[**Lethal numbers**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1706364/lethal-numbers)

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PALESTINIAN groups and the LTTE attracted global attention when they adopted suicide bombing (SB) as an effective weapon of warfare but the 9/11 suicide attacks changed the dynamics of terrorism.

Of the 156,772 terrorist attacks around the world from 1970 to 2015, SBs comprised only three per cent (4,771) and resulted in 14pc of the total fatalities. However, according to the US-based Combating Terrorism Centre, the 1,944 SBs that took place globally between 1981 to 2008 claimed an average of 11 deaths per attack. In 2021, the UK-based Action on Armed Violence recorded 61 SBs globally, resulting in 1,796 deaths and injuries. Of these casualties, 1,442 (80pc) were civilians, indicating a 7pc rise in such cases as compared to 2020, with an average of 25 civilians killed or injured in each attack. Afghanistan was the worst affected by SBs. Technology multiplied lethality: of the 61 SBs last year, 22 used VBIEDs (Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) causing an average of 26 casualties.

Attack locations may be easily accessible or of medium or low accessibility. Public parks, transport, and markets are easily accessible, while shopping malls and hotels in upmarket areas have medium accessibility. Military establishments and government offices have low access and are considered comparatively highly secure areas. Target-hardening measures increase the security level, but in case of failure to hit the actual target, the bomber prefers to detonate at the entry point or outermost security cordon.

An attack carried out in an indoor location increases lethality. Normally, everybody within 10 to 15 feet (three to 4.5 metres) of the explosion is killed within seconds. SBs in easily accessible places result in higher fatalities than those with multiple security layers.

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According to research, suicide attacks staged at the main entrances of the buildings registered an average of 14.5 fatalities. SBs in easily accessible locations resulted in 12.6 fatalities, while low-accessibility sites like military bases and checkpoints caused an average of 9.7 deaths. Where VIPs were targeted, an average of 6.2 people were killed; with military targets, the estimated death toll was 9.2 while civilians, with 13.8 deaths, registered the highest fatalities.

SBs in which stationary bombs are used kill an average of 11.5 people while the use of motorised weapons in SBs reported an average of 10.7 deaths. Suicide bombers can more advantageously use their bodies to detonate explosives as opposed to explosive-packed vehicles.

A single suicide bomber kills about 10 people, whereas an attack by two or more results in an average of 15.6 deaths. In 2016, Quetta’s Police Training College was stormed by three attackers; 61 people perished. During multiple suicide attacks, the second bomber targets the first responders and survivors of the initial attack. Attacks of this nature are generally carried out at easily accessible locations like venues of national holiday functions and political rallies.

Suicide attacks in more prosperous countries proved less lethal than in developing countries. This could be because developed countries employ the latest technology and quality intelligence, empower communities, and invest in counterterrorism.

To target high-profile personalities, discriminate suicide bombings are carried out where explosives are detonated near the targets. The assassinations of Benazir Bhutto, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and Rajiv Gandhi may be classified as discriminate suicide bombings. Indiscriminate suicide attacks are generally carried out against soft civilian targets and result in higher death tolls. However, to retain people’s sympathies, the masterminds prefer to target security personnel.

Though preventing suicide attacks is a gigantic task, public cooperation in counterterrorism may be solicited by raising public awareness. In 2002 in Tel Aviv, when a security guard saw wires hanging out of an attacker’s pocket, he grabbed his hands and foiled the attempt.

In Pakistan, the investigation of SBs primarily remains confined to the identification of the bombers, establishing their linkages with terrorist groups and verification of claims of responsibility. Questions that investigators usually fail to find answers to include: how the bombers were inspired, their hiring process, their training, and how the financial cost was managed. Prevention and successful investigation of SB is not possible by merely depending on the criminal justice-based approach. It warrants an understanding of push and pull factors such as socioeconomic aspects, dynamics of political and ethnic marginalisation, and misinterpretation of religious thought.

Living in isolation from ground realities is not a viable option. Those who preferred death over life need to be understood: only that can help ensure the right to life.

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