



Brothers in Arms: The Phenomenon of Complex Suicide Attacks

Mohammed Ibrahim Shire & Abdi Hersi
Summary by Hayden Lucas, University of Arkansas

Summary

The authors comparatively explore the tactical differences of complex suicide attacks versus simple suicide attacks in terms of its target goal, discriminative lethality, and delivery method. Complex suicide attacks must include/meet these criteria: 1) a deliberate/coordinated attack, 2) includes a suicide device, 3) more than one attacker, 4) more than one tactic, and 5) small arms fire. Simple suicide attacks differ slightly from complex suicide attacks because there is usually less preparation. For simple suicide attacks, only one (or more) suicide attacker is needed and simple attacks do not necessarily need an assailant. The authors examine Al-Shabaab (one of Africa's most adaptable and infamous violent extremist organizations) suicide bombings as a case study. Findings from this study shed light on the phenomenon of "complex suicide attacks" and contribute to growing research on best practices for reducing casualties and securing potential targets.

Methods

Data include any suicide attack where Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidin (commonly referred to as "Al-Shabaab") claimed responsibility or where at least two reliable sources attribute blame to the group. In total there were 208 incidents from September of 2006 up until December of 2018. Of the 208 incidents, fifty-four were complex suicide attacks (154 were "simple attacks"). The dataset was originally based/pulled from the Global Terrorism Database, however certain years were missing (2006 to 2009 and 2017 to 2018). To remedy issues of missing data for particular years, the authors drew data from Factiva as well as collecting/coding online news articles. The researchers coded twenty variables of each suicide bombing in order to supplement the missing years and to help in answering their research questions.

Results

- 1) Domestic targets bear the major brunt of complex attacks
- 2) Complex suicide attacks have a lower civilian casualty rate
- 3) Suicide vehicle bombs remain the most popular delivery system in complex attacks

Implications

As a foundational piece, this study lays the foundation for future exploration of complex suicide attacks. This is important, as violent extremist organizations around the globe have begun to incorporate more complex attacks. Findings from this study help inform law enforcement and other counterterrorism officials in developing evidence-based strategies for preventing and reducing human casualties as a result of complex suicide attacks.

Shire, M. I., & Hersi, A. (2019). Brothers in arms: The phenomenon of complex suicide attacks. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31, 1–22. doi: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1693371