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Taking Stock: Empirical Patterns and Risk Modeling of Terrorism
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What we know about why non-state actors commit atrocities using quantitative data is mostly related to the post WWII era. Valid and reliable data are not available prior. The Correlates of War data,[1] the main conflict data set until about the early 2000s, for example, go back until 1816. These data, however, are a state-based war data. There is updated intrastate data, but it lacks information on non-state actors.

More recently, The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) has become the de facto data most scholars of conflict use when investigating non-state violence by organized rebels.[2] UCDP offers data on external support to groups, specific events, dyadic conflict data, one-sided violence, battle deaths, among others. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) is the other alternative for related information (LaFree and Dugan 2007, LaFree et al. 2015). It has the benefit of having a large spatial-temporal domain (1970-2015, all countries). While the database has been criticized for including guerrilla rather than terrorist attacks (De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2011) and for the multiple ways it has been collected since 1998 (Enders et al. 2011), it remains both the most valid and reliable data on terrorist attacks during this period. Users can also filter events if they do not conform to the desired definition of what constitutes a terrorist attack.

The threshold some scholars use for mass atrocities is usually large, sometimes 50,000 people (Valentino et al 2004). Terrorism rarely rises above this level in a country-year and never at the incident level. Terrorism is one of the few violent forms of contention that scholars do not define at least in part based on a threshold of deaths (See Weinberg et al. 2012, Young and Findley 2011, Young 2013).

The conventional wisdom regarding groups that use terrorism is that they wanted a lot of people watching but only a few dead (Jenkins 2006). Following Rapport (2004), the most recent wave of religiously inspired terrorism has overturned this conventional wisdom. One consequence is that terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s was often claimed and clearly related to a particular group as the organization attempted to pursue its goals. Today, it is more rare for groups to claim attacks, although ISIS seems to run counter to this trend (See Figure 1).

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[1] http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/
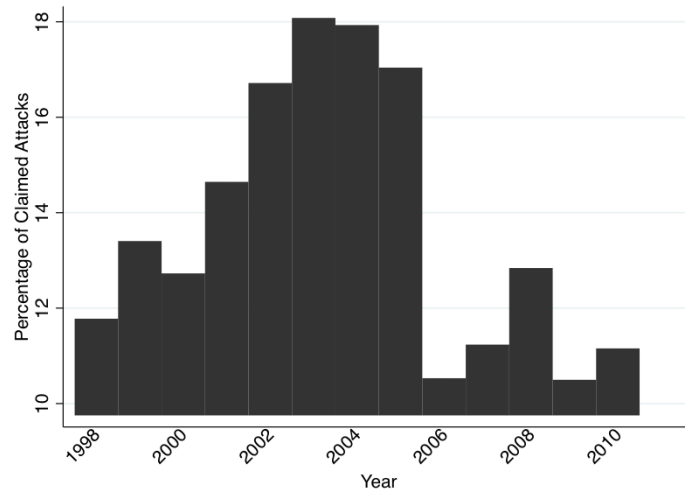[2] http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/

Figure 1: Percent Claimed Attacks in GTD 1998 -2012

At the region unit of observation, attacks have shifted over time from Latin America (Central and South America) in the 1980s to more recently South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA (See Figure 2). Within these regions, the bulk of attacks is within particular countries and often perpetrated by a handful of groups. The Shining Path in Peru, for example, for much of the lifespan of the GTD was the most prolific attacker and deadly group. It wasn't until recently that they have been eclipsed by more modern religious organizations. Figure 3 shows the time series of attacks and fatalities within a select group of countries over the period of 1970-2014. El Salvador, Peru, and Nicaragua accounted for many of the attacks in the 1980s. Each of these countries saw important declines in the 1990s after the decline of the groups (Peru) or important peace processes (El Salvador, Nicaragua). Algeria and Rwanda saw huge spikes of rebel violence in the 1990s during civil war and spells of state mass atrocities.

More recently, with the rise of Jihadist violence, countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq have accounted for huge portions of global violence. In Africa, Somalia and Nigeria also have brutal non-state actors who have targeted civilians at an increasingly deadly rate. Even though the data end in 2014, the rising violence in Syria is evident.

Figure 4 shows the deadliest groups in the GTD. Groups in Latin America, like the Shining Path or FARC have reduced their peak violence, and are responsible for few attacks currently. The Al-Qaida franchise, ISIS, the Taliban, and Pakistan's TTP are all increasingly deadly. Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram account for much of the violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The LTTE, once the most deadly suicide attackers, are now defunct.
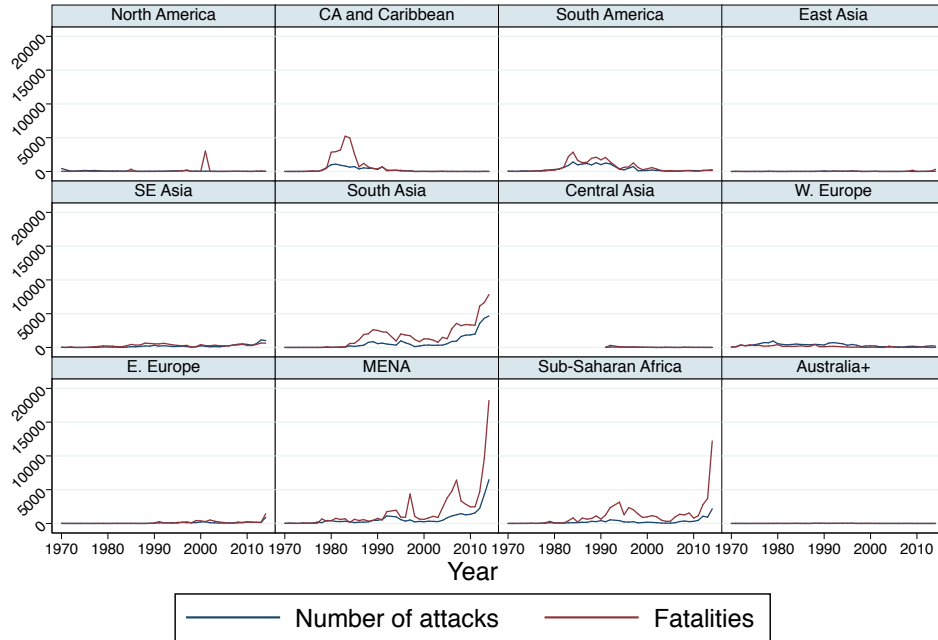
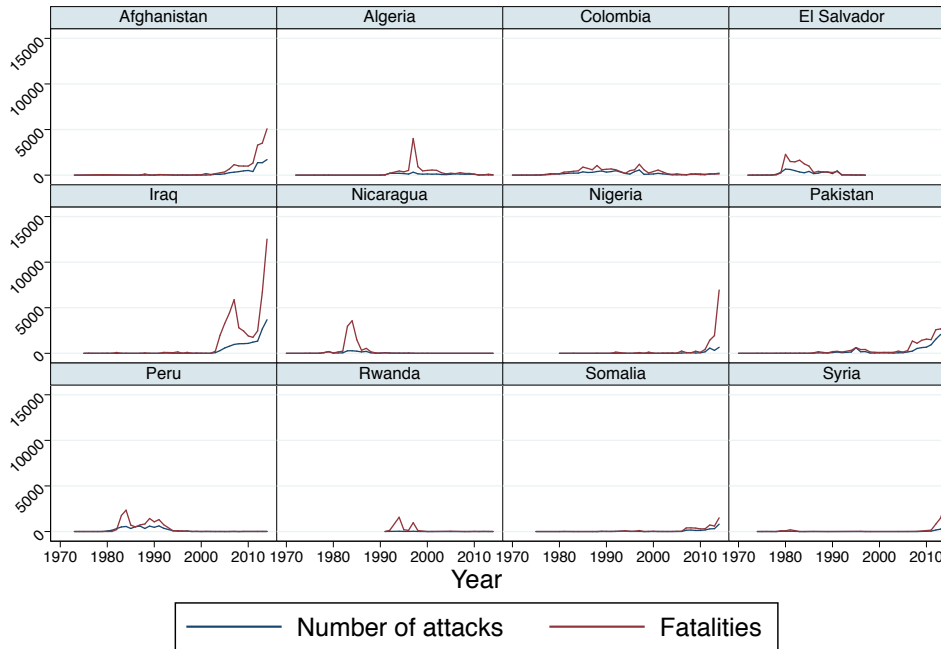**Figure 2: Number of Attacks and Fatalities by Region, 1970-2014**

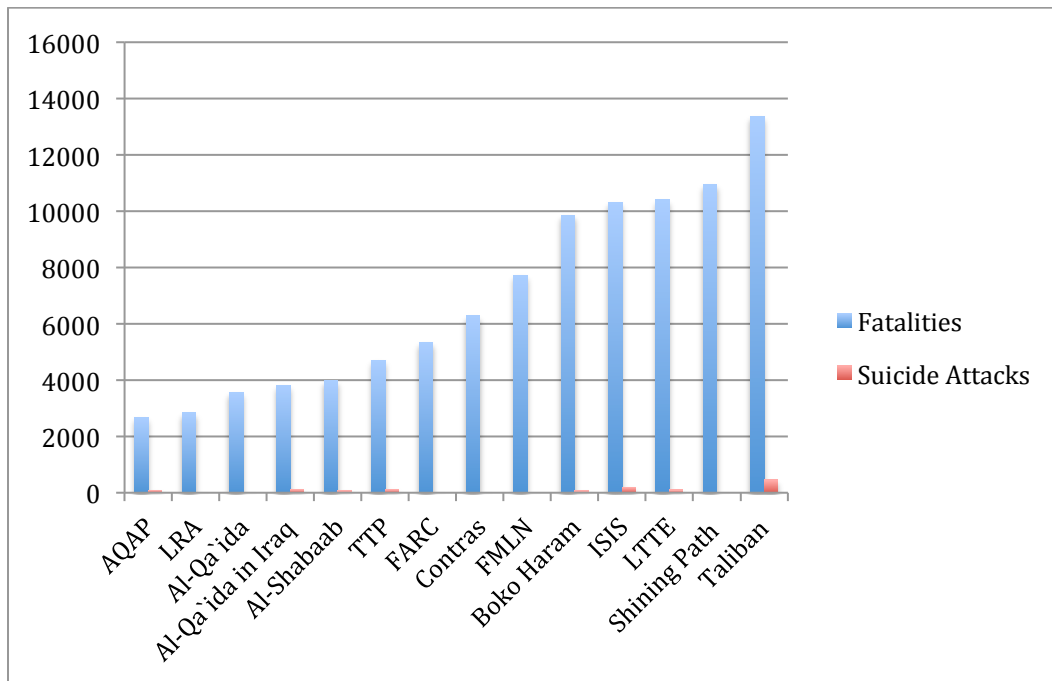**Figure 3: Attacks and Fatalities by Select Countries, 1970-2014**

Figure 4: Most Deadly Groups in the GTD, 1970-2014

One of the empirical patterns that we have observed is that mass killing often occurs in the context of civil war as a tool by the state to drain the sea (Valentino et al. 2004). Prior to a more recent wave of research (Fortna 2015, Stanton 2013, Young and Findley 2012), many scholars felt that civil war and terrorism were distinct forms of violence needing separate theorizing and explanations.

What Findley and Young (2012) demonstrate using geocoded events and rebel zones of control is that these forms of violence often go hand-in-hand. Most of this literature begins with the assumption that groups are using terrorism as a best response to extract some form of a concession from the state. Stanton (2013), for example, finds that rebel groups with a broader constituency are less likely to use terrorism. Related, Goodwin (2006) argues that groups are more likely to target other people's people with terrorism than their own, suggesting that civil wars with an ethnic component would likely have more terrorism.

Democracies do tend to be the states more affected by terrorism (Li 2005, Eubank and Weinberg 2001) and rebels might be more violent in these regimes (Eck and Hultman 2007) as we've seen in struggling democracies like Iraq and Nigeria. There is still an active debate over whether the democracy finding is caused by the ability of people to mobilize, soft targets, a free press, or simply a function of measurement error (Eyerman 1998, Li 2005, Drakos and Gofas 2006).

Eck and Hultman (2007) and other scholars examine what is termed one-sided killing, which rebel mass killing is one version of. They show that rebels are more likely to kill in territorial conflicts. Drawing on Kalyvas (2006), they argue this may be due to the groups' desire to induce compliance.

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Few scholars examine the effects of mass *terrorist* atrocities. Most of this scholarly work on terrorism examines year-to-year change in the frequency of counts of attacks (Young 2015). We know from this research that populous, wealthy, democratic states are more likely to be targeted (Li 2005, Piazza 2006). Suicide attacks, the deadliest form of this violence, are on the rise and likely part of the explanation for why attacks are more deadly and fatalities overall are increasing.
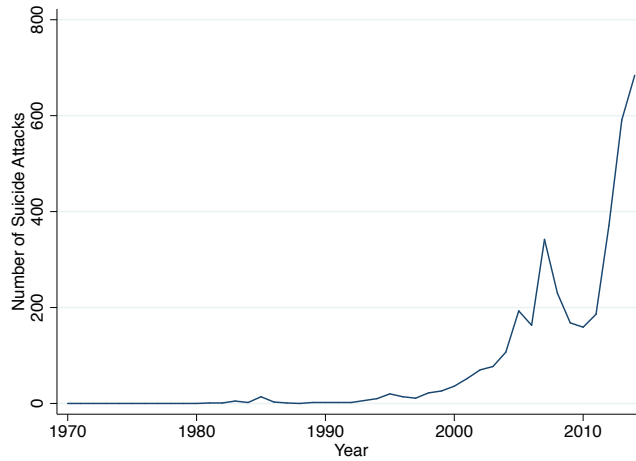

Figure 5: Number of Suicide Attacks in the System 1970-2014

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