

## Mass Casualty Explosives Attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan

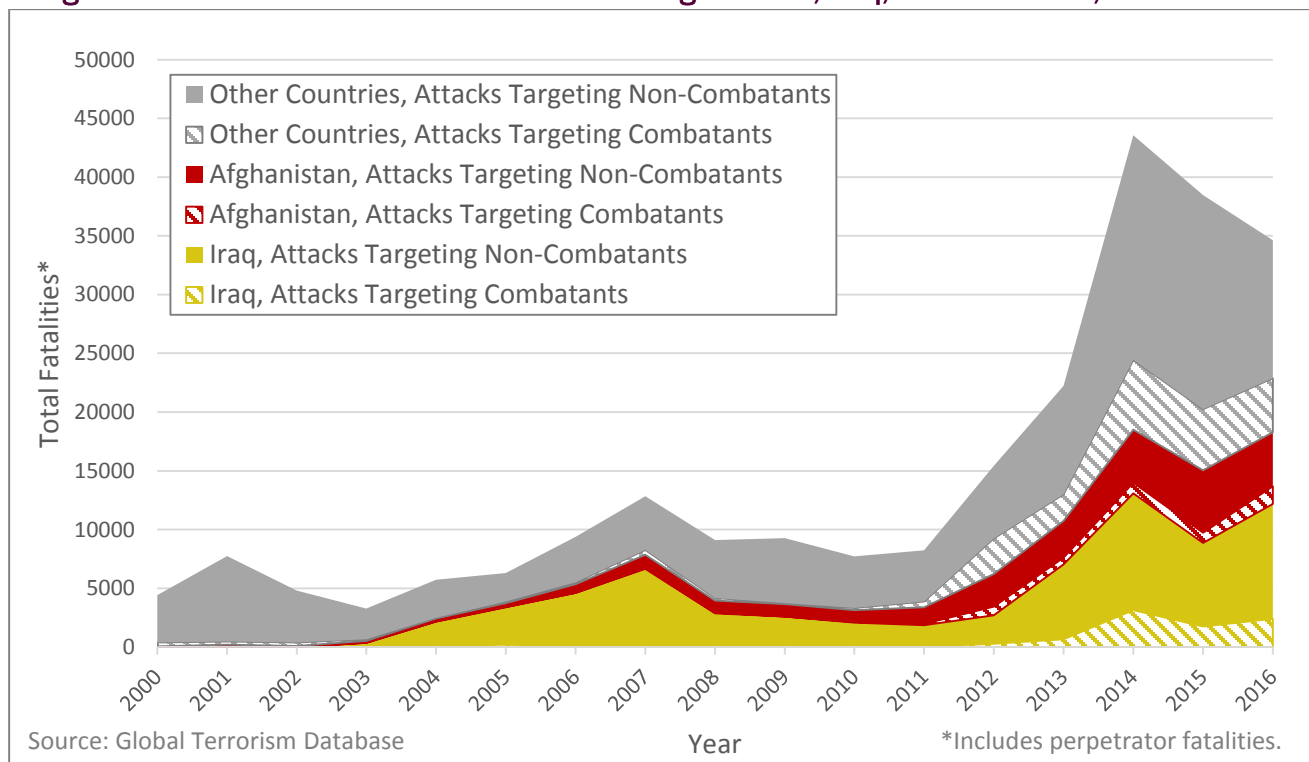
In the aftermath of a series of deadly terrorist attacks in Baghdad and Kabul involving vehicle bombs, START has compiled information from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan and the use of explosives—particularly vehicle-borne explosives and suicide tactics—in terrorist attacks.

### TERRORISM IN IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN

#### GLOBAL CONTEXT

As illustrated in Figure 1, terrorist violence in Iraq and Afghanistan has accounted for a substantial proportion of terrorism worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The total number of deaths caused by terrorist attacks in these two countries comprised nearly half (46%) of all fatalities worldwide between 2004 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> During this period, 13 percent of the fatalities from terrorist attacks in Iraq and 15 percent of the fatalities from terrorist attacks in Afghanistan resulted from attacks against combatant targets.

**Figure 1: Total fatalities in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq, and worldwide, 2000 - 2016**



The peak in 2014 coincides with the sharp increase in terrorist violence carried out by the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#), particularly in Iraq, and by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Terrorist attacks and total fatalities from attacks attributed to the Taliban in Afghanistan continued to increase in 2015 before declining slightly in 2016. In contrast, the terrorist activity of ISIL in Iraq declined slightly in 2015 before increasing again in 2016. The global pattern during this time period indicates that the number of terrorist attacks and the number of resulting fatalities declined in 2015 and 2016, largely as a result of patterns of activity outside Iraq and Afghanistan, including substantial decreases in terrorist violence in Nigeria and Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> Note that data from 2016 are preliminary, and we urge readers to interpret year-to-year changes with caution. The data collection process is likely influenced by fluctuations in access to open-source media reports over time and place. See the [GTD Codebook](#) for more details.

## PERPETRATORS

For the majority (78%) of terrorist attacks in Iraq between 2004 and 2016 source documents did not identify a perpetrator group. ISIL (including the perpetrator groups that would later become ISIL such as al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq) was responsible for 92 percent of the remaining attacks. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (formerly the Mahdi Army) was responsible for 2 percent of attacks for which a perpetrator was identified, and all other perpetrator groups identified were each responsible for less than 1 percent

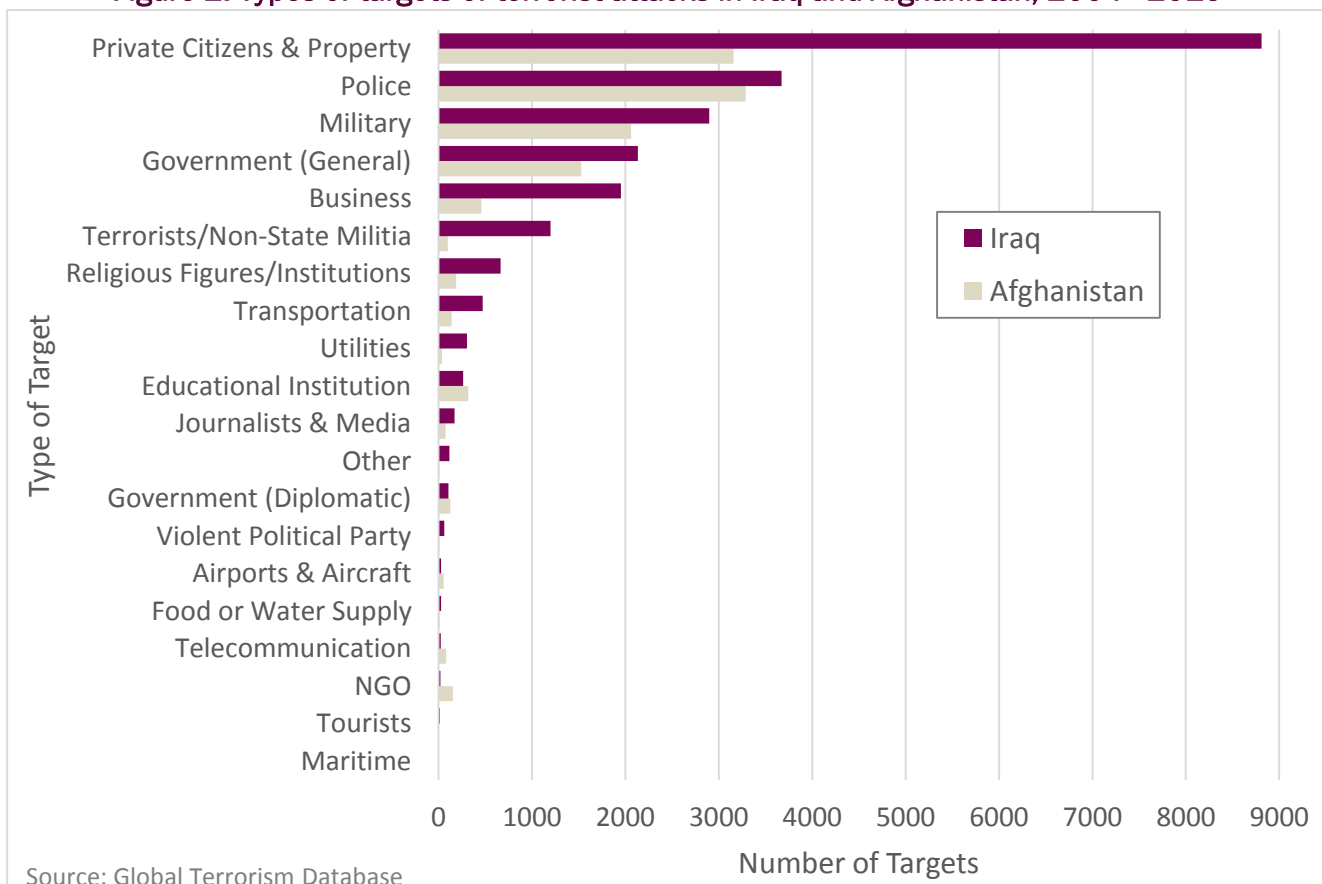
In Afghanistan, unidentified perpetrators carried out 39 percent of attacks between 2004 and 2016, and the Taliban was responsible for 95 percent of the attacks for which source documents identified a perpetrator. The Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State carried out 2 percent of attacks in Afghanistan during this time period, and the Haqqani Network was responsible for 1 percent. All other perpetrator groups identified were responsible for less than 1 percent of attacks for which source documents identified a perpetrator.

## TYPES OF TARGETS

Although terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2004 and 2016 took place in the context of war and insurgency, civilian (non-military) targets represent the majority of targets of terrorist attacks in both countries. Figure 2 shows the types of targets of terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan during this time period.<sup>2</sup> The GTD records up to three targets per attack; however, only 8 percent of attacks in Iraq and 12 percent of attacks in Afghanistan involved more than one distinct target.

In Iraq, more than one-third (38%) of all targets of terrorism were classified as private citizens and property. These targets were most frequently unspecified civilians; open marketplaces or plazas; personal vehicles; or private citizens targeted according to their religious identity. In Afghanistan, targets classified as private citizens also included people who were targeted according to their occupation, such as construction workers and engineers, or doctors and other medical personnel, particularly those involved in vaccination programs. In certain cases, the Taliban claimed responsibility for attacks targeting private citizens and suggested that the victims were spies or criminals.

**Figure 2: Types of targets of terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004 - 2016**



<sup>2</sup> In cases where the intended target was unclear or indiscriminate, this classification is based on the outcome of the attack.

Terrorist attacks against police in Iraq and Afghanistan most frequently involved security forces, police patrols, and police checkpoints; however, attacks targeting police buildings (headquarters or stations) were disproportionately deadly. In Iraq in particular, attacks targeting police buildings resulted in twice as many deaths per attack (6.1) than attacks against police targets in general (3.0). Dozens of attacks in Iraq targeted police recruits and training facilities, resulting in more than 700 deaths and more than 1,300 injuries.

Government targets of terrorism in both Iraq and Afghanistan were typically either government personnel (other than police or military personnel) or government buildings/facilities. In Afghanistan, terrorist attacks targeting election-related entities such as polling stations and election officials were also relatively common. In Iraq, however, terrorist attacks frequently targeted politicians and political party gatherings. Diplomatic facilities and personnel (listed separately in Figure 2) comprised 5 percent of all government targets of terrorist attacks in Iraq, and 8 percent of all government targets of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan.

Terrorist attacks against business targets in Afghanistan were considerably less common than attacks on business targets in Iraq. In Afghanistan, these targets most frequently included construction firms and personnel, private security firms and personnel, and hospitals/clinics. Retail stores, hotels, banks, restaurants, and entertainment venues combined comprised one-fifth (20%) of all business targets in Afghanistan. In Iraq, however, these same types of businesses where civilian crowds often gather represented more than half (53%) of all businesses targeted in terrorist attacks.

## ATTACKS INVOLVING EXPLOSIVES

Between 1970 and 2016, more than 170,000 terrorist attacks took place around the world and more than half of these attacks (52%) involved the use of an explosive device. Explosives used in these attacks included suicide and vehicle bombs as well as roadside bombs, grenades, and rockets.

## LOCATIONS

Although 189 countries experienced a terrorist attack involving the use of an explosive device between 1970 and 2016, these attacks were concentrated geographically. More than half (57%) of all explosives attacks occurred in just 10 countries. These countries are listed in Table 1 in order of the overall prevalence of attacks involving explosives. Table 1 also includes the total number of terrorist attacks in each country, the percent of attacks in each country that involved an explosive device, and each country's worldwide rank in terms of total attacks.

**Table 1: Ten countries that experienced the most terrorist attacks involving explosives, 1970 - 2016**

Country	Region	Total Explosives Attacks	Total Attacks	Percent Explosives Attacks	Rank Total Attacks
Iraq	Middle East	17,079	22,131	77.2%	1
Pakistan	South Asia	7,709	13,631	56.6%	2
Afghanistan	South Asia	6,195	11,304	54.8%	3
India	South Asia	4,795	10,958	43.8%	4
Colombia	South America	3,250	8,162	39.8%	5
Peru	South America	3,175	6,087	52.2%	7
Philippines	Southeast Asia	2,207	6,209	35.6%	6
United Kingdom	Western Europe	2,204	5,094	43.3%	9
El Salvador	Central America	2,103	5,320	39.5%	8
France	Western Europe	2,029	2,643	76.8%	19

The five highest-ranked countries (Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Colombia) were ranked identically in terms of the number of terrorist attacks they experienced overall. More than 19 percent of all attacks involving explosive devices occurred in Iraq alone. In comparison, 13 percent of all terrorist attacks worldwide took place in Iraq.

The 10 highest-ranked countries differ in terms of the percentage of attacks that involved explosive devices. Whereas more than 75 percent of all attacks in Iraq and France involved the use of an explosive device, the method was far less prevalent in Colombia, Philippines, and El Salvador, where it represented less than 40 percent of all attacks. This suggests that attacks involving the use of firearms, arson, or other weapons were more prevalent in these countries.

The countries in this list represent different regions around the world. Three countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India) are located in South Asia, two countries (Colombia and Peru) are in South America, two countries (United Kingdom and France) are in Western Europe, and one country is in each of the Middle East (Iraq), Southeast Asia (Philippines), and Central America (El Salvador).

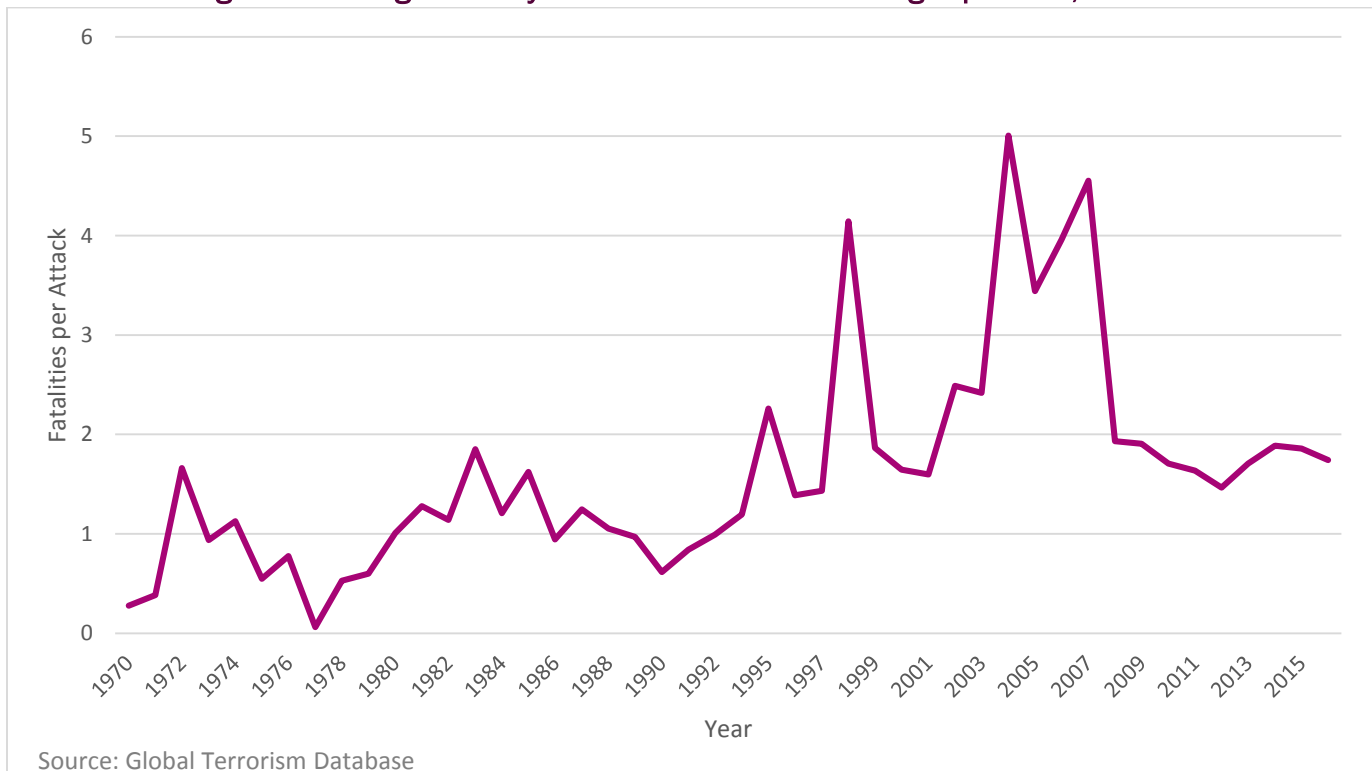
## CASUALTIES/LETHALITY

Attacks involving explosive devices were collectively less lethal, on average, compared with other types of attacks. While attacks involving explosives killed 1.7 people on average, other methods claimed 2.5 lives on average. There are several potential explanations for this disparity. For example, it may be that although attacks involving explosives have the potential to be extremely deadly, they were often used to target property rather than people. Alternatively, perhaps attacks involving explosives are more complex to execute and as a result they were more likely to be unsuccessful, even if the perpetrators intended for the attack to be deadly.

One-third (34%) of all attacks involving explosive devices between 1970 and 2016 resulted in at least one fatality, compared to more than half (58%) of attacks that did not include explosives. However, among attacks that were lethal, those that involved explosives were deadlier than those that did not. For attacks in which at least one person was killed, those involving explosive devices resulted in 5.0 deaths on average, compared to 4.3 deaths, on average, in attacks in which the perpetrators relied on other types of weapons.

The average lethality of all attacks involving explosive devices increased over time, as shown in Figure 3. From 1970 to 1994, the average lethality for these attacks never exceeded two people killed per attack. However, the average lethality increased steadily from 1990 through 1998 and then again from 2001 through 2007. The average lethality of attacks involving explosive devices peaked with more than five people killed per attack in 2004. Since 2008, the average lethality of terrorist attacks involving explosives stabilized at fewer than two people killed per attack.

**Figure 3: Average lethality of terrorist attacks involving explosives, 1970 - 2016**



## TACTICS

Attacks involving explosive devices represented a diverse set of tactics used by perpetrators of terrorism, including the use of roadside bombs, grenades, or rockets, as well as suicide bombings and vehicle bombings. These different types of delivery mechanisms for explosive devices resulted in somewhat different outcomes in terms of lethality. In general, suicide bombings killed 7.9 people on average, and injured 19.9 others. In vehicle bombings, 4.3 people were killed and 12.6 people were injured on average. For vehicle bombings, these figures were influenced by the high lethality of explosives-laden vehicles driven by suicide bombers, which killed an average of 8.0 people and injured an additional 21.6 people. In contrast, other explosives-laden vehicle attacks killed 2.8 people and injured 9.4, on average. This suggests that the combination of suicide bombers and vehicles was the most lethal strategy.

Table 2 shows the five countries that experienced the most suicide bombings and the most vehicle bombings, along with statistics about the percentage of all suicide or vehicle bombings worldwide that took place in each country, the percent of suicide attacks that involved vehicles in each country, and the percent of vehicle bombings that involved suicide tactics in each country.

The four countries that experienced the most suicide bombings and the most vehicle bombings were the same: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.<sup>3</sup> Nigeria experienced the fifth most suicide bombings whereas the United Kingdom experienced the fifth most vehicle bombings. Iraq experienced by far the greatest number of both types of attacks, with almost 40 percent of all suicide bombings and almost half of all vehicle bombings. There have been more suicide bombings in Afghanistan than vehicle bombings, which is in contrast to the pattern found in the other countries listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Five countries that experienced the most suicide and vehicle bombings, 1970 - 2016**

Suicide Bombings				Vehicle Bombings			
Country	Number of Attacks	Percent of Global Total	Percent Vehicle	Country	Number of Attacks	Percent of Global Total	Percent Suicide
Iraq	2,270	39.7%	64.7%	Iraq	5,379	49.8%	27.3%
Afghanistan	1,092	19.1%	43.5%	Afghanistan	913	8.5%	52.0%
Pakistan	478	8.4%	31.8%	Pakistan	515	4.8%	29.5%
Syria	285	5.0%	71.6%	Syria	398	3.7%	51.3%
Nigeria	265	4.6%	20.8%	United Kingdom	320	3.0%	0.0%

The percent of suicide bombings that involved a vehicle varied among the five highest-ranked countries. While the majority of suicide bombings in Iraq and Syria involved an explosives-laden vehicle, the majority of the suicide bombings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria involved bombers on foot using an alternative delivery mechanism. The relatively low percentage of suicide bombings in Nigeria that involved a vehicle is consistent with the fact that Nigeria ranked 18<sup>th</sup> among countries with the most vehicle bombings. Similarly, the percentage of vehicle bombings that involved suicide tactics also differed among these countries. In the United Kingdom, none of the 320 explosives-laden vehicles was driven by a suicide bomber.

Table 3 shows the perpetrator groups responsible for the most suicide bombings and the most vehicle bombings between 1970 and 2016. Three of these perpetrator groups were the same for both suicide and vehicle bombings. ISIL was the only group that has carried out more than 1,000 suicide bombings and 1,000 vehicle bombings during this time period.<sup>4</sup> ISIL carried out more than one-fifth of all suicide bombings and almost 15 percent of all vehicle bombings worldwide. Suicide bombings represented almost 23 percent of all attacks carried out by ISIL whereas vehicle bombings represented almost 31 percent of all attacks. In total, approximately 39 percent of all ISIL attacks involved either a suicide bomber, an explosives-laden vehicle, or both. As a comparison, only 8 percent of all terrorist attacks in total involved the use of a suicide bomber, an explosives-laden vehicle, or both.

**Table 3: Five perpetrator groups responsible for the most suicide and vehicle bombings, 1970 - 2016**

Suicide Bombings				Vehicle Bombings			
Perpetrator	Number of Attacks	Percent of Global Total	Percent Total Attacks	Perpetrator	Number of Attacks	Percent of Global Total	Percent Total Attacks
ISIL	1,184	20.8%	22.9%	ISIL	1,594	14.8%	30.9%
Taliban	637	11.2%	9.7%	Taliban	480	4.4%	7.3%
Boko Haram	300	5.3%	14.4%	IRA	220	2.0%	8.2%
TTP	166	2.9%	12.9%	ETA	191	1.8%	9.4%
Al-Shabaab	133	2.3%	5.0%	Al-Shabaab	187	1.7%	7.0%

The Taliban and Al-Shabaab also used suicide bombings and explosives-laden vehicles frequently, although not at the same rate as ISIL. All five of the groups responsible for carrying out the most suicide bombings are currently active and carried out attacks in 2016. In comparison, only three of the groups responsible for carrying out the most vehicle bombing attacks were active in 2016, as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA) have not conducted an attack in several years. Finally, while ISIL, the Taliban, and Al-Shabaab have all used suicide bombers in some of their explosives-laden vehicle attacks, the IRA and ETA never carried out a suicide bombing attack.

<sup>3</sup> Given the limitations of media coverage in Syria and START's practice of including in the GTD only those attacks that were reported by at least one independent news outlets, the data presented here are conservative estimates of terrorism in Syria.

<sup>4</sup> This includes the previous names of the organization, including Al-Qaida in Iraq, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Mujahedeen Shura Council, and Tawhid and Jihad.

Table 4 highlights the cities that were most frequently targeted by suicide and vehicle bombings between 1970 and 2016. The five cities most frequently targeted with suicide bombings are all located in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The first city outside of these two countries was Mogadishu, which ranked sixth among cities that experienced the most suicide bombings. Mogadishu was the only city not located in Iraq that ranked among the five most targeted cities for explosives-laden vehicle attacks. Kabul was sixth, with 167 vehicle-bombing attacks.

**Table 4: Five cities that experienced the most suicide and vehicle bombings, 1970 - 2016**

Suicide Bombings					Vehicle Bombings				
City	Country	Number of Attacks	Percent of Country Total	Percent Vehicle	City	Country	Number of Attacks	Percent of Country Total	Percent Suicide
Baghdad	Iraq	471	20.8%	62.2%	Baghdad	Iraq	2,225	41.4%	13.2%
Mosul	Iraq	214	9.4%	69.2%	Mosul	Iraq	354	6.6%	41.8%
Kabul	Afghanistan	210	19.2%	44.8%	Kirkuk	Iraq	268	5.0%	16.8%
Ramadi	Iraq	164	7.2%	46.1%	Ramadi	Iraq	177	3.3%	65.5%
Kandahar	Afghanistan	99	9.1%	70.7%	Mogadishu	Somalia	168	76.0%	41.1%

Almost 21 percent of all suicide bombings in Iraq occurred in Baghdad. Although far fewer suicide bombings occurred in Kabul, that city was also targeted in almost one-fifth of all suicide bombings in Afghanistan. Mosul and Kandahar, which both represented the second most targeted cities in their respective countries, each accounted for around 9 percent of the attacks in those countries. More than 41 percent of all vehicle bombings in Iraq occurred in Baghdad. Additionally, Somalia experienced 221 vehicle bombings, and 76 percent of them took place in the capital, Mogadishu.

Finally, whereas a majority of suicide bombings in Baghdad involved the use of an explosives-laden vehicle, the majority of vehicle bombings in Baghdad did not involve suicide tactics. A similar pattern took place in Mosul; however, the opposite phenomenon took place in Ramadi, where the majority of explosives-laden vehicle attacks included suicide bombers but the majority of suicide bombing attacks did not involve an explosives-laden vehicle.

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Erin Miller and Michael Distler are the primary authors of this report. Direct questions to [eemiller@umd.edu](mailto:eemiller@umd.edu).

The data presented here are drawn from START's Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and reports from news media. The GTD contains information on more than 170,000 terrorist incidents that have occurred around the world since 1970. For more information about the GTD, visit [www.start.umd.edu/gtd](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd).



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