



# Terrorists and Suicide Attacks (Congressional Research Service)

*Audrey Kurth Cronin Congressional Research Service*

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Terrorists and Suicide Attacks

Congressional Research Service Report for Congress


...Suicide attacks by terrorist organizations have become more prevalent globally, and assessing the threat of future suicide attacks against the United States has gained in strategic importance. While suicide attacks have been employed internationally for centuries, the degree to which this tactic could be used to carry out operations against Americans was more widely appreciated after 9/11. The vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to suicide attacks was amply demonstrated: virtually all previous such attacks by foreign actors against U.S. citizens had happened on foreign soil, leading to a mistaken belief that Americans were only vulnerable when they were abroad. Adding to the concern about suicide attacks is their potential connection to increasingly available new technologies. Although so-called “weapons of mass destruction” were not used in the September 11th attacks, the destruction was nonetheless unquestionably “massive.” The prospect of combining modern weapons technology (especially chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological weapons) with an age-old willingness to die in the act of committing an attack could be unprecedentedly dangerous. The degree to which Al Qaeda and other groups have recently stepped up their public advocacy of so-called martyrdom operations, combined with captured evidence of their interest in these weapons, is also worrisome.<sup>1</sup> With increasing numbers of casualties from suicide attacks occurring globally in places such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Russia/Chechnya, and postconflict Iraq, a focus on the threat of future suicide attacks against Americans and their interests, in the United States and elsewhere, merits consideration. This report focuses on the following questions: What are suicide attacks? What have been the patterns and motivations for terrorist organizations using suicide attacks in the past? What terrorist groups and other organizations are most likely to launch such attacks? How great a threat are terrorist suicide attacks to the United States, at home and abroad? How can the United States counter such a threat? In short, the goal of this report is to summarize the key lessons of the international experience with suicide attacks in the modern era and examine their relevance to the United States in the current threat environment....

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