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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Bhatt, Chetan (2017) *Human rights activism and salafi-jihadi violence*. The International Journal of Human Rights . pp. 1-21. ISSN 1364-2987

DOI: [10.1080/13642987.2017.1314643](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1314643)

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Available in LSE Research Online: June 2017

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Human Rights Activism and Salafi-Jihadi Violence

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The legal defence and high profile campaigning by progressive human rights organizations representing or working on behalf of Al Qaeda fighters and supporters has generated furious debate internationally over the past decade. In the context of a rights-based perspective, this article explores two case studies, one related to a US progressive and human rights delegation's visit to Pakistan to protest drone strikes, and another focusing on the activities of a self-described human rights organization working in the UK for those detained during the 'global war on terror'. The article focuses on the left-wing and progressive arguments related to these two cases to examine some broader issues about the orientation of the political left to political violence, the nature of reactive human rights approaches to imperialism and war, and the prospects for more visionary orientations regarding human rights and political change.

human rights, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, political violence, rights-based approaches

Introduction

Why might major Western liberal, left-wing and feminist human rights activists support groups that are ideologically aligned with Al Qaeda or the Taliban, even though the latter have an established and violent history of gross human rights violations?

The high profile legal defence and campaigning by progressive human rights organizations working on behalf of Al Qaeda fighters and supporters has generated furious debate internationally over the past decade¹. In part, the debates reflect wider issues about the defence of political Islamists and salafi-jihadis by sections of the Western 'anti-imperialist' left. But the debates are complex and invoke many substantive issues of great importance to human rights theory and activism, including the limits of rights-based approaches. There is no one event that exemplifies the issues fully, but the controversy from 2010 regarding Amnesty International's alliance with the UK-based Cage (formerly Cageprisoners), the US-based Center for Constitutional Rights' legal and campaigning support for Anwar al-Awlaki of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the response of sections of the left outside France to the Charlie Hebdo killings and the murders in Paris in 2015 constitute a few of the many markers.²

The debates arose from two highly polarized positions that both claim to represent the authentic fight for human rights and civil liberties. Both also emphasize different aspects of a 'rights-based approach'. Generally, one left perspective – Amnesty International is a good example – foregrounds the violence of the US military and its human rights violations and abuses, and this is the tendency I explore in detail later. The other left view highlights the human rights abuses of militia like Al Qaeda and Islamic State, and here the arguments of UK organizations like One Law for All or the Centre for Secular Space are good examples. This second position has also been strongly informed by secular feminism. Both positions are explicitly left-wing, claim they support human and women's rights, opposed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and generally the 'global war on terror', and unequivocally opposed torture,

renditions and extrajudicial assassinations. Both claim they are opposed to imperialism, racism, the far-right, and anti-Muslim hatred. Both oppose Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. Yet the ferocity of the disagreements between these left-wing human rights positions have occurred in remarkably similar ways in the US, UK and Europe over many years and across a very wide range of campaigns.

What might these disagreements mean? What broader social forces are manifest in the polarization described above? These disputes, though seemingly small, point to a deeper series of issues about international human rights activism, human rights alliances, and the limitation of contemporary human rights visions. 'Institutional human rights' and rights-based approaches are imbricated in these disputes, as we see later. The disagreements outlined above are about the meanings of contemporary human rights and are contestations about those meanings. They require deeper explanation because they are symptoms of a changed, unpredictable international political environment and a variety of major social changes across civil societies. Both the human rights movement and the left are grappling with international political transformations through which human rights ideas and institutions have been challenged profoundly. The human rights movement and, indeed, the left have been unable to contest effectively these challenges.

A bleak, dynamic environment

One aim of this article is to situate the reasons for these divisions, and the failures of a purely rights-based approach, within wider international transformations. As has been shown clearly by Miller & Redhead (2017), much academic literature and INGO practice has been dominated by rights-based approaches³. Several related themes are important for the argument and are outlined here briefly. A 'democratic-centrist consensus' regarding international human rights existed in earlier decades, one often characterized as the 'triumph' of human rights. Even if specific human rights provisions were attacked regularly, the legitimacy of a broad human rights paradigm was accepted by diverse political tendencies, from European social democrats to US neo-conservatives – at least until 2003, when a stated concern with human rights could both support and abhor devastating, illegal wars. That consensus either no longer exists or is under serious threat from a variety of powerful political forces. In the aftermath of the Western-led wars and military interventions in the Middle East and Asia, a series of reconfigurations occurred in the relation between politics, violence and law. This included the routine use of torture, extrajudicial assassinations and civilian killings by the US and other countries, but also included changes in the way civilian lethal force (law enforcement) is used routinely by the American state against some citizen groups, a tendency that emerged well before, but was powerfully symbolized in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of Michael Brown by police officers in 2014.

Internationally, there has been an arresting pattern of highly authoritarian figures emerging as prominent political leaders in several formal democracies or semi-democracies – Putin, Erdogan, Modi, Netanyahu, Trump, Farage, Le Pen, Orbán, among others. Their rise reflects accommodation to new political styles and habits: populism, agnatology and post-truth politics, nativism, illiberalism, an aversion to democratic accountability, and the undermining of independent democratic institutions and elements of the rule of law. One important consequence of the rise of such figures has been a continuous attack by several governments on domestic and international NGOs and their international donors, as illustrated by the introduction of punitive legislation in China, Israel, Russia, India and Turkey, among others. These attacks have tended to focus on NGOs working on land, energy and natural resources,

corporations and financial institutions, and the media and public accountability – all areas in which human rights are key.

In addition to these changes, over the previous two decades and across civil societies in Europe and north America, South Asia and the Middle East, there has been the emergence of various far-right, often violent movements based on nationalism, religion, regionalism, racism and xenophobia. The Western far- and neo-Nazi right may view salafi-jihads and political Islamists as mortal enemies, but they are all political tendencies of the far-right, whatever their atavistic claims about each other⁴. These movements are overwhelmingly concerned with civil society and other civilian groups, rather than the state as such. This dense focus on civilians manifests in disdain for minorities, women or sexual rights, severe strictures on those deemed unbelievers, or the need to maim and kill civilians (a form of politicide.) While they are often enemies of each other, both ‘authoritarian populist’ states and figures, as well as recent far-right movements exhibit *political cruelty* as a legitimate style through which normal politics is done. The gleeful display of visceral cruelty by Islamic State may be *sui generis*, but it is a manifestation of a general political cruelty emergent across various contemporary states and civil society movements.

Institutional human rights

If these tendencies represent a serious challenge for universal human rights, they also reflect a crisis in human rights resulting from the exhaustion of liberalism as it reaches its institutional and political limits. This latter claim is a large one, so I want to highlight an important distinction between the dynamic, largely right- or far right-wing political tendencies outlined above, and the institutionalized, nomophilic, procedurally-glacial nature of most contemporary human rights work, particularly rights-based approaches. Contemporary human rights are nomocentric, statecentric and governance-driven, and this helps explain the field of politics that human rights can make available as well as the depoliticizing, pacifying effect of international human rights on movements and struggles that are amenable to being metabolized into normative-legal human rights processes.⁵ A statecentric orientation also explains why, for example, non-state actors such as Al Qaeda or Islamic State have been typically neglected in much Western human rights campaigning. Similarly, because the state is simultaneously the principal violator and prime giver of rights, human rights discourse can be limited to an oscillation between denunciation (of state violations) and demand (of state remedies.)

Independently of their legal framing, human rights also manifest in and through vast international apparatuses of governance at various national and international scales. In a Foucauldian sense, human rights are a method for the governance of human populations, and rights-based approaches exemplify one of the techniques used. Rights-based approaches rely on the legitimacy of key institutional and procedural avenues for the realization of rights or the remedy of violations. Hence, the agendas of human rights organizations tend to be informed by a series of institutionalized formulae and techniques, exemplified well by rights-based approaches to development, gender inequality or poverty. These typically frame a political issue in terms of formal processes of accountability and legal redress, perhaps accompanied by campaigns (of ‘empowerment’) that present a political issue through the lens of individualized victimhood, shaming and denunciation, and legal remedy. But, in the kind of abstracted formulaic procedures associated with rights-based approaches, where is the definitive space for moral or ethical judgement? In a similar way, rights-based governance generates a number of abstract subjects as outcomes of institutional practices. The ‘human

rights defender', as defined in law⁶ and policy⁷, is a strong example of such a 'subject', indeed a *virtuous* abstract subject. The argument is not that law and policy are unnecessary to defend human rights activists facing very real and severe threats, but is about the sociological life of legal and policy classifications once they are initiated. Significant here are the problems which ensue when abstract subjects are inserted into complex social and political environments. Other problems include the limitations of the spaces for ethical, as opposed to procedural, judgement.

A rights-based approach also has to assume the legitimacy of 'centrist' political field – one where the institutions deemed to be accountable will be shamed or (eventually) punished, or will act reasonably because of the force of normative human rights, political censure or international sanctions. In the dynamic and unsettled political context described earlier, a rights-based approach, with its emphasis on technocratic, legal and state-centric processes is radically undermined when the political legitimacy of a field of accepted, normative human rights cannot be taken for granted, and where a former liberal human rights consensus is under complex attack from varied directions – states, movements, and parts of some civil societies. The argument here is not that human rights are under attack in the way that they always have been, but that the ground of civil and political rights, and the role of institutions that support them, is seen as illegitimate by sections of the Euro-American right and far-right. A centrist consensus regarding human rights can no longer be assumed in several Western or non-Western democratic countries. If human rights are one of the ways in which political liberalism was thought to be 'victorious', they also demonstrate one way that political liberalism has transformed from an ideological configuration to a bureaucratized, professionalized arena of law and governance, one subject to contestation precisely because it emerges institutionally in order to govern and manage populations. (It is partly from this context that the call emerges from the European right and far-right for 'organic' liberties that somehow inhere in belonging to a particular piece of land, while at the same time rejecting human rights as alien, statist impositions by the European Union.)

However, human rights discourse also exists outside of institutions and inspires numerous social and political movements. Human rights are sources for an independent political idiom that generates many political intervention by human rights activists that are not necessarily constrained within legal frames, state institutions or political governance. Even if its legitimacy is contested, the political idiom of universal rights has to be used – including by those ostensibly opposed to it, and often at precisely the same moment in which they contest the legitimacy of human rights through other appeals to freedoms, liberties, or the rule of law.

Thus, in the complicated context outlined above, attention to the issues human rights organizations prioritize becomes important. Notwithstanding valuable research on how human rights organizations identify, select and campaign around particular violations, human rights activism as a form of social action is relatively under-theorized and tends to be analyzed through social movement or interest group approaches. By 'theorized', I do not mean 'the theory of change' approach that is ubiquitous among professional social changers working in liberal institutions and INGOs⁸. Nor do I mean the social and community mobilization approach of activists coached in the distilled methods of Alinsky and others. (That something called 'social change' is advocated so readily today, sometimes using the same methods, by neoliberals, corporations, neo-conservatives, and progressive organizations alike requires further analysis.) I am instead referring to the explicit moral principle, ethical goal or political ideology that informs (or is absent from) a human rights action. For example, the definition of a rights-based approach is less a political theory and even less an ethical

form, than it is a procedural blueprint that subsequently develops its own independent social life. The argument here is not intended to be Kantian, but reflects a more general point for progressive politics: a political intervention that is not informed by something akin to a moral or ethical principle or political theory risks being purely oppositional and wholly reactive. Similarly, a political intervention that is not designed to generate new political knowledge will likely not advance beyond existing strategies and approaches.

Hence, one concern for this article is how knowledge and social action are related in human rights activism. The nature of and reasoning behind political interventions undertaken in the name of human rights then become key issues. What is the theory that informs a particular human rights action or intervention? Why, for example, did Amnesty International, whose work is rights-based in principle, intervene at the highest levels in 2010 to say that ‘jihad in self-defense’ was not antithetical to human rights? For those for whom ‘jihad in self-defense’ has contemporary relevance, it is equivalent to the concept of defensive jihad, which was used by Bin Laden to legitimize the 9/11 massacre. The concept is widely used by salafi-jihadis everywhere to justify the slaughter of formal civilians.⁹ What was the ethical theory or moral principle that Amnesty believed it was using to make such a claim?

Below, I consider these complex themes through assessing how they have played out in two human rights campaigns. Both campaigns highlight some problems of rights-based work and universal human rights. Both cases have received extensive and heated public commentary elsewhere, but here I want to use them to explore other difficulties of human rights work today, and the related failures of rights-based approaches. The cases, and in particular the detail within them, reveal some intractable problems about human rights and rights-based work. I begin with the visit of a US women’s peace and human rights organization to Pakistan, and then consider Amnesty International’s support of salafi-jihadi sympathizers. In both case, a figure alleged to be associated with Al Qaeda emerges as an international human rights icon. I conclude with some general reflections on the limitations of human rights and rights-based approaches.

Those who kill children

In October 2012, the US women’s, anti-war and human rights organization, Code Pink, joined a rally against US drone strikes, the rally taking place in Hatala, near the border with south Waziristan. The latter is one of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas and contains a strong presence of violent militia associated with the so-called ‘Pakistan Taliban’,¹⁰ and Al Qaeda. The protest rally had been called by the Pakistani politician and former cricketer, Imran Khan, who had intended to lead a mass demonstration into southern Waziristan against drone strikes.¹¹ Code Pink was part of a delegation of left-wing US and international organizations that was invited by Khan to attend his march. On 9 October, the Code Pink delegation also organized a fast from sunrise to sunset ‘according to the Islamic tradition’ outside the Islamabad Press Club to ‘atone for drone strikes’ and protest the deaths of some 160 children killed by US drones in Pakistan.

Members of the Code Pink delegation, which included the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) and the ‘Committee of the Disappeared’, also spoke at public meetings in support of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani citizen currently incarcerated in Texas, having been found guilty of attempted murder and armed assault on US soldiers while she was in US custody in Afghanistan¹². The details of why she was in military custody in July 2008, why she was flown to the US, and other issues surrounding her movements are strongly disputed,

including whether she was previously captured in 2003 and held until 2008 at the Bagram Theater Internment Facility in Afghanistan (the largest detention camp arising from the ‘global war on terror’.)

For her supporters in Pakistan, and for much of the human rights movement internationally, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Aafia Siddiqui symbolized powerfully the atrocities and injustices of the ‘global war on terror’ and US imperialism¹³. It is difficult to think of a more potent, gendered symbol for Pakistani popular nationalist consciousness in recent years than the figure of Aafia Siddiqui. She is frequently characterized as an innocent neuroscientist who worked tirelessly for the welfare of others, a loving mother who suffered horrifying atrocities for years at the hands of the US military, including physical and mental torture, rape, solitary confinement, sustained degradation, and enforced separation from her children and family. She is often presented by her Western and Pakistani supporters as a perfect victim of the most nightmarish injustice, a heroine, a woman with superhuman gifts of immense fortitude, wisdom, acumen and love¹⁴. This hagiographic style is quite common in many Western campaigns undertaken on behalf of those captured, tortured and imprisoned during the global war on terror. Siddiqui’s past work for charities, including ones known to be Al Qaeda fronts, is glossed in the representation of her as ‘a savior of humanity’. The Code Pink delegation stated that ‘Aafia, like other Muslims in prison in the U.S. as part of the phony “War on Terror,” is guilty of nothing’¹⁵.

While Aafia Siddiqui was indeed convicted, the strategic reduction of an entire political universe to a narrowly legal category is significant (and recurs in the second case discussed below.) This condensation of politics and ethics to a different issue of legal innocence is characteristic of many human rights orientations towards salafi-jihadis and their supporters. It has enabled the evacuation of ethical judgement about whether progressive and left-wing organizations should be allying with salafi-jihadis and their supporters in a manner that they would *ethically* choose not to were the individuals, for example, white neo-Nazis who preached violence or hatred. The transfiguration of politics to a question of legality is one of several translations that some human rights organizations have undertaken to make salafi-jihadis convincing victims in progressive discourse, irrespective of the illiberal political ideologies they may expound. At issue here is not the imperative to provide robust legal representation to victims of the ‘war on terror’, but the nature of the ethical choices that progressive, left-wing human rights organizations make in presenting salafi-jihadis and their supporters as bewildered victims unburdened with ideology, volition or agency. Concomitantly, in the act of infantilizing salafi-jihadis and their supporters for left-wing political discourse, their numerous crimes are ethically evaded. Similarly, in the Code Pink meetings about Aafia Siddiqui, the presence of representatives of movements working against enforced disappearances in Latin America created a symbolic equivalence between those killed by military dictatorships in Latin American countries and those captured and disappeared during the ‘global war on terror’. There are major human rights campaigns in Pakistan against a massive number of enforced disappearances of individuals and families from Balochistan, but this was not a stated concern for the US delegation.

Aafia Siddiqui was alleged by the US to have been strongly associated with Al Qaeda and other Pakistani militia movements. During the trial of Uzair Paracha, who was sentenced in 2006 to 30 years’ imprisonment after being convicted in a New York federal court of providing ‘material support to the al Qaeda terrorist organization’¹⁶, Siddiqui was named as the person who had opened a Maryland post office box in the name of a man sent to the US by Al Qaeda to commit acts that included creating explosions at petrol stations in Baltimore.

She was alleged to have opened the postbox while she was on a 10-day trip from Pakistan to the US, ostensibly to seek academic employment¹⁷. In 2002, she and her former husband were questioned in the US by the FBI for purchases of ‘about \$10,000 worth of night-vision goggles, body armour and 45 military-style books including *The Anarchist’s Arsenal*’¹⁸. Siddiqui later became estranged from her husband, went to Pakistan with her children, and subsequently married Ammar al-Baluchi, an important Al Qaeda figure who was a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, as well as a co-conspirator in the explosives plot described above. In 2004, the FBI listed Aafia Siddiqui among its seven ‘most wanted terrorists.’ Siddiqui ‘disappeared’ during the period from 2003-2008. Several international human rights organizations said she was likely held as a ‘ghost prisoner’ and severely abused and tortured at Bagram¹⁹, whereas the US said in a leaked diplomatic cable that she was not in its custody until 2008, while her ex-husband claimed she was in hiding in Pakistan and Afghanistan²⁰.

Siddiqui was also named as an Al Qaeda operative by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (‘KSM’ in the quotation below) during torture interrogations that included over 180 instances of waterboarding and which are described in a US Senate Intelligence Committee report in the following way:

...interrogators began using the CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques at DETENTION SITE COBALT a ‘few minutes’ after the questioning of KSM began. KSM was subjected to facial and abdominal slaps, the facial grab, stress positions, standing sleep deprivation (with his hands at or above head level), nudity, and water dousing. Chief of Interrogations ... also ordered the rectal rehydration of KSM without a determination of medical need, a procedure that the chief of interrogations would later characterize as illustrative of the interrogator’s ‘total control over the detainee.’²¹

Torture is unequivocally a wrong under any circumstances. The point of this example is that it condenses the horrific violations under the ‘war on terror’ and the appalling crimes by Al Qaeda, as exemplified by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed’s role in the 9/11 atrocity. If both are gross human rights violations that demand an ethical response, why might human rights organizations generally evade the latter? As Bennoune argues:

Instead of offering such a holistic response that encompasses the threats to human dignity from both terrorism and the ‘war on terror,’ international law writers either seem to engage with terrorism or with counter-terrorism, with security or with human rights, with terror or with torture, with the abuses of one side or with another. Many security-oriented commentators write only about what non-state actors are doing, while many human rights commentators seriously scrutinize only, or primarily, what states are doing.²²

In the case of Aafia Siddiqui, it is not simply that the human rights organizations focused on ‘torture’, but that they actively worked to make ‘terror’ disappear, remade its ideologues into virtuous figures. The FBI described the following circumstances of Aafia Siddiqui’s detention in Afghanistan in 2008:

[Afghanistan National Police] officers searched her handbag and found numerous documents describing the creation of explosives, chemical weapons, and other weapons involving biological material and radiological agents. SIDDIQI’s papers included descriptions of various landmarks in the United States, including in New

York City. In addition, among SIDDIQUI's personal effects were documents detailing United States military assets, excerpts from the Anarchist's Arsenal, and a one gigabyte (1 gb) digital media storage device...SIDDIQUI was also in possession of numerous chemical substances in gel and liquid form that were sealed in bottles and glass jars.²³

The chemicals included substantial amounts of sodium cyanide. Siddiqui was not tried on charges related to these allegations, but for attempting to shoot US soldiers after she was detained.

Following her sentencing in 2010 for 86 years, the popular mood in Pakistan was described as 'hysteria' by some writers²⁴. Mass protests took place there demanding her release, some of them led by the Jamaat-i Islami, a far-right Pakistani Islamist political party. Significantly, several Al Qaeda videos were released demanding Aafia Siddiqui be freed. In November 2010, Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, released an online audio message, *Who will support the scientist, Aafia Siddiqui?* in which he said:

Whoever wants to free Aafia Siddiqui and revenge for her honor against those who assaulted her and assaulted every other Muslim woman, let them join the ranks of the mujahedeens and let them support them and be part of them because there is neither pride nor dignity without seeking jihad.²⁵

Similarly, in 2012 al-Zawahiri issued a video in which he wanted to exchange Siddiqui for Warren Weinstein, an American businessman kidnapped in Pakistan and held hostage by Al Qaeda²⁶. The late Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior Al Qaeda figure, released a video calling for vengeance for Aafia Siddiqui²⁷. Masood Azhar, head of the extremely violent Jaish-e Mohammed (which has been part of the Al Qaeda combine in south Asia) similarly called for revenge in 2010²⁸. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb kidnapped and wanted to exchange seven hostages for Aafia Siddiqui in 2013²⁹. The Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan claimed a car bomb, which failed to explode in New York City in 2010, was partly in revenge for Aafia Siddiqui's conviction³⁰. The Afghan Taliban made similar calls for vengeance. In September 2014, American journalist Steven Sotloff was beheaded by Islamic State, who called for Siddiqui's release³¹. There are other examples and they are significant in illustrating the overwhelming support for Aafia Siddiqui by Al Qaeda and its affiliates, by the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban, and by Islamic State – a unique constellation of violent armed groups demanding the release of a woman from a US prison. Progressive human rights organizations who support Aafia Siddiqui do not seem to be troubled by this and dismiss it. Nor have they expressed concern about (or indeed mention) her former associations with Al Qaeda, its charitable fronts or its senior members, though these associations emerged from evidence given in open court during trials that followed due legal process.

Unseeing a field of violence

As Meredith Tax has pointed out, on 9 October 2012, the same day that Code Pink was protesting against the deaths of children in Pakistan caused by drone strikes, Malalai Yousafzai, a school girl and blogger with a background of socialist political activism in Pakistan, was shot in the head by members of Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, the same group for which Code Pink's ally, Imran Khan, had often advocated³². This attempted murder followed a succession of death threats against her for advocating the right to education, girls' rights and more generally human and women's rights. While Yousafzai became an international

symbol, her popularity among the Pakistani media largely vanished and she was often referred to by conservative journalists as an agent of imperialism, even as she rebuked Barack Obama for drone strikes in Pakistan. Code Pink did issue a statement of condemnation regarding the attack on Yousafzai, but the person their campaign focused on was Aafia Siddiqui.

At the time of Code Pink's alliance with him, Imran Khan was the most vocal mainstream Pakistani political supporter of both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. He claimed that the Afghan Taliban were fighting a 'holy war' against foreign occupation, and that the Taliban 'did not want to enforce Shariah in the country at gunpoint but wanted to liberate it from the US war'³³. He was named by the Pakistan Taliban as their representative in talks with the government. Over many years, Khan has vociferously called for talks with the Pakistan Taliban and regularly makes statements that have been interpreted by commentators as 'mainstreaming extremism' in Pakistan (he is commonly referred to as 'Taliban Khan' in Pakistan.)

It is also important here to acknowledge the national and social environment within which Imran Khan supported the 'Pakistan Taliban', and thus the context in which Code Pink and other progressive Western organizations formed an alliance with him in the name of human rights. From 2006, the number and lethality of suicide bomb attacks on civilians in Pakistan increased massively (see Chart 1.). In the years 2007-2010, over 3,000 people were killed and about 6,000 injured in suicide bomb attacks in Pakistan. This is a conservative number based on the Global Terrorism Database – data from Pakistan Body Count gives a higher figure of around 1,000 people killed each year in the same period. These figures only include suicide bombings and exclude other bombings, severe attacks or extremely violent coercion, such as regular acid attacks on Pakistani women for not wearing the hijab.

[INSERT CHART 1 ABOUT HERE]

The suicide attacks were overwhelmingly carried out by the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan and its associates. Excluding government and police targets, about eighty-five percent of the suicide attacks had civilians and civilian institutions as targets, such as markets, schools, religious institutions, minorities, government and police agencies. Only eleven percent of attacks targeted the military. It is thus Imran Khan's defence of the Pakistan Taliban that earns him the wrath of Pakistani left and liberal sensibilities. In the year that Code Pink went to Pakistan to join his protest, the number of attacks and deaths were at their peak (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Code Pink's intervention in Pakistan reflects a truism: 'international human rights solidarity' is always expressed in a complex, overdetermined and unpredictable social and political field.³⁴ Nevertheless, the political environment in which a significant alliance of left-wing, progressive rights groups intervened as an act of solidarity with visibly right-wing interests in Pakistan becomes clearer. Much has to be ignored internationally and locally for 'international solidarity' to be performed; an act of 'international solidarity' necessarily has to be an act of evasion of other confounding issues. Most significantly for this example, much

work had to be done to avoid addressing the horrendous violence that was occurring in Pakistan at the time of the act of peaceful human rights solidarity. In several meetings that Code Pink delegates had with left groups in Pakistan, they came across the view that drone strikes were necessary because of the atrocities against civilians committed by the Tehreek-e Taliban and its associates. Code Pink dismissed these views³⁵. One need not support drone strikes to acknowledge the relentless violence of the Tehreek-e Taliban and its horrific, visible impact on Pakistan's civil society, the attempted murder of Malala Yousafzai, or the reasons for the attack upon her. Code Pink instead focused on Aafia Siddiqui and drone strikes. From one rights-based perspective, this seems legitimate – there are human rights issues related to both. Nevertheless, what were the international social forces that made Aafia Siddiqui a heroine and Imran Khan a natural ally of a section of the progressive American human rights left? What are the global social forces that enable the foregrounding of one type of violence while largely evading another? More provocatively, does some contemporary left-wing human rights solidarity simply become a matter of supporting one variety of organized political violence rather than another, to support the weaker lethal violence against the stronger lethal one?

Only two sides

It would be a mistake to dismiss Code Pink as an exceptional outlier. It is therefore worth considering a second example, the activities of Cage UK (formerly Cageprisoners) and its director, Moazzem Begg, an icon for the human rights movement and especially Amnesty International, after his release from Guantánamo Bay as one of nine Britons held in extrajudicial detention by the US. This example has received extensive public commentary, especially after 2010 when Gita Sahgal, former head of Amnesty International's Gender Unit, was suspended by the organization after she criticized its alliance and working relationships with Cageprisoners and Moazzem Begg. At the time, Amnesty International unequivocally, vigorously defended these relationships. Cageprisoners later changed its name to Cage UK and was again mired in controversy following its description of Mohammed Emwazi (the Islamic State beheader, 'Jihadi John') as 'a beautiful man'. At issue is not Amnesty International's invitation to individuals to speak publicly about their experiences of human rights violations at Guantánamo, but the deeper, extensive working alliance that had developed between Amnesty International, Begg and Cageprisoners, thus raising the broader question about the paucity of progressive human rights visions that enabled such alliances. Amnesty's argument rested on the rights-based principle of the empowerment of rights holders and the legitimacy of an international human rights framework. However, rights-based work is not a single event but a longer-term process that has sociological consequences. Empowering individuals and organizations means working with them and training them in a very wide range of areas, from media presentation and report writing, to international human rights law and documentation, to fundraising and organizational development, to social media, among many other areas. This professionalization is a necessary consequence (indeed, an aim) of rights-based approaches. In the case of salafi-jihadis or their supporters, it has enabled a habilitation of their narrow, discriminatory sectarian political ideology such that it is often seen to represent the views of 'Muslims'. Cageprisoners would not have had the prominence and legitimacy it acquired had it not benefitted from the assistance, publicity, networks, funding and expertise of the human rights left.

Cageprisoners presents itself as a human rights organization working for the rights of those captured, detained and tortured during the 'global war on terror'. It has worked jointly with a

wide range of human rights organizations in the UK and elsewhere³⁶. Yet, Cageprisoners is *unmistakably* an outgrowth of several UK sectarian ideological tendencies that have ranged from salafi-jihadi to political Islamist in orientation. Begg's much celebrated book, *Enemy Combatant*, written with Victoria Brittain, is an exemplary instance of the reimagining of Al Qaeda or Taliban supporters and activists such that they can be apprehended as immaculate victims of Western imperialism³⁷. Indeed, Cageprisoners' public view can be reduced to one key argument, mimicked by some left and human rights organizations: 'the global war on terror' is the sole and sufficient reason for the 'radicalization' or 'extremism' of some Muslims, and every act of violence committed by salafi-jihads is an inevitable or legitimate response to that 'war' and resultant anti-Muslim hatred.³⁸ In this register, there is no authentic non-Western political agency unless it is a reaction to the West's cultural or military aggression.

Yet, the ideological configuration of Cageprisoners is unambiguous. For example, allusions to culture do a great deal of work in Begg's book, so that phrases that might be jarring to various non-Western sensibilities are presented by Begg and Brittain to Western readers as a pleasing search for cultural authenticity. Begg said that:

correct Islamic education – grounded in hard scriptural evidence and not on culture and superstition – would create a healthy environment of inquisitiveness and learning for those around me.³⁹

This casuistic sentence encapsulates the essence of salafi ideology. The idea of an 'Islamic education' not grounded in 'culture and superstition' may appear innocuous, perhaps even worthy, to a Western liberal audience but, in south Asia, the same statement can lead to the slaughter of Muslims by salafi-jihadi militias⁴⁰. The idea is based on salafist political claims that reject the histories, traditions and practices of most south Asian Muslims so as to displace them with the greater authenticity alleged to derive from salafi political ideology. Salafism, an elite, authoritarian ideology of political and civil power, and in essence the nationalist ideology of one state, is made to supplant the entirety of the religious traditions.

Indeed, Begg's book makes for strange human rights testimony. As Tax notes, it is a consistent apologia for the Afghan Taliban during a period when they were beheading and beating up women, destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas, and massacring Hazaras in their thousands, among numerous other violations of the rights of women, men and children.⁴¹ Similarly, Begg writes that he opened his (former) Birmingham bookshop, Maktabah al-Ansar, 'to give some of the profits to charity, and to educate people about Islam'⁴². But there was no doubt about the shop's purpose: it was the key English language publisher and distributor of salafi-jihadi ideological and political material that included writings by Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri and Abdullah Azzam, among numerous others⁴³. In his book, Begg refers in congenial tones to innocuous acts while he was in Afghanistan, such as designing an Arabic alphabet poster for children. I have an advertisement for a children's Arabic alphabet poster from the website of Maktabah al-Ansar, the webpages having been created before the 9/11 attacks⁴⁴. Near to it is a link to a publication, *The Islamic Ruling on Martyrdom Operations*, which advocates suicide bombings. Next to it is a link to Mohammed Faraj's *Jihad: The Absent Obligation*, a major text of salafi-jihadi political thought. Under the advert are links to signal texts from the salafi-jihadi corpus as it existed before 9/11, including *Al-Wala' Wa'l-Bara*, which propagates the central importance of hatred and enmity towards non-Muslims. In May 2001, before Moazzam Begg was detained by the US, the bookshop website had links to Azzam Publications, Abu Hamza's Supporters of Sharia

(which was associated with violent Algerian militia and was urging UK Muslims to pledge allegiance to Bin Laden), fighters' organizations in Chechnya, and web links to salafi-jihadi training camps. The bookshop published *The Army of Madinah in Kashmir* by Dhiren Barot, an important Al Qaeda figure arrested in the UK who, in his 1999 book, urged violent operations in Western countries. Other publications included Abu Hamza's *Allah's Governance on Earth*, Abdullah Azzam's classic *Join the Caravan* and Ibn an-Nahhas' *An Advice to Those Who Abstain from Jihad*.

Similarly, Cageprisoners showed consistent support for the late Anwar al-Awlaki of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula who unambiguously urged the mass slaughter of any non-believing civilians anywhere. It supported Ali al-Tamimi, convicted in 2005 for encouraging his American followers to go to Afghanistan to engage in military fighting against the US. In the 'Islamic Focus' section of its website, Cageprisoners had articles by some of the most important salafi-jihadi political ideologues, including Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, the ideological mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the latter a precursor to Islamic State, the late Abdullah Azzam, and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, a Syrian-British salafi-jihadi thinker. Other articles included writings by Salman al-Awda, a Saudi cleric and a key figure in the *sahwa* movement who formerly supported various salafi-jihadi positions, Mohammed al Habdaan, a highly influential Saudi cleric who urges the need to 'announce Jihad against the heads of disbelief in order to secure the release of the Muslim prisoners', and who also proposed a burka with only one eye slot since two visible eyes encouraged women to wear makeup⁴⁵, and various other Wahhabi-salafi preachers. This range of figures is as revealing for the vast majority of Muslim religious traditions that are left out as they are for demonstrating a clearly salafi sectarian focus. Other articles included poems for the 'brothers' Babar Ahmed of Azzam Publications, and Harun Rashid Aswat, wanted in the US for his alleged role in a bomb plot in Oregon.

The medieval fighter Ibn an-Nahhas al-Dumyati's fourteenth century writings on war are very important for contemporary salafi-jihadi creedal 'justifications' for violence against civilians and, significantly for Cageprisoners, for the treatment of Muslim prisoners of war. It is his text, not international human rights or humanitarianism, that shapes Cageprisoners' orientation towards the capture, detention, trial and conviction of its favoured prisoners:

The scholars have many positions on this subject, but they are agreed upon it being obligatory to free the Muslim prisoners of war, by either sacrificing ourselves or by our wealth.⁴⁶

Cageprisoners' frequent exhortation to 'Free the Prisoners!' might speak to Western human rights activists concerned about the illegality of Guantánamo, but the slogan is based on salafi-jihadi political ideology not international human rights⁴⁷. That slogan is widely used by salafi-jihadis, including Al Qaeda. Effectively, for Cageprisoners, all Muslim prisoners detained, charged and convicted in relation to counter-terrorism legislation are considered prisoners of war of the 'war on terror', the latter seen as a war against Islam. Those prisoners are claimed to be held only because they are Muslims, hence frequent statements of the kind that they are in prison for nothing other than declaring the *shahadah*. Thus, Cageprisoners actively promoted the cases of those convicted in legally uncontroversial cases, including individuals who pleaded guilty to plotting extremely serious acts of violence against civilians. It has also highlighted cases of individuals proven to be among the most senior of Al Qaeda operatives. Similarly, Cageprisoners reproduced advice from Ibn an-Nahhas' *Book of Jihad* that included views such as: if a Muslim prisoner of war 'can escape and capture with him

any enemy, take any of their property, or kill among them then he should'; the Muslim prisoner of war 'is not allowed to marry a Christian or a Jew in the land of disbelief because the children in this case might follow their mother's religion'; enemy 'women and children POWs...become slaves by default'⁴⁸.

As for Begg's own former alleged associations, and whatever might be the exact nature of his current relationship with British security services, the US case against him alleged that he was a member of, trained by, and fought, recruited and raised funds for Al Qaeda⁴⁹. The FBI alleged that Begg was associated with Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, including Derunta, al-Badr and Khalid bin Walid, and received extensive training in arms and simple explosives. It has been alleged that money orders from his account in Birmingham were found at an Al Qaeda camp. At the Derunta complex, it has been alleged that he was involved in running and raising funds for an important explosives training camp. Similarly, it has been alleged that in October 2001, he was 'armed and prepared to fight' alongside Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Begg has said that he received no arms training at the camps, though he recounts curious details from the 1990s such as: 'I saw [a trainer] teaching classes on AK47 rifles, sniper rifles, RPG7s, and anti-aircraft guns. Most of the weapons were Russian, except for one M16 which had no rounds, and an old Lee Enfield .303 from the days of the British Raj'⁵⁰. A number of other allegations have also been made about Begg's associations with various Al Qaeda or other salafi-jihadi individuals and supporters. Begg has denied all these key allegations.

Begg's human rights supporters frequently and correctly state that he has not been convicted of any offence related to terrorism. But his political and ideological affiliations were substantial and existed independently of whether or not he was charged or convicted of any offence. As with Aafia Siddiqui, human rights organizations have tended to reduce political affiliations to a matter of formal legality, thus giving law hegemony over the field of political ethics – a surprising approach for left-wing activists to take. Similarly, the abstract category of human rights defender into which activists have placed Begg and Siddiqui is a necessarily virtuous one that demands honouring. This abstracted human rights approach towards Begg extended to his post-Guantánamo ideology of political violence to which I now turn, and which important human rights organizations in the West, including Amnesty International, have publicly defended in the name of human rights.

To understand the shape of this ideology, we need to consider the flux of ideas among political Islamists, salafis and salafi-jihadis about legitimate forms of political violence in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, and the mass murders of Shias in Iraq after 2003 by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi of Al Qaeda in Iraq. There were concerted attempts by the Muslim Brotherhood and some salafi-jihadis to delineate a revisionist set of ideas about jihad in the wake of the backlash after 9/11 and then illegal war and occupation. These ideas continued to include jihad as equivalent to physical fighting under conditions of military occupation, and as a global individual obligation of 'self-defence' against foreign military occupation of that mystical (and historically and territorially meaningless) entity commonly termed 'Muslim lands'. 'Self-defence' against foreign occupation can also be extended to governments termed 'apostate', since they are illegitimately 'occupying' a 'Muslim country'. These revisionist efforts can be read as attempts to retrospectively distance the late Abdullah Azzam's political ideology from the later events it inspired, such as the London and Madrid bombings, and 9/11 – in other words, to distance Azzam from Al Qaeda and much extant salafi-jihadi thinking.

Begg has extolled Azzam's views, referring to 'the stirring speeches of the assassinated Palestinian scholar, who had revived jihad in the 1980s in Afghanistan'⁵¹ and describing Azzam's *Defence of Muslim Lands* as 'magisterial'⁵². Azzam said physical fighting is an individual obligation if 'a hand span' of 'Muslim land' is occupied by '*kuffar*' aggressors. This obligation remains 'continuously until every piece of land that was once Islamic is regained.'⁵³ Begg's post-Guantánamo writings often parallel this ideological rescuing of Azzam. Hence, the 'noble concept' of jihad is for Begg an inseparable aspect of faith. This is a political claim such that criticism of jihad becomes an attack on the faith of Muslims and a 'demonization' of Islam. He states:

Verses in the Quran mention the word Jihad many times so for somebody to say it and recite it and to be proud about what they believe and what they believe is part of their identity is now something to be very very afraid of.⁵⁴

Of course, the implication of this argument is that Christians should not be afraid of proud belief in genocide or ethnic cleansing since such acts are mentioned in the Old Testament. Begg also reproduces the idea of jihad as military fighting, a 'deed unmatched in reward', and considers it erroneous to limit the jihad to internal, spiritual striving. He similarly states that jihad is an individual obligation on Muslim men and women when 'their land is occupied by foreign enemies', stating that there are dire warnings in the Quran for Muslims who abandon jihad. Where operatives have deliberately targeted civilians, Begg says 'There is no ... honour in killing unarmed civilians' (like other apologists, Begg routinely adjectivizes the word 'civilian'.) He says 'It is not surprising too that Muslims have become angry and have even responded with actions rejected by Islam to unleash their outrage'. He refers to 9/11, 7/7 and the Madrid bombings as 'violent strikes'; in comparison, extraordinary rendition is 'terrorism of the worst kind'.⁵⁵ For Begg, the jihad and the 'Muslim nation' are global in scale. But simultaneously, he articulates jihad as simply self-defence against external occupation. A sectarian political ideology is articulated in terms that are carefully ambiguous and sufficiently familiar such that they are understood by secular human rights and left-wing activists as equivalent with legitimate self-defence of a sovereign territory against external military aggression, such as American or British military imperialism. Or, they are understood as self-determination by a distinct national or ethnic group fighting for legible territory. While this revisionist ideology may appear to be based on elements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or international humanitarian law, it signals a radically different project and illustrates how an uninformed, unethical application of a rights-based approach can create a home for a sectarian political ideology.

When the controversy about its extensive working partnership with Cageprisoners emerged in 2010, Amnesty International's public statements were a robust defence of Cageprisoners, Moazzem Begg and his qualities. It is worth quoting this defence fully:

[Moazzam Begg] speaks powerfully from personal experience about the abuses there. He advocates effectively detainees' rights to due process, and does so within the same framework of universal human rights standards that we are promoting. All good reasons, we think, to be on the same platform when speaking about Guantánamo. Now, Moazzam Begg and others in his group Cageprisoners also hold other views which they have clearly stated, for example on whether one should talk to the Taleban or on the role of jihad in self-defence. Are such views antithetical to human rights? Our answer is no, even if we may disagree with them... I am afraid that the rest of what we have heard against Moazzam Begg include many distortions, innuendos, and

“guilt by association” to which he has responded for himself. I wish to stress to you as I have done repeatedly in public that if any evidence emerges that Moazzam Begg or Cageprisoners have promoted views antithetical to human rights, or have been involved in even more sinister activities, Amnesty International would disown its joint advocacy. However, also at play is the old principle that anyone is innocent until proven guilty – not only in a judicial sense. To disown our work with Moazzam Begg on the basis of what we have been presented so far would betray basic principles of fairness which are also at the heart of what we stand for.⁵⁶

Articulated here very precisely is a rights-based framework into which a sectarian ideology has been enfolded. As significant is the reduction of political ethics and judgement to a question of legal innocence and virtuousness. Similarly, Amnesty’s argument that ‘jihad in self-defence’ is compatible with international human rights reflects how a deeply sectarian political ideology has become normalized in some areas of human rights work. It was not until 2015, when Cage UK publicly defended ‘Jihadi John’ as a ‘beautiful young man’ that Amnesty International UK finally stated:

Amnesty no longer considers it appropriate to share a public platform with Cage and will not engage in coalitions of which Cage is a member. Recent comments made by Cage representatives have been completely unacceptable, at odds with human rights principles and serve to undermine the work of NGOs, including Amnesty International.⁵⁷

It is striking that it took the spectacle of visceral cruelty in which Islamic State delights before Amnesty International publicly expressed any concern about Cageprisoners. However, in 2010, Cageprisoners and Begg’s ideology was fully in the public domain and had been brought to Amnesty International’s attention.

Conclusion: the ley lines of the left

The idea of furthering social change has become pragmatic, procedural, indeed normative in many liberal societies. Social change management is not a radical idea but an institutionally-calibrated and audited one that is embedded in many of the activities of the great liberal institutions and global philanthropies of our time. Yet, this kind of social change appears to exist outside of any explicit grand ideology, political vision or ethical purpose, except for change of some ‘better’ kind, one perhaps in tune with neoliberal imperatives. Human rights can segue precisely into this pragmatic anti-utopian, anti-critical orientation towards social change. For many left-wing human rights activists, the most elementary forms of anti-imperialism and anti-racism are seemingly the ‘theories’ for the kinds of positions they might advocate, which include alliances with groups that support Al Qaeda and Islamic State. It is the argument here that this purely oppositional human rights stance is itself as empty of progressive visionary content as that advocated by neoliberal managers of social change. It is unable to advance broader progressive visions that lend to genuinely ethical, critical, informed solidarities with groups and movements outside the West. In a similar vein, Judith Butler’s argument that Hamas and Hezbollah have to be understood ‘as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left’⁵⁸ is a consequence of a this content-less, oppositional politics of global sides rather than substantive visions.

It is tempting to see within this anti-imperialist stance a contemporary version of a unreflexive Western ‘Third Worldism’ of the late 1960s and 1970s which, for some, was little

more than a projection of metropolitan fantasies about heroic, magnificent violence: a Western celebration of the ideas of violence gleaned from Mao, Sartre, Fanon, against the greater violence of the West. However, at the core of much contemporary Western left-wing anti-imperialism is a further theme deeply relevant to human rights: the nature of the relation between politics and violence. Human rights discourse contains mystifications about how human rights are necessarily associated with violence – they have to be, since human rights requires enforcement, otherwise it has no effective power to manifest as law. Notwithstanding frequent arguments that human rights lack enforcement, which only confirm their relation to force, the point here is that human rights represent emblematically the key antinomies of liberalism with regard to political violence. The protection of rights requires coercion; the rule of law, which generates fundamental rights, requires social order; rights are bestowed by an entity that monopolizes the legitimate exercise of violence; the logic of international human rights enforcement can lead to military occupation and war. Liberalism does not escape an association with violence but, like most modern political ideologies, is founded on a relation to violence that is mediated by law. If we consider violence as an analytic, then a further question is foregrounded for left-wing human rights activism: what is to be the left's relation to political violence?

It has been argued by many writers that the legal, institutional colonization of human rights restricts the possible emancipatory visions that are made available for progressive politics.⁵⁹ The point here is a related one: the reduction of complex political and ethical areas to a bare question of formal legality entails a number of consequences that together can diminish the potentially radical power of universal human rights. In both the cases examined, and in numerous others, including the legal case against Barack Obama and others initiated by the Center for Constitutional Rights on behalf of Anwar al-Awlaki of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, there was a sustained effort by largely left-wing progressives to present the main protagonists as immaculate victims who had no political agenda other than perhaps a generous vision for humanity. They were presented as having little agency and history beyond their violent victimization by imperialism. The issue here is not the need for the legal defence of the individuals concerned so as to protect their human rights and liberties, nor the necessity of sustained legal attack on the US or other states' gross violations of human rights. There have long existed strong arguments for the robust and unequivocal defence of the human rights of non-state actors who may have committed or who advocate gross violations of the human rights of others. The point instead is ethical-political one about the values of much of the contemporary Western left, including key human rights organizations, that enable it to evade ideologies of political violence, but conversely confer moral rectitude on the advocates of ideologies of violence. At its worst, this generates a simple moral universe: there are only oppressors and oppressed, contemporary imperialism is little more than racism or Orientalism, with neither of the latter unmoored from the colonial nineteenth century, the victims that matter are those of 'the global war on terror', and the gaze is irreducibly from and only concerned with the West.⁶⁰ This exemplifies a pure politics of opposition, perhaps redolent of the Maoist maxim that there is one principal contradiction, and there exists only social fascism and those who battle it. This is indeed the nearest one comes to a theory for the moral actions of sections of the anti-imperialist left and its human rights affiliates.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Rob Merrett, Karima Bennoune, Steve Cross, Meredith Tax, Steve Charkewycz, Sukhwant Dhaliwal and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

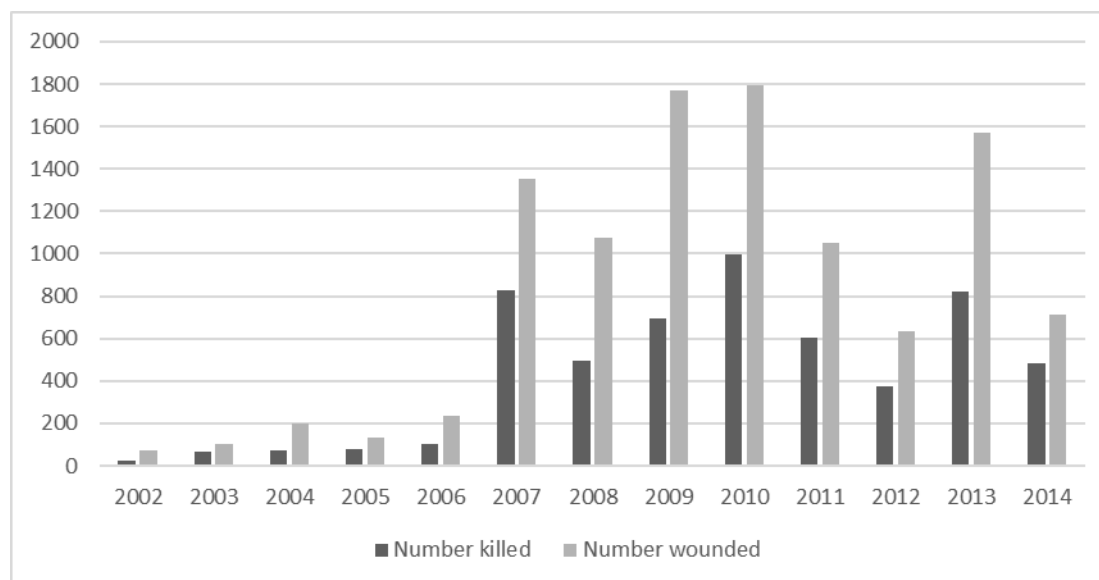


Chart 1: Suicide attacks in Pakistan, 2002-2014 – numbers killed & wounded

Based on data from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Global Terrorism Database, 2015, datafile: globalterrorismdb_0615dist.xlsx. <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

Group	Year (2000+)														Total killed
	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14		
Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan / Taliban (Pakistan)			11			46	155	289	692	453	216	243	365	2470	
Lashkar-e Jhangvi		53	18		57			25	52	4	19	222	32	482	
Harkatul Jihad-e-Islami						141								141	
Tehrik-e-Taliban Islami											40			40	
Al Qaida	14	15	9			63	34				6			141	
Other Revolutionary Deobandi	12							4	37		5	172	65	295	
Unknown / Other		1	35	78	43	577	306	378	216	146	88	187	24	2058	

Table 1: Suicide attacks in Pakistan, 2002-2014 – perpetrators & deaths

Based on data from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Global Terrorism Database, 2015, datafile: globalterrorismdb_0615dist.xlsx. <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>. The main groups listed are normally Tehreek-e Taliban allies. Some smaller groups, also erstwhile TTP allies, are included in the 'Other Revolutionary Deobandi' category.

Notes

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