, worldwide attacks can be linked to the global organization of al-Qaeda, Afghanistan. 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. According to Tosini there is not one theory that can explain the phenomenon because it is a result of different actors who operate and co-operate during the conflict.

Generally speaking, scholars explain the importance of the suicide phenomenon using sociological, psychological or similar explanations. All of these are interesting and important explanations since a suicide-attack involves people

who want to kill themselves and others, but our research focuses on something else, i.e. in the changed (and changing) strategic context. But before we analyse the subject strategically, we need to explain how we use the term "suicide attack" and "terrorism". From our point of view it is important to recognize "contemporary terrorism" as a military "action" and as a "reaction", this would allow one to consider a "suicide attack" as a technique of armed opposition or an act of resistance 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 (Bertolotti, 2010). Nowadays terrorism is a word with a negative meaning; in Afghanistan, as well as in Syraq (Syria and Iraq), 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"[1] (but also *mujahidin*, rebels, freedom fighters) to describe subjects generally called, with a rather partial approach, terrorists[2].

As mentioned above the point of view of the present study is strategic, we chose it 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 present study is thus divided in two parts. The first one deals with the strategic debate on the transformation of war, reading it in two ways: one comprehends all theories about the importance of technology and the central role of information technology, that is RMA; the other one is centred on the perpetrators of the violence and underlines the fact that today wars are fought by non-state actors, as a consequence the way that violence is inflicted is changing. From this new strategic context many characteristics, which could help explain

[1] In line with Assaf Moghadam critique, see Moghadam 2006a.
[2] 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); see, for example Ashworth et al. 2008; Atran, 2004; Crenshaw et al. 2000; Dershowitz, 2002; Enders, et al. 1990; Hoffman, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Kramer, 1998; Lombardi et al. 2009; Merari, 1998; Merari, 2004; Merari, 2010; Pape, 2005.

why suicide attacks are so important nowadays, emerge. Finally we are going to focus on a particular battlefield and its characteristics, i.e. urban battlefield.

In the second part of this study we are going to analyze the Afghan theatre of war both to give a context to all the theory we have illustrated in the first part and to see the practical results of suicide-attacks. In the last decade, the Armed opposition groups (AOG) have begun employing a new tactic the use of which was increased progressively on the Afghan battlefield: the suicide attack, a military technique based on a political strategy. Can we conclude that it is a successful technique? 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) created by one of the authors (based on 66 categories and subsections and more than 31.500 single information data) it is now possible to understand new trends and developments of the Afghan phenomenon, analyzing, furthermore, direct and indirect results obtained on strategic, operational and tactical levels.

1. Suicide Bombing and Strategic Thought[3]

1.1 RMA and Suicide Bombings

In the paragraphs below we seek to understand from a theoretical point of view why suicide attacks are so important on the battlefield today. For this purpose we are going to use three different approaches: drawing parallels between suicide attacks and the Western concept of RMA; studying the current debate on the transformation of war; carrying out a brief analysis of how a special feature of modern conflicts, urban warfare, could affect the increasing use of suicide attacks.

Generally speaking, what is known as "western way of war" is about high technology and RMA. The entire debate dates back to the 70s, and we have to emphasize some of the concepts as we can trace them in the strategic logic of suicide tactics. A parallelism between a suicide bombing and RMA is not new (Lewis, 2007; Hoffman, 2004), but here we want to underline some aspects which can help us understand the phenomenon better in the light of modern strategic thought. The roots of RMA lie in the idea that the American Army had fewer troops and weapons than the Soviet Army, for this reason new weapons capable of going undetected and being failure-proof in striking a target more in depth and precisely were needed. Moreover, weapons had to have a good survivability (Shimko, 2010).

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[3] This section has been written by Andrea Beccaro.

The precision of the strike is a very important feature because it 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 not very complicated and the explosive can be found around the theatre of war or on the black market. Furthermore, with suicide attacks the cost, in terms of risk, is lower than any other attack tactics because the fighter can not be arrested and interrogated[4] giving the organization a better survivability to enemy investigations (Hafez, 2007). According to Bunker and Sullivan, another important aspect is that in order to plan a suicide attack the terrorist organization needs neither an elaborate plan nor an escape, which historically has been one of the most complicated and difficult plan to realize. A suicide fighter, like a cruise missile, can not be defused or removed by the enemy who can only wait to be attacked. Even when the regular army are able to identify the threat, he/she could be attacked in any case because the suicide fighter can detonate himself/herself before reaching the right target. 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. If the selected target is too well protected, the attacker can turn around the corner and detonate himself/herself in a market. This way the chosen target will be safe, but the attack will be successful, nevertheless, because it will have attracted media attention anyway as the organisation or the individual hoped it would. Studying the Afghan case in the second part of the essay we will see how this change in the objective of attack could affect the understanding of the phenomenon in the theatre of war. Moreover, a suicide fighter can walk inside and around the target, making adjustments and choosing the right moment and place to attack. In this sense the suicide fighter, and not the cruise missile or the JDAM, is the only real smart bomb (Bunker, Sullivan, 2004).

Reading the problem of suicide attacks in this light, Bunker and Sullivan underline two features of the tactics included even in the RMA concept of *stand-off* weapons. First of all, the suicide fighter is invisible to the defender who knows they are under attack only when the explosion has occurred. This way the suicide attack is a surprise attack and represents the most important tactics in an irregular war. Secondly, suicide bombings could be absolutely precise, enabling the attacker to hit difficult and well protected targets, and they are flexible enough to change target or attack procedure if necessary *(Bunker, Sullivan, 2004)*.

Another common feature between modern weapon systems and suicide bombing is the ability to project force. Cruise missiles, aircraft like F117 or B2 and so on were designed to penetrate in depth in enemy territory due to their "invisibility", a suicide fighter can carry out the same deep penetration allowing the terrorist organization to strike in territories which are far beyond

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[4] Clearly not all suicide attacks end with the detonation because of malfunctions or other reasons, in these cases the suicide fighter can be arrested and interrogated, but this is not very common.

classic terrorist tactics and traditional capabilities of such organizations. One of the original ideas that each terrorist has, is to strike everywhere it is possible in order to create fear and to undermine state authority. With suicide bombing this aspect becomes simpler and it can have a greater impact (Lewis, 2007). In Iraq and in Afghanistan the insurgents were able to strike important facilities using suicide bombing as a battering ram for a more complex attack. Other examples of crossing battlefield borders are Chechens suicide attacks in Moscow or attacks linked with al-Qaeda, an organization without a real and territorial base but able to strike worldwide with suicide attacks.

According to Lewis, suicide bombing is not simply a metaphor of technology, it is a kind of technology: "In this light, suicide bombing appears as a technological solution to a practical problem" (Lewis, 2007). While the United States, in particular, have spent billions and billions on technological research and innovation, terrorists use what they have in a new and unexpected way. The same idea was expressed by two Chinese colonels in the middle of the Nineties. Their book, *Unrestricted Warfare*, was very famous a decade ago, and even if it has some its limits their idea to strike the enemy in new and unpredictable ways is exactly what suicide bombing did and well before the colonels' book (Qiao, Wang, 1999).

But which way do terrorists use the technology in an unexpected way? According to Lewis, while the United States install in their bombs or missiles devices able to guide them precisely to the target, terrorists, who have not the same technology, money and research possibilities, use a "human device" for the same purpose. This point has been also underlined by both Bruce Hoffman, who introduced the definition of "human weapon system", and Boaz Ganor for whom the suicide-fighter is the thinking vector of a destructive device (Ganor, 2000). Using a "human device" is even better than the technological device because he/she can change plan while travelling to the target, make adjustments, thus it has a bigger flexibility and produces better results than traditional technology. Indeed, as Lewis notes, during al Aqsa Intifada Palestinians used "dumb rockets" to strike Israel cities and only two years later the first attack they were able to kill someone. Instead, using suicide bombing, Palestinians increased their attack capabilities: suicide bombing were only 0.5 percent of the total attacks but killed 50 percent of the casualties. According to Lewis (2007), from a technical point of view, there are little, if none, differences between classic rockets, like Qassam 2, and suicide vests, on the contrary the former have more explosive power than the latter. The biggest difference lies in the "human guidance system" which enables to strike the target accurately. But this does not mean that terrorists, insurgents and the like are not able to use high technology for their purposes. As we will see below speaking about Hybrid Warfare, irregulars use high technology but

in ways which are considered strange by westerners; the attacks of 9/11 are the most famous example, although not the only ones (Jessee, 2006).

There are also two big differences between western ideas tied to RMA and suicide bombings. Firstly, the entire debate around RMA is concentrated on technology trying to eliminate human beings from the battlefield. The "absolute precision" of the strike, the "perfect knowledge" envisioned by RMA and so on exclude the human dimension from the war. 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. Secondly, it seems that suicide bombings have been able to get over the biggest problem tied to technology, which is the fact that sooner or later a new device can be invented and that it can counter the first device. At the moment a tactic or a technological device capable of countering suicide bombings does not appear to exist.

1.2   Suicide bombings and the debate on the transformation of war

In the last three decades a huge debate emerged around the idea that warfare is changing or has already changed. These theories highlight how Western powers, focusing on technology and classic state versus state warfare, have forgotten other kinds of war which have been followed by western adversaries. One of the most famous definitions is Creveld's LIC (Low Intensity Conflict) (1991): generally fought in underdeveloped countries; not fought by regular armies but by irregular fighters sometimes against a regular army; not fought with advanced technological weapons; and finally their causalities are mostly civilians. After few years, Creveld Kaldor's *New Wars* (1999) stressed the idea that modern wars are new[5] for three reasons: the aim, because new wars are not fought for some political ends but for identity politics and so religion or ethnicity play a more important role; the fighting method, as fighters try to achieve their goals through the control of the population obtained with violent practices like rapes and deportation; the new war economy with close links to globalization and its consequences. Another interesting theory is Lind's Fourth Generation Warfare (Lind, 1989). Historically speaking it presents problems, but it underlines some important features: the 4th generation removes the distinction between civilian and military (as in Creveld and Kaldor theory) so the

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[5] The use of the adjective "new" is controversial for this reason Kaldor (2003) tried to clarify her ideas some years later but this aspect here is not important because we are more interested in the reasons why professor Kaldor thinks that the wars are different.

entire society becomes a battlefield; the logistic is less important; manoeuvre is a key factor because contingents are smaller; destroying the enemy from the inside is more important than destroying it on the battlefield. Hence the 4th generation theory highlights unwittingly two important aspects of the suicide bombings the targets of which are mostly not military: firstly there is not a distinction between civilians and military; secondly, a separation between civil society and battlefield does not exist because the civil society is the battlefield, and for the same reason it is important to affect the media.

A more recent theory is Hoffam's Hybrid Warfare theory. In this case the regular and irregular characteristics are mixed giving irregular fighters better capabilities and more possibilities to stand and fight against the regular army (Hoffman, F., 2007). This definition is very interesting because it was coined after the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and it stems from the analysis of the reality of that war (Biddle, Friedman, 2008), where Hizballah showed its unique and significant military capabilities. Indeed Hizballah had large ground forces, which Itai Brun (2010) assesses at around 10,000 fighters, that fought and operated like guerrilla forces. It is true that Hizballah had stock of long and short range rockets, anti ship, tank and aircraft missiles, even an air force able to strike with some UAVs, but at the same time Hizballah operated in a guerrilla style, trying successfully to create an attrition war and to win by not losing.

This aspect leads us to take into account ideas of Brigadier General Itai Brun who shows that the western technological RMA was not the only possible revolution. If the western RMA has its roots in the Vietnam war, Cold war and technological innovation, the O-RMA (Other-RMA) devised between 1978 and 1982 when several conflicts and revolutions took place in the Middle East (The Iranian revolution, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Israel war in Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq war and so on). The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the first provider of weapons and doctrine to many Middle Eastern states, and the Gulf War in 1991 forced those states to change their strategic view and operational doctrine and to find new and different ways to fight. According to Itai Brun three organisations were the first to do that: Hizbollah, Hamas and Al-Qaeda. Not surprisingly the three of them have used suicide tactics in their operations. Moreover, in the last few years even inside jihadi groups a huge thinking has taken place in order to use violence in a better and more functional way (Adamsky, 2010).

While Western RMA was the product of new technology, ORMA, as Itai Brun (2010) notes, was 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". In this regard the priority that Western powers gave to airpower, and PGM during the war against Iraq in 1991 is particularly important. That conflict and other like those fought by Israel and United States in Somalia, in the Balkans and so on also highlight-

ed the weaknesses in the western "way of war", that the western leaderships are highly sensitive to public opinion and to the number of casualties on both sides. This issue was well analysed by Martin Shaw (2005), who points out even the important role of media in building the consensus or in hiding the deaths. 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.

The guerilla theme is important for other theories of modern warfare. Due to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq several scholars and analysts, referring to modern warfare, have started talking about insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN). These two concepts highlight important features of the modern wars and tie them to the long military history in which guerilla warfare takes an important role (Kilcullen, 2005; Metz, 2007; Rid, Keaney, 2010).

With this theoretical background we can identify some characteristics of the modern warfare which are important to understand the problem of suicide bombings from a strategic point of view. Almost every scholar agrees that today wars are fought by irregular fighters sometime against a regular, conventional army, sometimes against other irregular groups. Technology is important but not in the way envisioned by RMA theories, instead it is important because it gives irregular fighters more fire-power, more and faster communication capabilities and more possibilities to build their own bombs and weapons.

From the debate on the transformation of war illustrated before, it is clear that modern warfare is some kind of a modern irregular war[6] and, historically speaking, one of its typical characteristics is that the irregular force tries to win against a stronger opponent using cheaper tactics or rather tactics which can achieve the goal the irregular force wants without spending too much economic resources, time and men. Therefore in this kind of war there are many ambushes, raids, hit-and-run tactics and the irregular force uses small weapons (assault rifles, machine guns, RPG etc.). Nowadays these tactics remain valid and widely used but in modern warfare the use of mines, IEDs, car bombs and suicide attacks has grown. P.W. Singer highlights that ships loaded with explosives have been used since 1500s and mines since the American Civil War, but, even if they represent an early version of modern IED, they were used in small quantities in the past and they never had strategic consequences. Singer highlights that since IEDs demonstrated their ability to strike, their use will increase and they will not be a weapon only for insurgents. Similar to suicide bombing, "IEDs present increasingly difficult

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[6] Finding a definition is really difficult, Callwell (1996, 2012) said that small wars, which can be considered synonymous of irregular war, "include all campaigns other than those where both the opposing sides consist of regular troops". In this case regular is a synonymous of state army, as in Carl Schmitt (1972) who defines the concepts of regular and irregular in the light of the kind of the political organization, i.e. the state.

balance-of-costs problems". U.S. have spent $17 billions on anti-IED gear, but one IED costs much less (Singer, 2012) since, according to Dietz (2011), 80% of Afghan IEDs were "made using home-made explosives (HME) developed from farm fertilizer, ammonium nitrate". According to Brooking Institute (2012) data the U.S. Armed Forces counted 1756 casualties due to IEDs, that are the 39,2% of all the casualties in Iraq[7].

This aspect leads us to another interesting theory of the current transformation of war: in "Open source Warfare" John Robb (2005) stresses the idea that modern fighters can communicate their successes and failures more rapidly than conventional forces and so they are always a step ahead of their enemy. But "Open source warfare" identifies another important aspect, that is the strategic impact of tactics. In the second part of the essay we are going to examine this aspect further with the Afghanistan case study, but now it is important to note that in Iraq insurgents were able to undermine the Iraqi economy targeting pipelines, power lines and other facilities of this kind. Robb (2007) calls this type of attacks systems disruption, which means using "sabotage of critical systems to inflict economic costs on the target state". Insurgents do not try to destroy the entire system but only to keep the infrastructure to a level below what is needed. Robb's idea is interesting because he underlines that such attacks are relatively simple and cheap but they create a big economic damage which can be long to resolve. The Brookings Institution (2011) counts 469 attacks against pipelines in Iraq between March 2003 and 26 April 2008 only, without taking into account similar operations against other facilities. The same logic could be applied to suicide attacks which, generally speaking, are not able to destroy military units or big targets but they can seriously damage and change the order of priority of regular forces affecting the enemy's OODA loop as western theories of RMA try to do.

The background of these definitions leads us to understand ORMA band suicide bombing better. According to Itai Brun (2010), the ORMA originated from an analysis of weak points of western RMA because the understanding of these points allowed the weaker technological side to turn the tables in their favour following a strategy which has common features of irregular warfare in general. Firstly, irregulars "need to significantly improve their ability to withstand attacks in order to prolong their absorptive capacity" and this is a typical characteristic of irregular and guerrilla warfare which, according to Kissinger (1969), "wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win". Throughout history, irregulars have always tried to prolong the fight in order to weaken the other side and destroy the will to continue the war. This way the conflict could be won not with more numerous, powerful

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[7] To analyse the IED in Iraq and American response see also Smith, 2011.

and technological advanced weapons but with a stronger will and determination. In fact, according to Cassidy (2003), "irregular" warfare has six paradoxes which make more difficult for the great power to win in this context and one of the paradoxes is just linked to the will to fight, which is always stronger in the irregular side than in the regular side. So irregulars "need to move from a decisive win strategy to a strategy of attrition [...] due to Western sensitivity to continuous war and casualties". Attrition means a long war and a long war means that the perception of a dead end situation can become stronger and stronger and at the end it leads to a public opinion's request for withdrawal. So, while the West seeks a quick, clear and decisive victory, irregulars seek only to survive and to prolong the war in order not to lose it. But the suicide attacks highlight the difference with the history of guerilla warfare because unlike classic ambushes used by guerrillas which could cost a lot of casualties as a result of better training and fire power of regular infantry, suicide attacks minimize the casualties for the attackers (Michael, Scolnick, 2006).

Itai Brun (2010) indicates six vulnerabilities which irregulars were able to identify analysing the western way of war: emphasis on survivability of the fighting forces achieved by using bunkers, tunnels, camouflage, deception etc.; emphasis on high-trajectory weapons because they are technically simple, low cost, able to penetrate deep into enemy territory and difficult to find because they can operate from mobile launchers; confronting areal superiority with the use of active and passive means. But for our research purposes other two vulnerabilities are more important. Firstly, the emphasis on media and media centred propaganda, internet and so on in order to influence not only the local population (it is an important aspect since this kind of war is often an insurgency where the support of the population is central), but even the international community[8]. As a result of the revolution in telecommunications, media operations and perception management have became ever important and from the irregulars' point of view suicide bombing has became the perfect propaganda tool due to its "horrific and sensationalistic effects" (Michael, Scolnick, 2006).

For the purpose of our study the greatest weakness is related to "the use of weapons and methods of operation that can lead to a high number of casualties". In this vulnerability we can include both the IED and suicide bombers. Although the first suicide bombings were at the beginning of the '80s, an important turning point seems to be the Second Intifada because Hamas discovered that "suicide bombings not only created a 'balance of terror' with Israel, but also provided advantages to the Palestinians". In front of this threat Israel lacked "any deterrence or offensive capabilities [...] Israeli technological supremacy

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[8] Hoffman (2006) notes that this aspect is a feature of terrorism in general and in particular of terrorism after the Second War World.

could not come to terms with Palestinians' determination and willingness to sacrifice their men and women" (Brun, 2010). We can trace the same logic in Iraq against the Coalition forces leaded by the United States and it is clear that behind this logic there is the will to conduct a war of attrition (Beccaro, 2013).

1.3   Urban Warfare

Historically speaking, if the weaker side wants to follow an attrition strategy and to establish a credible deterrence capability, he has to fight in areas where the regular armies experienced more problems in the way they operated. For our analysis this aspect is really important because it opens a reflection on the urban warfare which helps us explain the development of suicide attacks. For this reason Itai Brun pinpoints another vulnerability, the sixth, of the western way of war on the emphasis on "close battle" where technological advantages are less crucial. In urban warfare the fighting is very close, in fact the physical characteristics of the cities push the two sides closer together compared to a traditional battle on an open battlefield. Streets, monuments, buildings (destroyed or not) limit weapon's range and force the army to operate in small squads and to conquer each building (Scales, 2005). Because of all this, urban fighting takes time (helping the irregular in his prolonged war) and requires a lot of ammunition and more soldiers on the ground. Urban terrain balances the differences between regular army and irregular fighters because it generates close fighting at platoon level or smaller in which the technology plays a minor role (Grau, Kipp, 1999; Peters, 1996; Thomas, 1999). The idea to push western armies inside cities in order to prolong the war and to balance the technological differences between the two sides is not new, Peters highlighted it in 1997 and Scales showed in 2005 that this is not a possibility but it is a reality of modern battlefield because the enemy understood the need to fight in cities in order to undermine western power. Since in this kind of battlefield troops have to be divided to operate (Morrison Taw, Hoffman, 1994), this means that irregulars can choose more objectives to strike and more objectives mean less protection for everyone.

Thus, the third way we have tried to understand suicide attacks is represented by the increasingly growing phenomenon of the urbanisation of conflicts. Here we can neither explain the reasons of this trend nor try to demonstrate it, but some scholars[9] have started to highlight how modern conflicts are fought more often inside cities. There is a demographic explanation to this trend because during the last decades an increasing number of people start-

[9] Rosenau, 1997; Desch, 2001; Spiller, 2001; Hills, 2002; Robertson, 2003; Russell *et al.*, 2007; Davis, 2009; Evans, 2009; Killkullen, 2013.

ed living live in cities. According to the World Urbanization Prospects 2011 now about half of the world population lives in cities and this statistic is very impressive because it is the first time in human history that the urban population has the same number of rural population. But even more important the World Urbanization Prospects 2011 indicate that in 2050 urban population will be more numerous than rural population.

From our point of view, strategic, operational and military explanations to the urbanization of conflicts are more important than the demographic one. In this respect we can deal with the problem in two different ways. First, historically regular Armies have always had problems fighting inside cities for several reasons: complexity of urban terrain, civilian presence, lower to high (importance) technology weapons and so on. Secondly, urban terrain is perfect for irregular warfare tactics and terrorism in general. Hoffman (2006) noted in his book *Inside terrorism* that every terrorist group used urban terrain to carry out its attacks. Irgun in Israel used terrorist attacks to attract international attention on Israeli issues, the same idea was used by Grivas in Cyprus and in Algeria. The best way to do this is to carry out some big attacks under media eyes and the places where they are more present are cities. Moreover, in cities there are numerous targets to attack of different nature from a political one to an economic one. For the security forces it is simply impossible to defend every possible target so suicide bombing can attack the least defended building or place without losing the possibility of attack. The irregulars understood the importance of cities as *Practical Course for Guerrilla War* by 'Abd Al-'Aziz Al-Muqrin, an Al Qaeda's practical war manual of Al-Qaeda, demonstrates. Its contents are not very original compared to traditional guerilla manuals but it has some pages on how to operate inside cities, and it stresses the importance of cities because here there are a lot of objectives first of all economic ones. The manual indicates twelve advantages of urban operations including media coverage which helps the group to be known around the world (Cigar, 2009).

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. Just like other "irregular" tactics, e.g. snipering and IED, suicide attacks are very effective in cities because there it is invisible to the defender. On a classic battlefield, an open terrain where there are two armies confronting each other, a civilian walking around could be simply identified as a possible threat, but in a city this is simply impossible. The suicide fighter is completely visible to the defender but not his nature and the threat that he is carrying, so the human bomb is invisible and can attack when, where and how he/she wants.

2. Suicide-attacks in Afghanistan.
A triple way reading of the phenomenon[10]

The topic of this article section concentrates upon is the result of an analytic research where a number of complementary sources have been analyzed: on the one hand, the field research lasted around two years, on the other hand the open sources information and data analysis.

The theoretical approach we have chosen to adopt is based on the definition which indicates suicide-attack as an offensive or defensive action in a context of asymmetrical war, that for its own nature entails the irrefutable death of the attacker and the consequences of which could have repercussions on different levels: political, strategic, operational, tactical and psychological.

In Afghanistan the phenomenon of the suicide attacks is relatively recent; since 2001 it has been evolving on a technical and military level becoming a real threat across the country. Even if there are types of methods used in the Afghan war and classified as suicide tactic, including the so called "green on blue" attacks (or "insider attacks", actions carried out by insider attackers within the Afghan security forces), we have taken into account solely the ones with the use of explosive equipment conventionally called IED (Improvised Explosive Device).

Aside from the ideological implications, the cultural justifications and the individual motives – on strategic, operational and tactic fronts, what contribute can the Afghan suicide-fighter give on the battlefield?

On the basis of the field research, following the analysis of the gathered data from the ASA[11] database, (reporting 1264 attacks registered between 2001 and 2014), it was possible to answer the aforecited question, shedding some light on the technical evolution and on the role of the suicide-attack conducted by an Afghan *shahid*.

2.1   An approach to the phenomenon

The *Istishhadi* is an "independently chosen martyrdom", the *Shahid* – "the living martyr" – is the individual who consciously decides to die for the cause.

Numerous studies have dealt with this phenomenon – often called "suicide terrorism" – Since the 90s. Few of these, have focused on the Afghan

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[10] This section is written by Claudio Bertolotti. The original article was presented and 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. It represents the main chapter of the Author's PhD Thesis (Bertolotti, 2013).

[11] ASA, «Afghanistan Suicide Attacks» database created by the Author.

case, partially and in a limited manner. The limited availability of in depth studies is principally due to: the difficulty of gathering primary data on the field, because of the chronic state of war and the consequential precarious safety conditions and the consequence of the relatively innovative suicide attacks in the Afghan war emerged as a phenomenon since 2005.

Although a part of the scholars deals with the social causes and the suicide-fighters' individual motives, this research concentrates on the possible reasons behind this phenomenon, as well as the tactical-operational and strategic factors. This is therefore an approach which looks at a number of attacks and not a single action.

Boaz Ganor asserts that this is not a new phenomenon, but that it is growing exponentially. It imposed itself as a *modus operandi* typical of the contemporary terrorist movements. The premise on which the correct analysis ought to be based is the concept of suicide-attack, as an "operational method" in which the real deed of the attack depends on the attacker's death. Ganor's contribution (2000), although not adding very much theoretically, contributes to define what an attack really is and gives an insight in his analysis of the operational potentialities of the suicide-attack tactic, that he defines as "the most sophisticated"; aside from individual reasons and religious radicalism what have caused the evolution of the phenomenon is simply the fact that this tactic has proved effective (Dershowitz, 2002; Pape, 2005) and allows them to reach immediate results on the battlefield and in terms of impact on the media coverage. Besides what Ganor insists on is the nature of this phenomenon: not a simple personal initiative, but the result of an "organized" process.

Bruce Hoffmann (2006) also offers a fine reading of this phenomenon, no longer analyzed as a way to obtain immediate results on a tactical level, but an objective of strategic nature, such as mass media amplification; the suicide attack tactic becomes an instrument of psychological warfare (Juergensmeyer, 2000). Besides Hoffman (2006) recognizes the suicide attacks a rational and simplified nature, as they do not impose the study of an escape plan.

Scott Atran (2004) offers an important contribution as far as the relationship between action and reaction is concerned: the repeated attacks would show how the tactic countermeasures based on the adoption of passive protective solutions would not result in a reduction of the phenomenon. This does not appear to be so, fast adaptability and flexibility would lead the Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) to adopt more productive tactics and procedures. Atran believes that the presence of the foreign armies – in line with Pape's opinion on the subject – does not contribute to containing nor contrasting the phenomenon effectively.

In contrast with this approach to the phenomenon, the literature on the evolution of the Afghan case is unfortunately rather limited and the report of

the institutional organizations address the problem within their area of activity and they fail to analyze the tactical nature of the phenomenon in depth, and its operational evolution (and partially the social evolution) and, lastly, the strategic developments of the *Istisshadi* in Afghanistan.

What is still missing – not exclusively in the Afghan case – is a method to read the phenomenon, which takes into account all the information and the data, both the open source and the classified; the approach we propose and we are going to illustrate – thanks to the valuable database of information and data on over thousand attacks – has as objective the analysis of all the information components through a «triple way reading» which supplies the reader with a different perspective for each of the observation point ("attacks-events-subjects") [see point 4].

2.2 Lexicon and methodology

In order to proceed with the study of this phenomenon it is convenient to choose the appropriate lexicon to define the problem.

As anticipated in the article introduction, recognizing terrorism not only as an "action" but as a "reaction" would allow one to consider it as a violent act and not as a product of *tout court* terrorism, but an act of resistance or a technique of armed opposition.

Nowadays terrorism is a word with a negative meaning used by one side of the conflict to define the other; and in Afghanistan suicide attacks mainly aim at military and institutional targets, while non-combatants are indirectly involved individuals, the so called "collateral damages". The organization or the subject are terrorists, perpetrators of the shameful and publicly condemned act, which is never justified. We therefore kept a neutral standpoint.

Lastly, the three levels we concentrated on to analyze the effects of suicide attacks: strategic, operational, tactic.

1. **Strategic level**: It entails a long term strategy for the planning and consequently for the coordination of the actions intended to reach a specific objective and for the formulation of military plans. It is essentially the ability to reach macro objectives – i.e." victory" – arranging resources, both actual and virtual (e.g. direct and indirect use of the mass-media, public opinions and propaganda), and deploying equipments and vehicles, for the purpose.
2. **Operational level**: It relates to the theater of war /overall outcome of the military operations in the operational area and the aim of which is to reach, on a strategic level, the desired outcome; it is based on the results achieved on the battlefield and on the coordination, on a tactical level, of the actions/operations. The repetition of the successful tactics is fun-

ctional to reaching the operational objectives. At this level we talk about an "emerging strategy", a collection of decisions that single groups, either with the other groups or singularly, act upon as a response to changes of external circumstances and to the way strategy is interpreted.

3. **Tactical Level**: Strictly speaking, it is the battlefield and it refers to the deployment of vehicles and equipments and the employment of military resources in order to reach a partial objective or a series of intermediate successes. It is a selection of actions aimed to reaching a specific aim and it deals with the deployment of forces, adapting the tactics, the procedures and to conform the results obtained to the desired outcomes. In all tactics – among which the suicide attacks – strategy, as a whole, is the logical basis and conditions them giving them a common aim.

3. Sources and methodology

As the quantitative nature of this phenomenon can be observed empirically and it is functional to the definition of the phenomenon dimensional boundaries, the research has moved in this direction taking advantage of the primary data gathered on the scene of the attacks, *open source* information (institutional reports, unclassified information, mass-media and propaganda) and classified data available on Wikileaks (2009). The information, broken down, categorized and processed, has contributed to a more complete and reasoned way of deciphering the armed opposition and the results obtained by suicide attacks.

4. The database

One of the most significant limits in the analysis of this phenomenon is the shortage of data and information from explorative studies; this is a real limit when trying to deal with the Afghan case as a phenomenon. Besides, the security organizations – local and international – have limited and often non-coherent cataloguing methodologies that we had a chance to assess personally. The NATO-ISAF studies and research products are often approximate and rarely show results that enable the understanding of the problem in its complexity. Recent publications have partially – although sectorially – filled the "knowledge gap" about the Afghan case; but this is still not enough.

A more in-depth assessment cannot leave aside the statistics on the frequency of the attacks, the analysis of the tactics and of the objectives, the evaluation of the geographical implications, the direct and indirect effects on the so-called battlefield, and the consequences of the mass-media exposure. What is still missing is a database built on these data and criteria, detailed

and shared among the security and cooperation organizations. This is what we have tried to accomplish.

The methodology for qualitative research utilized partial data, often incomplete, supplied by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior (UNAMA, 2007). On a quantitative level, in spite of the theoretical information, the results have yet to prove appropriately used for the study of this phenomenon and its effects on different levels: tactical, operational and strategic. The simple possibility of theoretical access to a significant wealth of information does not represent the ideal tool for the study of this phenomenon, however it is its use that contributes to an effective analysis of the problem. We therefore proceeded processing the data and the information selecting them accurately and ultimately organizing and synthesizing them. Following on Pape (2005), Moghadam[12] (2006b) and Tosini's (2009; 2012) footsteps we wanted to analyze the Afghan phenomenon through an empirical research and a statistical study of the information available on each attack. The contributions of this research are mainly the quality and the comprehensive information, and a fundamental categorization and compartmentalization of collected data; specifically we wanted to draw the attention on the 647 cases registered in the database WITS (Worldwide Incident Tracking System) of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)[13], on the 545 cases that Pape cataloged for the *Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism* (CPOST)[14] and the registration work carried out by the *Global Terrorism Database* (GTD)[15]; Authors' archive of suicide attacks (ASA database) carried-out in Afghanistan (including the failed attacks and the ones classified as peripheral and therefore not included in the ordinary statistics) contains data concerning 913 single cases (period 2001-2012). There is a substantial difference between the methods, this enabled us to show more reliable results and conclusions that thanks to their breaking down and organization into subcategories led to three very distinct ways to read-of the Afghan suicide attacks phenomenon in contrast with the *one way reading* of the other databases, as they classify the attacks as separate, regardless of the number of suicide-fighters, attacks and simultaneous targets (see further on). We therefore devised a database of all the data gathered from three different sources: *open source* information, classified and unclassified reports, revendications/propaganda from the AOGs. What we have collected

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[12] The authors want to express their warmest thanks to Ashraf Moghadam for his advice.
[13] Worldwide Incidents Tracking System database (WITS), created by the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) https://wits.nctc.gov/federalDiscoverWITS.
[14] Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPOST) database available at http://cpost.uchicago.edu.
[15] See the Global Terrorism Database, created by the University of Maryland, available at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd.

is, originally partial and incomplete, information that thanks to a process of systematization have contributed to what can be considered the most thorough database of the Afghan suicide attacks since 2001. What sets this database apart from the ones currently available (WITS,CPOST,GTS) is not the quantity of the information processed, but the analysis of each piece of information, that way it has been broken down and differentiated of the single data structured in informative macro-areas. Analyzing the Afghan suicide attacks phenomenon, it is the participation to the action or the event that becomes significant; while the aforementioned databases show the direct effects (typology of objectives, tactic and damage to the enemy). The analysis of the data, becomes of paramount importance, whose aim is the definition of how many individuals contribute to reaching the tactical-operational objectives and hence to understand the evolution and the participation to the phenomenon. Here are listed the nine macro-areas of information on which the reading and the analysis of the information gathered, filtered and systemized, is based:

1. "Temporal" area (Date, day of the week, time);
2. "Spatial" area (Province, district, town, village, military headquarters)
3. "Technical" area (SVB-IED, SBB-IED, commando, unreported tactic);
4. "Action" area (Total of attacks, events, attackers);
5. "Personal" area (Gender, age, nationality, province/town/village, education, ethnicity)
6. "Group" area (AOG responsible for the attack, revendications, etc...)
7. "Effect" area (Dead and wounded, ANSF, ISAF-NATO, civilians, contractors, civilians/soldiers ratio, etc,...)
8. "Target" area (ANSF, ISAF-NATO, government targets, UN, ONG/PSF, non-military targets, locations, etc...)
9. "Outcome" area (Failure, success, functional stop, impact on mass media)

The analysis which followed shed light on an evolutive trend of the phenomenon on a quantitative level (number of attacks) and on a qualitative one (techniques improvement and flexible adaptation to countermeasures), but also on the social level (increase in the number of suicide-fighters and expansion of the recruiting pool).

5. Data and analysis

5.1 Evolution of the phenomenon

From the single cases in 2001 and 2002 the number grows and reaches 25 suicide attacks in 2005; the following year the events unfold on a weekly basis, and in 2007 the attacks are three to four a week and its yearly total reaches the number of 159. In 2008 165 suicide attacks are registered and from this year – with a fairly

constant frequency until 2011 – they level out with high figures, while the number of attacks levels off, the number of the suicide-fighters grows. From a spatial point of view, suicide attacks have progressively spread across the territory. Although the southern and eastern regions have been hit by the violence of the attacks, the phenomenon evolved in the northern, western and central areas of the country, becoming an efficient and functional tactic. The regional subdivision chart (Fig.1) highlights the higher number of attacks in the southern provinces, followed by the southeastern and central regions. Kabul represents a different case. In the last few years the attacks have increased exponentially concurrently to the introduction of a new policy adopted by the radical groups operating under the banner of the Islamic Emirate (*in primis* the *Haqqani* network). The main roads and the most crowded urban areas are places where, in percentage, most of the attacks take place. The strategy of carrying out spectacular actions is a priority for the AOGs and the fact that they choose to hit with a high concentration of (local and foreign) security forces, as well as journalists and reporters, is a symptom of their will to hit symbols of the enemy on the battlefield, but also ideologically (Bertolotti, 2011), while trying to attract media attention.

Figure 1: Geographical distribution of the phenomenon (per ISAF Regional Command)
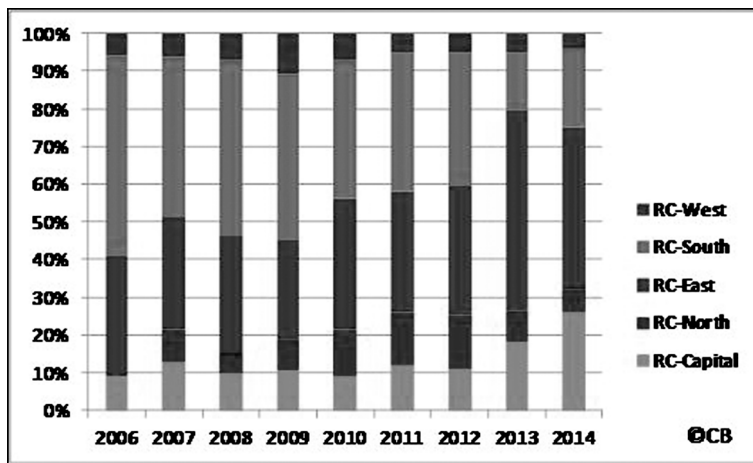
With regards to the indirect effects, the number of victims is growing progressively, although the attacks are concentrated mainly on military and government targets, the victims are mainly civilians. In 2007 suicide attacks killed 497, 282 of whom were civilians, 28 foreign soldiers and 169 Afghan soldiers and police officers (Afghan National Security Forces, ANSF). If we compare it with the data statistics of the previous year, 307 killed of whom 216 civilians, this shows an in-

crement of victims of 31%. The total of people killed grows in 2011, too; a total of
449 civilians, 235 Afghan soldiers and police officers, and 18 foreign servicemen
(Figs. 2 & 3). The reason for this escalation may be interpreted as the result of a
winning strategy *in primis* economically, thanks to the costs of the tactic and on a
communication level, thanks to the ability to attract the media attention.

On the basis of the media attention rate trend of these operations – besides
the tactical success – (Fig.9) it is possible to identify a pretty constant trend of
an offensive phase, where the attacks are going to have a significant role and
can be marked by a greater number of suicide-fighters.

Figure 2: Trend of civilians and soldiers' deaths:
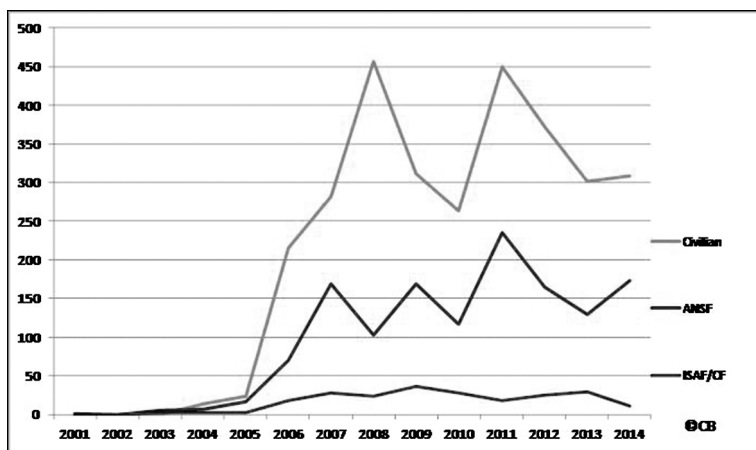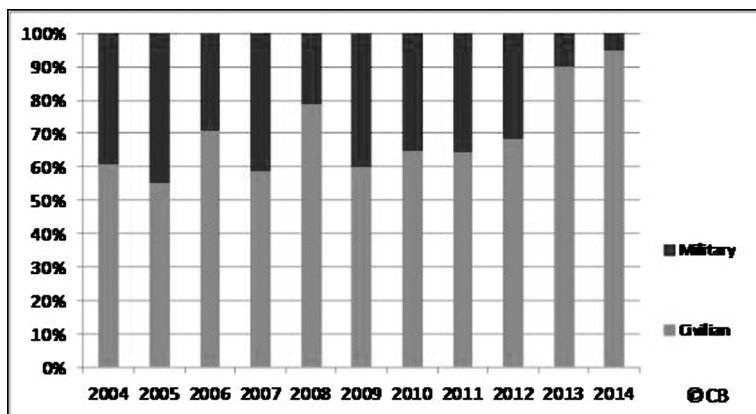Civilian collateral damages versus ANSF and ISAF/CF members killed

Figure 3:Percentage of civilians and soldiers' deaths

5.2 Techniques and attack procedures: Suicide Body Born-IED, Suicide Vehicle Born-IED and Suicide-commandos (SC-IED)

The increased frequency of the actions is a clear indicator of the enhanced ability and technical expertise, and it is proof of how their belief in its benefits from an opposition and insurgency strategy perspective has matured and is not simply a tactic to be used on the battlefield. 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.

Between 2005 and 2007 the AOGs used mainly two tactics: the "Suicide Body Born-IED" (SBB-IED) and the "Suicide Vehicle Born-IED" (SVB-IED); the period 2008-2014 marked the beginning of an increasingly more widespread use of the suicide-commando-IED (SC-IED) tactics that we have analyzed further in the following sections (Trend confirmed in 2012-2014).

A seesaw like trend in the use of the tactics started emerging in 2006. In the first months of that year the statistics show a substantial decrease of the SVB-IED technique, reaching 63% of the total of the attacks, lowering to 58% in 2007 (Fig.4). The percentages have followed a decreasing trend between 2008 and 2011(61% in 2008, 59% in 2009, 43% in 2010, 36% in 2011 and 33% in 2012) concurrently to the disappearance of the multiple suicide-commando attacks, the third and latest tactics adopted in the Afghan conflict; finally, during the period 2013-2014 the percentages are 46% and 44%.

The data referring to 2008 shows a new situation also in the SBB-IED (single suicide-fighter) attacks. While they represent 40% in 2007, the following year the percentage is down to 32% to increase progressively from 29% to 33% in 2009-2010, to 45% in 2011. 2012, 2013 and 2014 percentages are respectively 36%, 29% and 30%[16].

In 2008 a new tactics appeared in the Afghan war: the commando units, flanked and supported by fighters and support elements. A tactics that has proved efficient reaching 12% of the actions in 2009, settling between 22% and 19% in 2010-2011, 31% in 2012, 22% in 2013 and 26% in 2014. This is an efficient tactics – the result of two classic methods of SBB-IED and SVB-IED alongside the conventional tactics of the armed attack based on the coordination of one or more suicide-fighters (often divided in sub-units or echelons) supported by a close protection unit. The generational change at the summit of the insurrection may be at the origin of the introduction of the new combat tactics, while the cooperation among different groups led to the concentration of this kind of attacks in the areas of Kandahar, Helmand and Kabul in particular, concurrently with the rapid expansion of the Kabul

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[16] Author's database.

Attack Network of the Haqqani Group. Kabul evidently represents an import-
ant target, strategic and symbolic at the same time; here where the opportu-
nities to hit high profile targets are high and warrant an amplified media-eco,
in the last four years the cooperation among the opposition would be the
reason of a significant augmentation of the so called "spectacular attacks"
(Bertolotti, 2010, 2011).

Figure 4: Comparison of the attacks SBB-IED, SVB-IED and SC-IED, 2001-2014
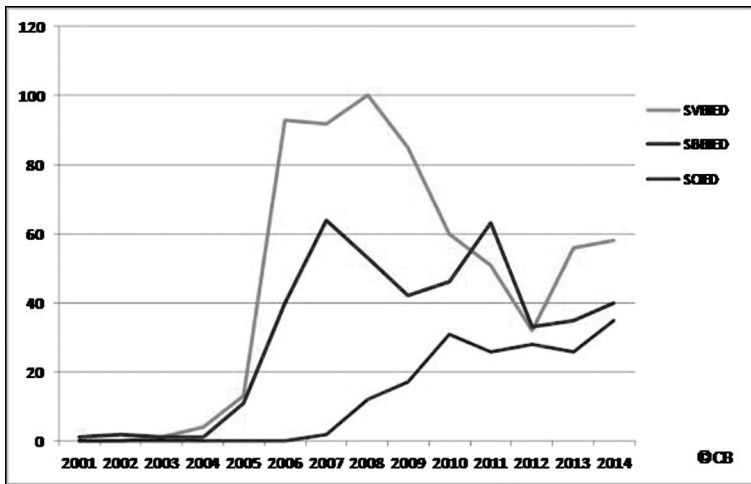
5.3 A triple way reading: "attacks-events-subjects"

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 isolat-
ed event – regardless of the number of suicide – fighters and targets hit. How
would one behave in front of the so-called multiple attacks (suicide-comman-
dos), against a single or multiple targets simultaneously?

To answer this question a painstaking process of collection, reading and
analysis of all the elements available is needed, as the method used to read the
information has a significant effect on the interpretation of the data, hence
the analysis of the problems and its solutions. 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 classifying each act
through a triple way reading (cf. Fig 8), a method that allows the observation
of the phenomenon from three different points of view. This is a study meth-
od different from Pape's method (CPOST) – which lacks in classifications on
the basis of the type of attack and composition of the group of assailants, and

different from the approach of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (WITS database), as the latter does not consider the number of participants to each action or event.

Thanks to the triple way reading illustrated in this section, the attacks (including the enumeration of acts with at least one suicide-fighter reported as death) are registered, interpreted and classified on the basis of three categorization processes.

1. The first category is the "attacks" category. This 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 and undetailed information from the media (*open source*).

2. The second category called "events" category comprises the number of simultaneous single actions that have been strictly coordinated, or linked to the same organization, group or mandant and it includes every single attack that has been carried out simultaneously against different targets (in this case the suicide-commando operations are counted on the basis of the targets hit). This data is the result of the analysis of not classified information as *open source* (TV reports, newspaper articles, news) and classified reports as originating from ISAF/Coalition Forces (available from Wikileaks) and secondarily from the web revendications of the insurgency groups and the security forces' information activities.

3. The third category is the "subjects" category. The subjects are the suicide-fighters who carry out the attack(s). Its reading and even more its analysis takes into consideration the statistical and, although not strictly speaking, the social aspects. Its calculation is not limited to the single or multiple acts (actions and events), but to the number of suicide-fighters who carry out the attack (excluding the arrested and the survivors). Also in this case along with the analysis of the texts the AOGs and the Security Forces' statements contribute to the information.

One example, in brief. The 9/11 attacks to the United States: 1 attack, 4 events[17], 19 subjects.

The results of the data classification are three different methods for the reading of the information, coherent to each of the approaches to the phenomenon, and enabling the reader to analyze them with three different outcomes. They are as follows:

1. "Attacks" trend (Fig. 5): This method allows a positive general assessment, when lacking a rational process of categorization, by inserting a simple

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[17] Two of the planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a third plane hit the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C., and the fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.

data in the graph this will give a result corresponding to a significant decrease of suicide attacks between 2008 and 2012 (and, more in general, a low number of attacks).

The first approach lends to a positive interpretation of the trend tending to show a progressive reduction of the suicide actions in the period 2008-2012 (cf Fig. 5). This methodology – also used by Pape (cf. CPOST database) – is currently used by NATO-ISAF and by the Afghan government organizations and it is functional to the need of presenting this phenomenon in a phase of containment and reduction; this in order to show how efficient the countermeasures are, capable of reducing threat significantly. What does not exist is a real counteroffensive strategy and, effectively, what can be deduced, analyzing the procedures adopted by the security forces, is an effort centered on the short term and limited to force protection measures at tactical level: at present no common counteroffensive appears to have been used on the battlefield. On an analytical level, being a methodology based on the observation of partial data, the result would be a consequence of an incomplete and misleading reading, that could show the situation to be the opposite than the real one, a potentially incorrect interpretation of the phenomenon. We have called this an "opportunity method" – incomplete therefore not reliable – useful to demonstrate results in the countermeasures and the problem solving that actually have never been materially obtained.

"Events" trend (Fig.6): This approach to the data analysis obtained from the calculation of the single actions carried out simultaneously, or coordinated among each other, allows the examination of the evolution of suicide-attacks from a different perspective: the one of complexity and operational intensity. Thanks to this approach it is possible to read the phenomenon as relatively stabilized: using this kind of analysis would lead to an assessment of the situation in a phase of "containment", hence it is functional to demonstrate a partial effectiveness in the threat containment process.

2. The second approach was inspired by the constructive criticism on Pape's methodology by Moghadam (2006b) in his analysis of the suicide attacks phenomenon.

   This method, that we might call "operational", contributes significantly to the attempt to answer the question on the evolution of this phenomenon through a reading of the data based on the analytical examination of the events, although Moghadam himself does not refer to it in the WITS database; this method is centered on an in-depth approach of analysis, although limited to the direct effects on the battlefield, as it takes into account the contemporary and coordinated events (reported appropriately as single events in the "action" category). Thus the graphic transposition of

the data gives a perceptibly different picture compared to the result obtained with the first method, with a relative stabilization of the phenomenon (cf Fig.6). The attacks, in contrast with the interpretative analysis of the first method, don't decline, but they stabilize on high figures as of 2008, showing, on the one hand, the ability of the AOGs to maintain a high operational level, on the other hand, it would contribute to a negative assessment of the countermeasures adopted by the security forces. It is a method, although partial, that contributes to the description of the phenomenon evolution on a temporal and also on a tactical progress level.

"Subjects" trend: The third reading method is certainly the most interesting one; it describes the phenomenon as growing sensibly and suggests notwithstanding the absence of an effective counteroffensive strategy. Hence, thanks to this observational method, the phenomenon – whose magnitude and potentiality would be highlighted by a growing operational and social recruitment pool of suicide-fighters – can be read as in constant evolution.

3. The third approach, that we called "para-social" – as a social study activity would have needed a qualitative research methodology based on a representative sample of subjects[18] –, it takes into account the total number of individuals that take part and carry out suicide attacks. Using this method to read the data highlights an interesting side of the Afghan phenomenon, showing its evolution in quantitative terms (i.e. ever enlarging recruitment pool, increasingly more developed organizational ability of recruitment teams, efficient connection and coordination work) and qualitative (training level, equipment, technical evolution, etc.). The number of would-be suicide-fighters is growing, it even doubles year on year (see Fig. 7) until 2011 with a decrease in 2012 – the year of the operational reduction of US-led coalition troops – and a new increase in 2013-2014: the results are surprising and show, also in this case, the lack in reliability of the first method as it is based exclusively on reading the actions, and at the same time it shows how tenuous and ineffective a prospective prevention and counteroffensive strategy can be. This different approach supports the analysis and the threat assessment in the medium to long term, highlighting adequately aspects such as individual participation (i.e. number of suicide-fighters) and the insurgency' operational ability (i.e. recruitment, indoctrination, information gathering by tactical-logistic support groups). This method, along with the

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[18] The higher the numbers of subjects analyzed, the more representative the sample. The majority of suicide attacks end with the assailant's death, while the ones who fail attempting the attack are just a small percentage. For this reason it is necessary to proceed cautiously with the definition of the subject as an assailant-martyr purely on the basis of the interviews.

"operational" reading that the second method warrants, has proved to be more functional to research, as it gives a more complete overall picture of the Afghan phenomenon, its progress and its potential developments both on a military level and on a social one.

Figure 5: Graphic representation of the "attacks" trend between 2001 and 2014
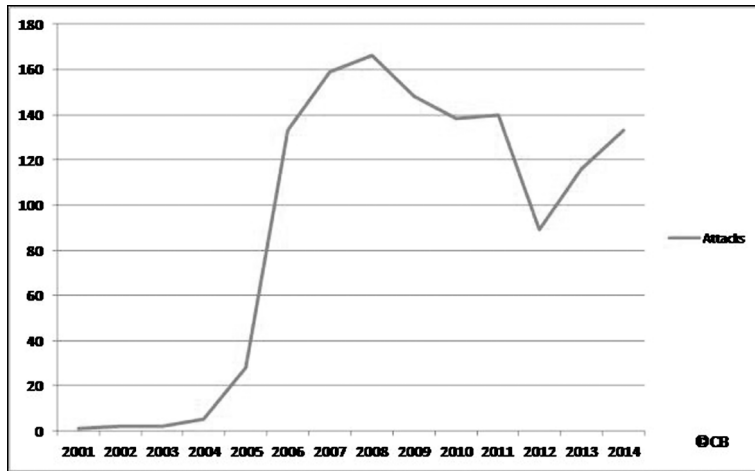

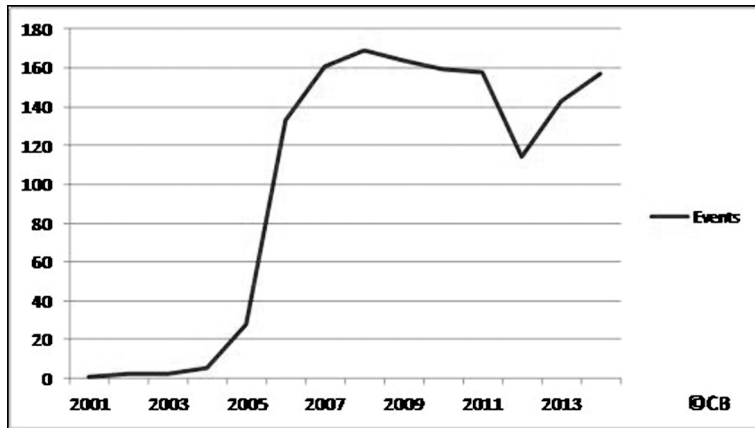Figure 6: "Events" trend graph for the period 2001-2014

Figure 7: "Subjects" trend graph for the period 2001-2014
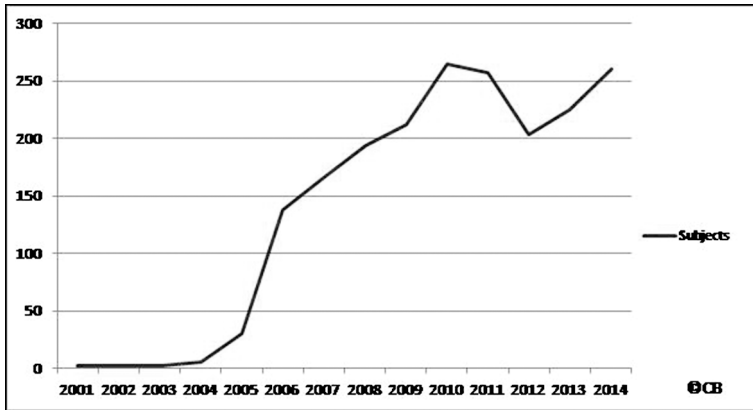
Having demonstrated how unreliable is the analysis based on a first reading method (i.e. "attacks category"), it is possible to assert that the second approach (i.e. "events category") enables a significant contribution to the understanding and definition of the suicide attacks role on the medium term and on an "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 forecasting and assessment on the long term. See Fig. 8 for the results obtained with the three reading methods.

Figure 8: The 2001-2014 "triple way reading": "Attacks", "events", "subjects" trend comparison.
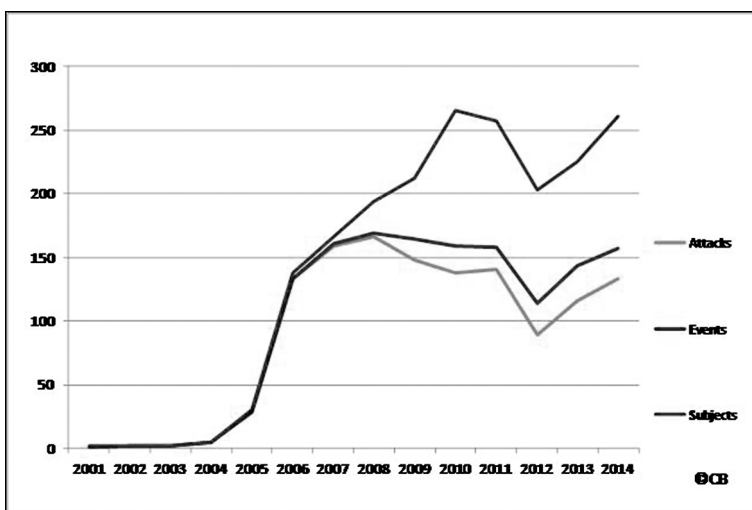
5.4 Failure and success: effects of the suicide attacks

From an operational viewpoint, suicide attacks have proved to be a successful technique on different levels. 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, such as the multiple suicide attacks (commandos) against government infrastructures in main urban areas, targeting high profile politicians, leading attacks against international military bases, etc.; this takes place regardless of the tactical outcome they reach. This is not new in the study of suicide attacks; the Japanese in the Pacific Ocean during World War II, the Chinese in Korea and the Vietcong in Vietnam, just to list a few recent ones, have all used suicide-commandos. With the exception of the Vietcongs who infiltrated the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during the TET offensive, lacking an international media-eco, their importance was purely tactical; of the latter, just like for the Taliban commandos, we remember the torn bodies that shocked the American audiences as the media – yesterday like today – showed those images around the world.

Secondarily the Afghan insurgency obtained positive results from an operational functionality perspective. The rational approach of the AOGs emerges from the results they obtained on the battlefield where the majority of the attacks, besides the direct and the immediate effects and the coalition forces' public statements, reached a tangible goal: the "functional stop" (or "operational stop"). This definition indicates all the events that had a significant impact on the operational level of the security forces (i.e. vehicle and building damages, wounded soldiers and police officers, movement limitation, etc.); these effects have direct repercussions on the security forces' activities and are capable of limiting access to certain areas, imposing longer times and limiting the ability of maneuvering following classic schemes and standard times and also reducing efficiently the technological advantage and the operational potential. There have been tangible results and, between 2009 and 2012, the attacks success was relative (functional stop) on average in 78% of the cases (88% in 2012, 72% in 2013 and 75% in 2014); this was calculated taking into consideration the damages, direct and indirect, caused to the targets, independently by the presence of victims.

In addition to that, the ability to affect the troops' morale sensibly has to be considered: the psychological effect of suicide-attacks, or simply its potential threat, represents another concrete result. 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 martyrdom tactic has been capable of conditioning significantly the force-protection measures of the security forces raising the cost of war, in 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. The results obtained to the detriment of the security forces would confirm the validity of this tactic; even if not in quantitative terms, it is possible to hypothesize that the AOGs are going to use this tactic further, incrementing the numbers of would-be suicide-fighters, improving the quality of the equipment and perfecting the technical operators' training in order to be able to strike more efficiently. Furthermore what can be deduced by analyzing this phenomenon on the whole is that today the AOGs, thanks to a good level of information-sharing and the use of technological instruments, are able to learn and share new techniques and tactics far more quickly that they used to.

On the basis of these factors, will the impact of the suicide tactic contribute to the cost increment of the mission for the Afghanistan western armies? The results obtained have enabled the AOGs to adapt the explosive devices to better fit their tactical needs. As far as update and adaptation are concerned, the AOGs anticipate the Afghan security forces and the coalition forces. This happens because the insurgency's adaptability is a lot faster than the conventional forces: it is faster and cheaper to increase the suicide attacks' offensive ability and its destructive potential than projecting more armored and high technology vehicles and equipments; in comparison to the inexpensive suicide-fighter kit, international security forces invested billions of dollars in new equipments[19] and incremented the number of security officers[20]. An augmentation in the level of protection translates in the need for more powerful devices in order to cause damage: a vicious circle influencing significantly the statistics of collateral damages, the civilian victims, that Taliban (as well as the NATO) rationally consider a calculated risk – although formally the opposite happens[21].

More than thousand[22] "Afghan cases" have been registered and categorized in order to analyze the evolution of the phenomenon. On a military level we can assert that the relevance of the suicide actions is partially significant, it is also evident an increased advantage on the battlefield: ability in recruiting and training would-be suicide-fighters. This would show that the AOGs have made important progress on the "social battlefield", the "human

[19] Mainly mine-resistant armors, jammers to stop signals used to activate IEDs, detectors and neutralization systems, robots and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).
[20] 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.
[21] The Layeha, the rule-book of the Taliban mujahidin, forbids – as much as possible – the involvement of civilians in war actions. (Johnson, DuPee, 2012).
[22] Total cases analyzed are 1256 (period 9th of September 2001 – 31st of December 2014).

terrain" contended with the supporters of the counterinsurgency doctrine as a solution for the Afghan war (Petraeus, Amos, 2006). 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 9):

- On the strategic level, suicide attacks caught the attention of the regional and International media in 78% of the cases while the multiple actions/commandos attracted 100% of the media attention; a clear and pursued media success that has a great impact on the recruitment campaign of would-be martyrs, whose numbers grow as time goes by, "stoking" the potential pool of suicide-fighters, the number of whom is greater than the number of actions carried out (Fig.7).
- 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) causing material damages, reducing the operational potential, limiting the army and the police's operational capabilities and freedom of moving and maneuvering.
- Lastly on the tactical level (i.e. the real battlefield) – conceded that the objective is to cause the enemy's death (in the majority of cases local and foreign security forces' members) –, suicide attacks do not reach the chosen target on average 42% of cases (including all the attacks between 2001-2014). We should take into consideration how such a long period of time has a significant effect on the margin of error; evolution of the last examined period of time (2009-2014) shows an improvement trend and an increase of the attacks with a positive outcome. The results in the last year (2014), in particular, show how a tactical success was reached in 54% of cases while 26% of them were formal failures.

Figure 9: Media attention, Functional Stop and Tactical success: effects of the attacks trend (normalized data on total of attacks).
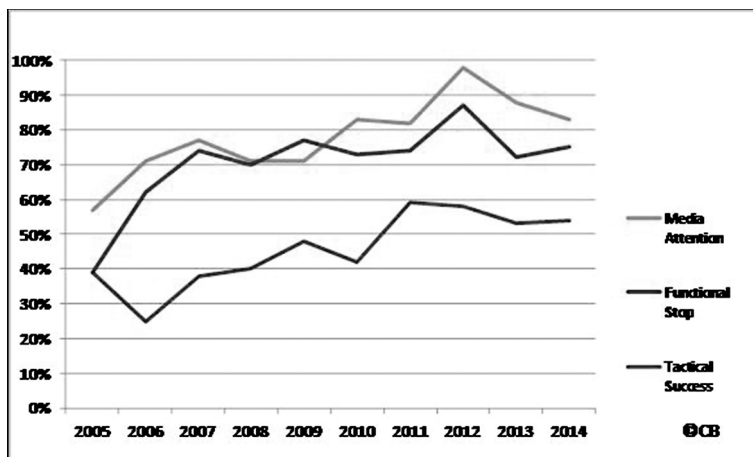
Analysis of available data would attest that suicide attacks are important as much on an operational level (i.e. reduction of the security forces' operational capabilities) as on a media attention level; the latter is exploited for political and propaganda purposes as shown by the media attention statistics both regionally and internationally. We can therefore talk about assessed political-military strategy, the objects of which in order of priority consist of:

- Attracting media attention regardless of having reached the tactical objective (i.e. killing of the enemy/destruction of a target) in order to influence the governments taking part to the international security mission (in order to push foreign contingents to disengage from the war and to oblige the sole Afghan security forces to oppose the AOGs);
- Contributing to the imposition of an operational stress condition (particularly through the use of a "functional stop") aiming to influence indirectly the current political and negotiation processes that would lead the insurgency movements (Taliban, Haqqani network and Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) to an advantageous position at the negotiating table obtaining a formal recognition;
- Creating a state of general insecurity (thus demonstrating the inability of the local and international forces to warrant a minimum level of security) with significant repercussions on the public opinion, internal social condition and on the struggle for the local power (the latter is used as a tool for the AOGs to rise to the status of mediators-resolvers in the local conflicts).

All the objectives, in particular the first and the second one adhere to the idea of contrasting the "direct" military occupation and the foreign interference; a local-nationalistic struggle, disengaged from the qaedist pan-Islamism (Tosini, 2012), as a conflict with a revolutionary nature (i.e. deposing of the Kabul government and establishment of an Islamic Emirate).

It is assessing that suicide-attack tactics would not be chosen for military reasons, because a lack on results at tactical level; on an operational level there are significant results although it is the strategic level – similarly in other theaters of war – that benefited from the devastating effects of the suicide attacks. Lastly, on a social level, what one can observe is that in the period 2009-2012 there has been a reduction in the total of attacks (in particular in 2012) but in contrast with a doubled number of suicide-fighters registered in the period 2008-2011.

Finally, suicide attacks have newly increased during the period 2013-2014, in parallel with the foreign troop's reduction and the AOG's offensive concentrated on the ANSFs and the Afghan governmental objectives.

6. Conclusions

The suicide attacks strengths are the low costs and the immediate and amplified effects; a tactic that, unsuccessfully countered, enabled the AOGs to reach significant results on different levels: strategic, operational and not negligible tactical.

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 (See Fig. 3); while the security forces have adopted countermeasures in order to fight the direct effects systematically, but not the main causes of this muted strategy (Hoffman, 2006).

Tactically, the security forces appeared to be concentrated where the AOGs seem less interested in reaching tangible objectives. On the force protection front – defense and security measures – the delimitation of secured "green areas" with a limited access represented the first and most obvious containment action, but it was not sufficient to fight the threat, as it is a military countermeasure, with tactical effects in the short term, demonstrating not to take into consideration the political-strategic aspects; not a strategic response is being adopted at the moment and it is likely that intensity, quantity and lethal nature of the attacks will proceed in parallel with the political and military conditions.

Figure 10: 2001-2015 NATO/ISAF-OEF/Vigilant Sentinel military presence in Afghanistan
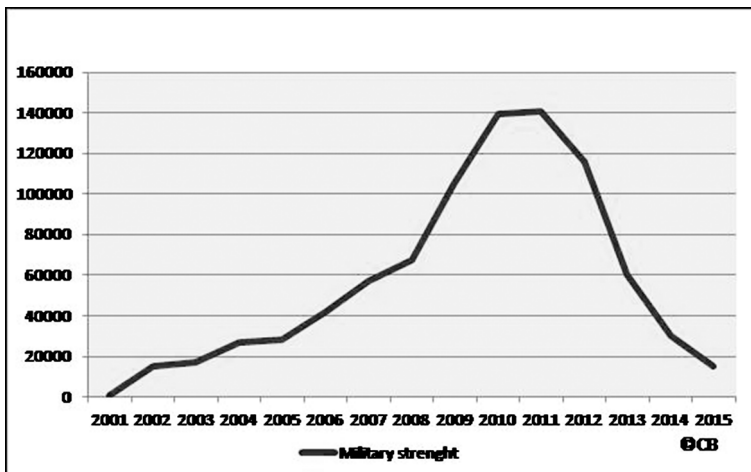
Finally, on the one hand, AOGs registered in 2012 qualitative results in Afghanistan (as well as in Syraq): augment of "functional stop" effect, in-

crease in killed security members, and more media attention (a decrease of the international media attention in 2015-16 should be assessed as the consequence of the foreign disengagement from Afghanistan). On the other hand, the quantitative decrease of actions and events in 2012 should be effect of the reduced military pressure, of the diminished military presence and capability in rural and peripheral areas and of the political decision to disengage the main part of US-led coalition combat troops from the Afghan conflict[23]. In line with Pape's (2005) theory regarding the correlation between «foreign military occupation» and suicide-bombings phenomenon, in Afghanistan suicide attacks 2001-2012 trend proceeded in parallel with US-led coalition troops level, as observable in Figure 10; in 2013-2015 the main targets of the attacks remain the ANSFs and the Afghan institutions indicated as "puppets" of the foreign invaders by the Taliban propaganda.

Aim of the research was to describe the military aspect and results of suicide attacks tactic introducing the «functional stop» category and considering the strategic and political results through the interpretation of media outcomes – with direct and indirect effects on public opinions and political decisions.

This is an important and innovative contribute, applicable to different study-cases and functional to tactical, operational and strategic analysis of the different *modus operandi* applied in the contemporary asymmetric conflicts – in particular the guerrilla/insurgency actions, the complex ambushes based on Improvised explosive devices combined with direct fire.

It is an analysis and assessment study which represents an important contribution for the researches focused on offensive tactics used in asymmetric conflicts, on their effects, results and the possible conclusions.

Broadening the analysis on suicide-attacks to asymmetric conflicts is a key factor in order both to better understand this kind of conflict and to examine in depth the suicide-attack tactics. Indeed, if we look at the Mediterranean Region we can see that mainly ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) uses in a systematic way suicide-attacks and it has integrated them in its warfare. ISIS used this tactics since the insurgency against U.S. troops in Iraq when the group was named Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). They used suicide-attacks in order to strike civilians and to create the conditions of a civil war between Sunnis and Shias. After the surge of 2007 the violence in Iraq has dropped as well as the use of suicide-attacks (according to the Brookings Institution data suicide attacks in 2009 were 51 against 172 in 2007) but they did

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[23] It is important to underline the evolution of further offensive tactics the Taliban began to develop during the last four years – concomitantly with the suicide attacks' decrease: the «green on blue attacks» (incidents in which ANSF members attack Nato/Isaf coalition soldiers) and the «assassinations campaign» against difficult targets (like district governors, police chiefs, high public officials): what is most important is the trend of decreasing suicide attacks and corresponding increase in green on blue attacks and assassinations events.

not disappear: for example during 2009 electoral campaign on 25 October two suicide-attackers (one in a small bus and one in a minivan) targeted the Ministry of Justice and the Baghdad Provincial Council building killing 155 people.

It was after the U.S. withdrawal at the end of 2011 that suicide-attacks have taken a "new" form. It is noteworthy that the strategic situations in "Syraq" and what we have analyzed in Afghanistan are different because there insurgents fought against local and U.S./Western forces, in "Syraq" and in other asymmetric conflicts in the Mediterranean Sea (Libya, Sinai, Lebanon) the fight is sometimes between a conventional army and irregular fighters and sometimes between different irregular fighters. Starting from 2011 the security situation in Iraq begun to worsen and AQI to strengthen changing its nature in addition to its name. Thanks to the civil war in Syrian the group was able to consolidate and to build up its political and military structure, to gain new war experiences and then to penetrate again in Iraq where it has launched the *Breaking the Walls* campaign (July 2012-July 2013) with at least three goals: first, to liberate former group members from Iraqi prisons in order to strengthen its organization; secondly, to improve its military capabilities and to gain terrain; thirdly, to show and to demonstrate Iraqi military and political weakness. In order to achieve these goals AQI used a mixture of different tactics some more related to the guerrilla some other more related to terrorism creating a new "hybrid" form of war that has became the ISIS way of war.

During the *Breaking the Walls* campaign AQI not only changed its name in Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (8th April 2013 following the military victory in al-Raqqa in Syria) but also it "executed 24 VBIED waves that showcased the technical, logistical, and training capacity underlying AQI's VBIED program" (Lewis, 2013). Within this campaign AQI increasingly used suicide-attacks mainly starting from April 2013, and even if they did not overwhelm non-suicide operations, the increase indicated two important factors: the increase of foreign fighter activity and an organizational shift toward operations that could be better executed by suicide-attacks. Indeed, an ISIS suicide-attack is not simply a bomb-attack with a suicide bomber, but it is a different tactical operations involving sophisticated support teams.

Consequently, ISIS has increasingly integrated suicide-attacks in its military operations and so they are becoming just a part of a more complex military operation that encompasses tactical coordination with other units, small units movements, using different weapons (from small arms to artillery). We can cite several examples of this kind of cooperation and of operation but the most recent happened in May 2015 in Ramadi where after one year of attacks ISIS conduced a series of suicide-attacks outside the compound that housed the city's main police station and governor's office and then seized control of all the city.

When ISIS uses suicide-attacks in this military way it uses special vehicles because in these cases it does not need to hide them in the civilian traffic. Indeed, especially after the conquer of Mosul (June 2014) ISIS has improved again its suicide-attack capabilities using Iraqi military vehicles, such as HUMVEE, or heavy vehicles such as trucks or bulldozers (Naylor, 2015). Online it is possible to find a plenty of images about this kind of vehicles which are very often heavily modified with more armour plates in order to resist to small-arms fire and to anti-tank grenade or missiles. ISIS needs this kind of "military" vehicles because they have to survive in a true battlefield, moreover these vehicles are often equipped with heavy metal structures on the front in order to break defence lines and to go off inside the building- or defence structure- target. In this way the suicide-attacker is like a PGM or a cruise missile as we said in the first part of the paper, because he is able to strike precisely the target and blow himself only when he is on or inside the target. Peshmerga and Shia militias have started to extensively use against this kind of threat anti-tank missile (Milan or AT-4) with success but the tactics remains valid and extensively used by ISIS.

Thanks to a combination of targeted killing, suicide-attacks, guerilla operations, media and political campaign ISIS was able to conquer a wide space between Iraq and Syria and smaller space in Sinai, Libya and Lebanon becoming a strategic and geopolitical threat in the Mediterranean Sea.

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