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Terrorism in the 2020s: Examining the Global Threat Landscape

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TERRORISM IN THE 2020s:

EXAMINING THE GLOBAL THREAT LANDSCAPE

A Master's Thesis

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Master of Science, Defense & Strategic Studies

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to (1) explore the global trends and trajectories of terrorism, (2) identify emerging strategic challenges, and (3) outline an opportunity analysis for U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Collectively, this project provides a strategic forecast for terrorism in the 2020s, demonstrating that terrorism is becoming increasingly dangerous, dynamic, and difficult to defeat.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, counterterrorism, terrorism in the 2020s, the future of terrorism, terrorist organizations, international alliances, foreign terrorist fighters, cyberterrorism, the crime-terror nexus, countering violent extremism

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INTRODUCTION

Executive Summary

Eighteen years after the 9/11 attacks, the United States continues to grapple with how to defeat the terrorist threat. Though U.S. counterterrorism strategy has prevented another large-scale, foreign-born terrorist attack on U.S. soil, it has not succeeded in defeating terrorist groups themselves. By tracing global terrorist activity, several distinct trendlines appear, revealing that today's terrorist groups are more dangerous, dynamic, and difficult to defeat than ever before. Yet, in the next decade, counterterrorism officials will face emerging strategic challenges that are even more complex. Terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are building international networks of allied terrorist groups, thousands of foreign fighters who traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS are dispersing around the world, and terrorists are arming themselves with the technical tools and expertise they need to conduct crippling cyberattacks. To undermine the groups that perpetuate these threats, the U.S. must layer sensible strategies that suffocate terrorist groups' ability to survive. Two decades of evidence suggests that capturing or killing every terrorist in the greater Middle East is not a realistic outcome. Instead, the U.S. should refine the role of law enforcement to combat terrorist finance, place a greater focus on undermining the ideology that allows terrorist groups to regenerate their recruits, and begin to marginalize terrorist activity online, effectively eroding terrorist groups' preferred communication channel and recruitment pipeline. Only by severing the support structures that maintain terrorist groups will the U.S. be better positioned to combat terrorism in the 2020s.

Project Overview

      Why This Research Is Important. The Global War on Terror will soon enter its third decade and, despite tremendous financial and human resources, the international community is no closer to defeating twenty-first-century terrorist organizations. One theory to explain this is that policymakers have focused primarily on preventing today's attacks, rather than tomorrow's challenges, resulting in a game of cat-and-mouse led by asymmetric warfare. In order to prevent terrorist successes, rather than react to them, counterterrorism officials must recognize and respond to the future of terrorism. Thus, a strategic forecast such as this will provide officials with opportunities to become better prepared to combat terrorism in the 2020s.

      According to counterterrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, all terrorists share one common denominator: they "live" in the future, continuously planning and preparing, convinced they will defeat their enemies and achieve their political goals.[1] In response, the counterterrorism community must devote equal or greater attention to the future, keeping in mind that their decisions today will have lasting effects in the decades to come. Long-term thinking is critical to framing a successful strategy and should be at the forefront of counterterrorism. It pushes policymakers and practitioners to reexamine expectations, assumptions, and ambiguities.[2] It also invites discussion and debate, creating opportunities to generate greater insights for assessing strategic risks.[3] Forecasting the future is an undoubtedly difficult but worthy endeavor; one that does not pretend to provide definitive answers but rather an insightful outlook of emerging phenomena.

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[1] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 169; Boaz Ganor, "Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century," in *Essentials of Terror Medicine*, ed. Shmuel C. Shapira, Jeffrey S. Hammond, and Leonard A. Cole (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 13, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-48479-6_8.

[2] "Trends Transforming the Global Landscape," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, January 9, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/global-trends/trends-transforming-the-global-landscape.

[3] Ibid.

Chapter Overview. This thesis encompasses in-depth research and analysis on a variety of terrorism and counterterrorism-related topics. It is divided into three chapters, which are designed to serve as building blocks for strategic thinking. Data and information represented in this paper have been gathered from a variety of academic sources, including open-source databases, government publications, critically-acclaimed books, accredited news reports, and scholarly articles, which have been synthesized to provide a comprehensive, strategic forecast of terrorism in the 2020s.

Global Trends and Trajectories of Terrorism. The first chapter begins by exploring the history, status, and future of global terrorism. It explains that modern terrorist activity has occurred in distinct ideological waves and introduces the reader to the present wave of religiously motivated terrorism. It then presents a statistical analysis of global terrorist activity from 1970-2017 using data from the Global Terrorism Database, the most comprehensive open-source database of terrorist activity in the world. In this chapter, data is used to demonstrate that terrorist activity fluctuates, terrorist activity is generally concentrated among hotspots, those hotspots move over time, and terrorism is a growing and global problem. Collectively, these insights provide a foundation for examining the global threat landscape.

Emerging Strategic Challenges. The second chapter identifies three emerging strategic challenges that counterterrorism officials will face in the 2020s. First, it highlights the formation and growth of international terrorist networks and discusses how they will challenge policymakers in the next decade. Next, it discusses the impending challenge presented by thousands of ISIS foreign fighters who have left Iraq and Syria to either return to their native countries or relocate elsewhere. Then, it identifies the looming prospect of cyberterrorism, highlighting terrorist organizations' recent development of technical tools and proficiencies.

Opportunity Analysis for U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy. The third chapter highlights opportunities for improvement in U.S. counterterrorism. First, it examines how terrorist groups have been defeated in the past, investigates the nexus between crime and terror, and evaluates the role of law enforcement in combating terrorism. Next, it explains how policymakers can chart a path toward delegitimizing the ideology that fuels twenty-first-century terrorism by constructing and communicating effective counter-narratives. Finally, it discusses tactics for marginalizing terrorist activity online, thereby reducing terrorist recruitment and radicalization. Combined, these proposals provide sensible supplements to a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.

Conclusion. Overall, this project provides a timely, strategic forecast of terrorism in the 2020s. It illustrates the global trends and trajectories of terrorism, identifies emerging strategic challenges, and outlines practical policy recommendations for U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Findings are rooted in data-driven research and analysis and will serve as useful tools for others who are seeking to understand the evolution and trajectory of the global threat landscape. Most importantly, however, is that throughout this project, opportunities are identified to help shape the future, rather than simply respond to it. After all, we cannot reasonably expect the Global War on Terror to reach a favorable outcome if the opposition continues to chart its course.

Definitions and Terminology

There is no universally accepted definition of "terrorism," making it difficult to characterize and quantify. So, when conducting terrorism research, it is imperative to use a clear and consistent definition; otherwise, research findings may become complicated or confused. This project uses the definition and terminology outlined by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism's (START) Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

The GTD defines a terrorist attack as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation."[4] This definition is critically important to the development of the GTD—and this project—because it determines what data is collected and analyzed. In order to be included as an incident in the GTD, all three of the following attributes must be present:

1. The incident must be intentional—the result of a conscious calculation on the part of a perpetrator.

2. The incident must entail some level of violence or immediate threat of violence, including property violence, as well as violence against people.

3. The perpetrators of the incidents must be sub-national actors. The database purposefully does not include acts of state terrorism.[5]

In addition to this baseline definition, at least two of the following three criteria must be present for an incident to be included in the GTD:

- The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. In terms of economic goals, the exclusive pursuit of profit does not satisfy this criterion. It must involve the pursuit of more profound, systemic economic change.

- There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims. It is the action taken as a totality that is considered, irrespective of whether every individual involved in carrying out the act was aware of this intention. As long as any of the planners or decision-makers behind the attack intended to coerce, intimidate, or publicize, the intentionality criterion is met.

- The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities. That is, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law (particularly the prohibition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants).[6]

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[4] "Global Terrorism Database: Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables," *The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)*, July 2018, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

This comprehensive definition is inclusive, yet specific, providing a proper framework for classifying what constitutes terrorism, terrorist activity, and terrorist attacks. This definition applies throughout this project, ensuring that its references to terrorism are both clear and consistent. Its thoroughness and attention to detail also serve to demonstrate the importance of precisely identifying the threat we face.

GLOBAL TRENDS AND TRAJECTORIES OF TERRORISM

Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges for counterterrorism officials is identifying the next conflict or cultural catalyst that will energize or transform global terrorist activity.[7] It is for this reason why forecasting the future of terrorism can be incredibly difficult. On a macro level, however, one of the best predictors of future behavior is past performance. Through the careful collection and analysis of terrorism data, researchers can trace the global trends and trajectories of terrorism to illustrate the global threat landscape. When combined with a contextual understanding of world events, a statistical analysis can be used to provide key insights regarding the history, status, and future of global terrorism.

The History of Terrorism

Origins. Organized terrorism can be traced back to the first century when a splinter group of the Jewish Zealots called the Sicarii formed to overthrow their Roman oppressors. At the time, the Romans had captured the city of Jerusalem and were occupying Judea, and the Sicarii sought to gain independence and install their own system of religious-based governance. In order to influence their peers, the Sicarii engaged in guerilla warfare against not only the Romans but also complicit Jewish leaders whom they considered to be traitors to their cause. Tactically, the Sicarii would hide within crowds, wait for their enemies to come near, and stab them with daggers before retreating and blending in with the masses.[8]

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[7] Daniel Byman, "Was Syria Different? Anticipating the Next Islamic State," *Lawfare*, November 20, 2018, https://www.lawfareblog.com/was-syria-different-anticipating-next-islamic-state.
[8] "What Is Terrorism?" *Operation250 Inc.*, accessed on February 15, 2019, https://www.operation250.org/what-is-terrorism-1/.

Another early terrorist group is known as the Assassins, a sect of Islamic extremists that operated during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Established with the aim of overthrowing the existing order in Islam, the Assassins believed that Islamic leaders had strayed away from the religion's fundamental principles. Seeking to restore what they believed was the correct interpretation of religious rule, the group began to assassinate prominent Islamic leaders. Targeting both its political and religious enemies, the Assassins became the first group to make systematic use of murder as a political weapon.[9]

Though examples of organizations using violence to achieve political objectives can be found throughout history, the term "terrorism" was not coined until the end of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the term was not created to describe the intentions or tactics of a non-state actor. Rather, it became the popular term to categorize the actions of a government. After the French Revolution overthrew the monarchy, the newfound government sought to purge their country of those they deemed a threat. The Reign of Terror, as it would become known, was a period in which the ruling political party, known as the Jacobins, executed tens of thousands of French citizens who opposed the revolution and refused to recognize its legitimacy.[10]

The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism. Though the abundant use of terrorism would eventually lead to each of these groups' demise, the tactic itself has proven to live on. In the past 140 years, terrorism has evolved and spread across the globe in a pattern-like fashion. To describe this phenomenon, Dr. David Rapoport penned "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," which has become one of the most influential theories in the field of terrorism studies.[11]

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[9] Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 129.
[10] "Terrorism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed on February 15, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism.
[11] David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11," *Anthropoetics* 8, no. 1 (2002), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0801/terror/.

Following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, Dr. Rapoport established a theoretical framework for modern terrorism by grouping previously indistinguishable patterns of political violence into four distinct waves.[12] In his work, Dr. Rapoport identified that since the late 1800s, each wave has been inspired by prevailing socio-political motivations and each has lasted a generation. Chronologically, these include the Anarchist, Anti-Colonial, New Left, and Religious Waves—the last of which persists today. It is important to note that more than one type of terrorism occurred throughout the world during these given time frames. However, the waves are named after the most dominant form of terrorism during that period of time, which made up the overwhelming majority of terrorist activity.[13]

The Anarchist Wave. The first wave of modern terrorism began in 1880. Until then, most revolutionary groups had relied on peaceful strategies such as distributing pamphlets and holding demonstrations to voice their grievances. However, when these strategies became ineffective to influencing their peers or achieving their goals, terrorism emerged as a way to re-engage the general public in a panic-inducing and time-sensitive way. As a result, assassination became a common tactic for anarchist groups. In fact, the 1890s are sometimes referred to as the "Golden Age of Assassination," as the leaders of Russia (Tsar Alexander I), France (President Marie François Sadi Carnot), and the United States (President William McKinley), were all shot and killed within the decade.[14] Although at times anarchists proved to be tactically effective, overall, they were unable to achieve any lasting political change.

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[12] Erin Walls, "Waves of Modern Terrorism: Examining the Past and Predicting the Future," *Georgetown University*, April 5, 2017, 1, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1043900/Walls_georgetown_0076M_13610.pdf?sequence=1.
[13] "What is Terrorism?"
[14] Ibid.

The Anti-Colonial Wave. The second wave began in the 1920s, soon after the end of World War I. After the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was divided into independent nations, each of which was overseen by a colonial power. In response, natives of these lands organized to bring attention to their collective grievances, undermine the authority of their perceived occupiers, and convince them to cede control. Examples of such groups include the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which fought the British government to unite Northern Ireland, and the Irgun, which attacked the British in Palestine in an effort to create a separate Jewish nation. Unlike the first wave, anti-colonial groups preferred attacking police and military targets. In addition, some of these groups received funding from foreign governments and diasporas, individuals who had moved away from their ancestral homelands but were sympathetic to the cause. Terrorist groups in this wave were more successful than those in the first. In fact, some were able to achieve part or the majority of their political goals.[15]

The New Left Wave. The third wave began during the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s. This wave of terrorism was characterized by the idea that Western powers had committed atrocities against third world countries. As a result, terrorist groups arose around the world to raise awareness, denounce the West, and promote their own political ideologies. Students and well-educated members of society were the driving force behind many of the groups created during this wave. Additionally, many groups around the world received support from the Soviet Union, which viewed such sponsorship as a supplement to its formal diplomacy. At this time, kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings were frequently used tactics, targeted at government assets. However, by the 1980s these groups had been largely defeated all over the world.[16]

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

The Religious Wave. The fourth and present wave began in 1979, a revolutionary year in Islamic culture following the Camp David Accords, the Iranian Revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is important to note that all religions have had terrorist groups arise at some point in history. Whether it be the Christian extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan or Islamic extremists such as al-Qaeda, these groups believe that their members are superior to non-members and have found justifications for violence in perverse interpretations of their respective religions.[17] Though organizations from varying religions have fueled the present wave of modern terrorism, jihadist terrorism has comprised much of its activity, becoming both the most well-known and the most deadly. Furthermore, suicide attacks have become a highly lethal and popular tactic among modern, religious terrorist groups.

In his 2001 publication, Dr. Rapoport predicted that if the generational life cycle remains constant, the Religious Wave, which has given birth to organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, should dissipate in the 2020s and be ultimately replaced by a new ideological wave.[18] However, what differentiates this wave from the former three are direct military engagements in countries that foster the ideological movement. In addition to extended military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, authoritative governments, prolonged civil wars, and humanitarian crises have fueled religious extremism throughout the greater Middle East. As a result, this wave has yielded the greatest number of terrorist organizations, terrorist attacks, and terrorism-related deaths in history.[19] Moreover, as jihadist terrorist organizations continue to recruit and operate, and youth age in incubators for extremism, the Religious Wave will likely prevail past the 2020s, becoming the longest-lasting modern wave of terrorism, as well.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Rebel Terror."
[19] Max Roser, Mohamed Nagdy, and Hannah Ritchie, "Terrorism," *Our World in Data*, January 2018, https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism.

The State of Terrorism Research

Overview. Shortly after September 11, 2001, Dr. Andrew Silke, a distinguished academic and leading expert on terrorism, made a poignant comment about the state of research in the field of study.[20] Describing it as fundamentally malnourished, Dr. Silke wrote that terrorism research "existed on a diet of fast food"; studies that were "quick, cheap, ready-to-hand, and nutritionally dubious."[21] Dr. Silke made this critical valuation based on several key contentions. First, policymakers, academics, and experts had not reached a consensus on the definition of terrorism—a complication that continues to confuse terrorism research today. In fact, more than 100 definitions of terrorism have appeared in professional literature and, without a clear, common definition, it is difficult to conduct consistent research and develop a meaningful knowledge base.[22] Second, Dr. Silke points out that most of the existing terrorism research was not based on quantitative analysis. Publications rarely featured statistical examination, and the data that had been collected was mostly descriptive, rather than inferential. Third, research was neither adaptive nor predictive, and therefore largely inapplicable and uninformative to the policymaking process. In his 2001 publication, Dr. Silke wrote, "Research is ultimately aimed at arriving at a level of knowledge and understanding where one can explain why certain events have happened and be able to accurately predict the emergence and outcome of similar events in the future. Terrorism research, however, has failed to arrive at that level of knowledge."[23] As a result, when the War on Terror was catalyzed, policymakers did not have the tools or information they needed to responsibly inform an effective counterterrorism strategy.

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[20] Brent Turvey, *Criminal Profiling: An Introduction to Behavioral Evidence Analysis*. San Diego: Academic Press, 2012, 574.
[21] Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001): 12.
[22] Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa: University of South Florida, 2004), 65; Turvey, *Criminal Profiling*, 574.
[23] Silke, "The Devil You Know," 1.

About the Global Terrorism Database. Shortly after Dr. Silke's publication,

researchers at the University of Maryland began to curate the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),

an open-source database of information on terrorist attacks around the world. Today, the GTD

contains data from 1970-2017, with annual updates planned for the future. For each GTD event,

information is available on the date and location, weapons used, type of target, number of

casualties, and, when identifiable, the group or individual responsible for the attack.[24] Statistical

information contained in the GTD is based on reports from a variety of open media sources but is

not included unless and until a trained team of researchers has determined the sources are

credible. In fact, more than 4,000,000 news articles from over 25,000 news sources were

reviewed to collect incident data from 1998-2017 alone.[25] Furthermore, with data collected on

more than 180,000 cases of attempted or successful terrorist attacks, the GTD is currently the

most comprehensive unclassified database on terrorist attacks in the world.[26]

The GTD is a product of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and

Responses to Terrorism (START), a counterterrorism research and education center housed at

the University of Maryland. Dependent on critically important grants and funding, START

makes the GTD available online to the public for free to increase the scientific understanding of

the causes and consequences of terrorism so that it can be more readily studied and defeated.

Leading news organizations around the world frequently cite the GTD, and it serves as a

principal resource for policymakers and practitioners. Using GTD data, researchers are also able

to trace the empirical trends and trajectories of terrorism and offer a glimpse of what

developments are likely to follow.

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[24] "Overview of the GTD," *The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)*, accessed on February 26, 2019, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/about/.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

Statistical Analysis

      Terrorism Ebbs and Flows. Much like the stock market, global terrorism is influenced by international political climates, impactful government policies, and significant world events. Comparatively, both are complex, interrelated systems made up of a multitude of international bodies that primarily make uncoordinated decisions. Like stocks, terrorism ebbs and flows, can be seemingly unexplainable, and is undoubtedly difficult to predict. As any good investor knows, the production of a single day, week, or even month may not reflect the overall trajectory of a stock's annual output. However, when earnings are tracked over time, they reveal trends that can help to produce a useful forecast. Similarly, by tracking terrorism, policymakers and practitioners can be better equipped to forecast future threats (see Figure 1).
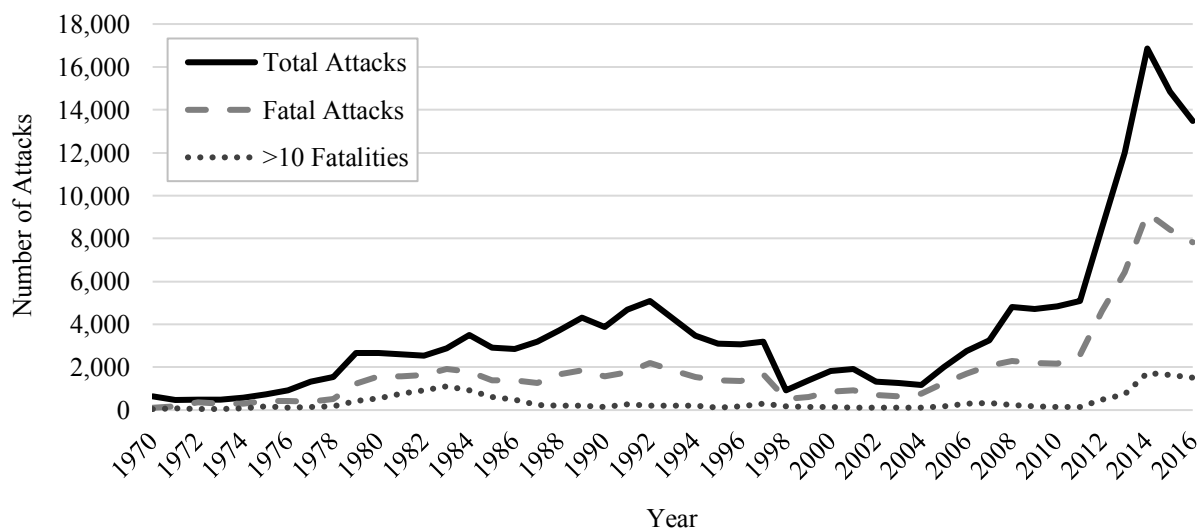
Figure 1. Terrorist Attacks by Year (1970-2016)

Note: Number of total attacks, fatal attacks, and attacks that produced more than 10 fatalities from 1970-2016. Data are shown by year. Source: Global Terrorism Database.[27]

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[27] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2018). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd; Gary LaFree, "The Future of Terrorism" [PowerPoint], *The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)*, Presented on June 18, 2018.

Since 1970, global terrorism has experienced periods of both growth and decline. After slight increases from 1970-1978, the number of total attacks and fatal attacks experienced a period of steady growth until 1992. Corresponding with world events, this growth was likely catalyzed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the onset of the Religious Wave of terrorism. Moreover, the number of attacks that produced more than 10 fatalities grew rapidly from 1978-1983, before returning to levels that were more historically constant.[28]

After the fall of the Soviet Union, global terrorism declined almost every year from 1992-1998. After reaching a 23-year-low in 1998, the number of total attacks around the globe remained relatively low until 2004. However, 2004 marked a trend change. Likely fueled by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the number of total attacks, fatal attacks, and attacks that produced more than 10 fatalities grew almost every year from 2004-2011.

Then, from 2011-2014, each category experienced an unprecedented and exponential surge. Over this three-year period, the number of total attacks grew 232%, only to be slightly outperformed by the rise of fatal attacks, which grew 260%. Largely driven by the rise of ISIS and the widespread political unrest that swept across the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring, the number of terrorist attacks reached historical highs. At its peak in 2014, there were nearly 17,000 terrorist attacks around the world, compared to only 756 a decade before. Since 2014, the numbers of total attacks, fatal attacks, and attacks that produced more than 10 fatalities have subsided. 2017 marks the third consecutive year of declining numbers of attacks worldwide. However, with 10,900 terrorist attacks killing more than 26,400 individuals in 2017 alone, terrorist violence remains extraordinarily high compared to historical norms.[29]

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[28] "Global Terrorism in 2017," *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)*, August 2018, 1, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_GTD_Overview2017_July2018.pdf.
[29] Ibid.

Consistent with the growth and decline of terrorist attacks worldwide, the number of fatalities that resulted from attacks experienced an exponential surge from 2011-2014 at a combined growth rate of 440% (see Figure 2). At its peak, global terrorist attacks produced 44,490 deaths in 2014 alone—more than thirteen times higher than the number of terrorism-related fatalities in 2003. Though the number of fatalities has decreased each year since, the figure remains historically high. In 2017, global terrorism produced 26,445 fatalities, a figure which would have been unprecedented only four years prior. Moreover, terrorist attacks produced nearly as many fatalities in the last six years (182,429) as they had in the 25 years prior (183,960).[30] Though terrorist activity experienced a significant influx around the globe during this time, the majority of attacks and fatalities took place in only a few highly concentrated areas.
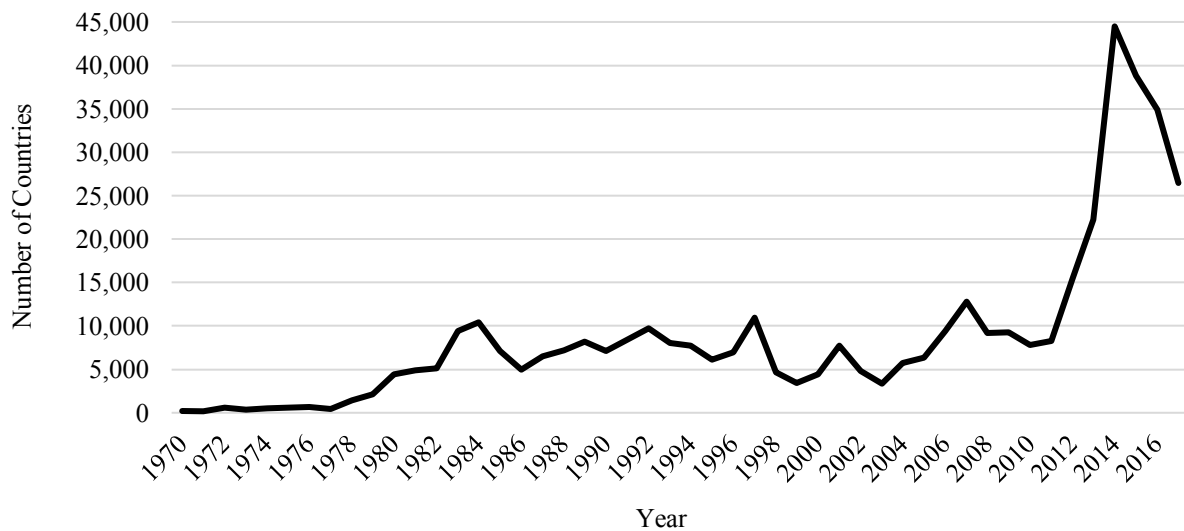
Figure 2. Number of Fatalities from Terrorist Attacks (1970-2017)
Note: Data are shown by year. Source: Global Terrorism Database.[31]

[30] Ibid.
[31] "Global Terrorism Database."

Terrorism Occurs in Hotspots. In 2016, START published "45 Years of Terrorism," a

special edition of its annual GTD World Map, which displays the concentration and intensity of

terrorist attacks that occurred throughout the world from 1970-2015 (see Figure 3). Using

advanced geographic information system (GIS) data, START researchers plotted over 350,000

terrorist attacks, assigning value to both fatalities and injuries. As a result, START researchers

identified that over the past 45 years, the majority of terrorist activity has been primarily

concentrated in relatively small pockets of the world.
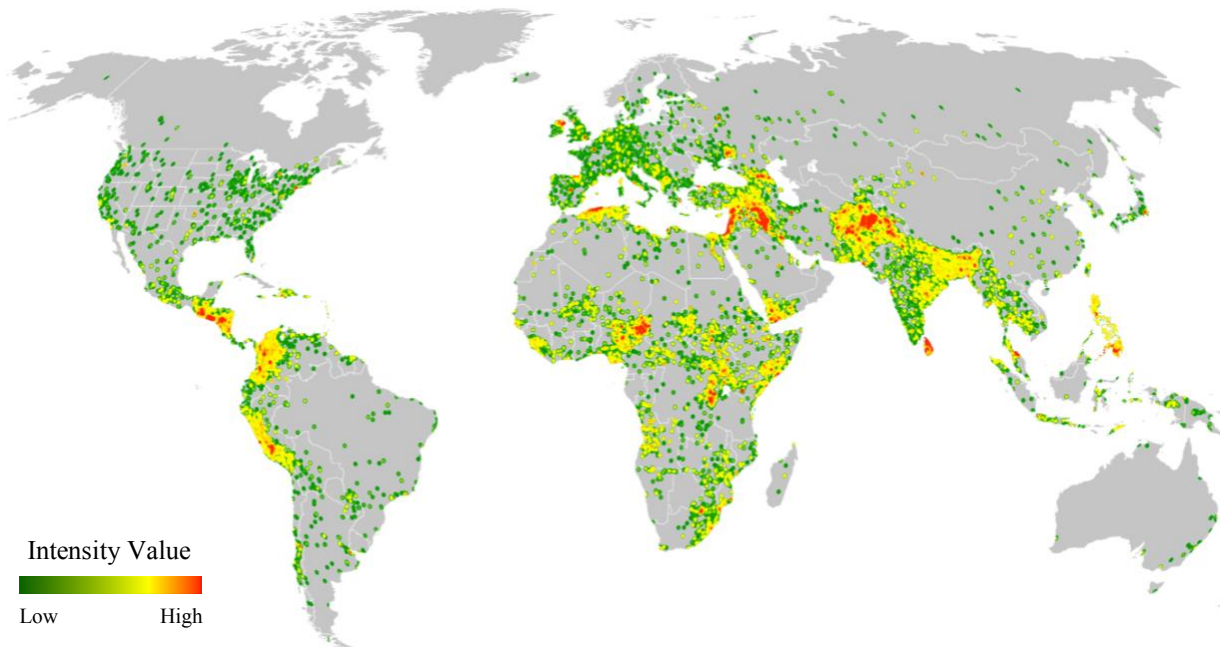
Figure 3. 45 Years of Terrorism (1970-2015)

Note: Geographic information system (GIS) data used to demonstrate concentration. Intensity value is a combination of incident fatalities and injuries. Source: The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).[32]

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[32] William Kammerer, "45 Years of Terrorism: Terrorist Attacks 1970-2015, Concentration and Intensity," *The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)*, 2016, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/images/START_GTD_Heat_Map_2017.jpg.

Though the identified hotspots are spread across several continents, each is generally contained within regional swaths. Moving from west to east, the first hotspot was once located along the northeast coast of South America, with activity spilling into parts of Central America. Next, concentrations of terrorist activity are spread throughout the Sahel, a belt of mostly ungoverned territory that stretches horizontally across the African continent, while pockets also appear in North and East Africa. Moreover, an Eastern Mediterranean region known as the Levant has sustained unprecedented intensities of terrorist violence. Comprised of countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the Levant experienced the highest concentration of terrorism during the 45-year data sample. While smaller hotspots appear along the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and the islands of Southeast Asia, the largest hotspot in terms of geographic size stretches across South Asia. From the northern intersection of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, to the borderlands dividing India and Bangladesh, South Asia has been plagued by terrorist activity for decades, making it the longest-lasting terrorism hotspot in modern history.[33]

Today, terrorism remains heavily concentrated in several hotspots and often coincides with other types of political violence. In 2016, more than 75% of terrorist attacks took place in just 10 countries.[34] Similarly, in 2017, more than half of all attacks took place in four countries: Iraq (23%), Afghanistan (13%), India (9%), and Pakistan (7%)—and more than half of all deaths took place in three countries: Iraq (24%), Afghanistan (23%), and Syria (8%).[35] Though terrorism in the twenty-first century has become primarily associated with countries in and around the Middle East, the region has not always been a hub for terrorism. In fact, for decades, terrorist activity was far more common in Western nations.

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Sophie Chou, "More Than 75 Percent of Terrorist Attacks in 2016 Took Place in Just 10 Countries," *PRI*, July 14, 2017, https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-07-14/more-75-percent-terrorist-attacks-2016-took-place-just-10-countries.

[35] "Global Terrorism in 2017."

Terrorism Moves Geographically. While terrorism has historically been confined and concentrated, terrorism hotspots have moved geographically over time (see Table 1). Largely influenced by the dominant ideological wave, terrorism has affected different parts of the world at different times in history. In the 1970s, four of the five countries that experienced the most terrorist attacks were Western nations. During this time, Northern Ireland experienced the highest number of attacks, primarily due to the tactics of the IRA, but was closely followed by the United States, which experienced the highest number of domestic terrorist attacks in its history during the New Left Wave.[36]

Table 1. Countries with the Most Terrorist Attacks by Decade (1970-2009)
Note: Data are shown by decade. Source: Global Terrorism Database.[37]

	1970s		1980s		1990s		2000s	
#1	Northern Ireland	1,483	● Peru	4,222	▲ Colombia	2,835	● Iraq	5,189
#2	United States	1,384	● El Salvador	4,123	● India	1,791	▬ India	2,570
#3	Italy	1,022	● Colombia	2,951	▼ Peru	1,781	▲ Pakistan	1,980
#4	Spain	901	● Chile	1,744	● Turkey	1,666	● Afghanistan	1,949
#5	Turkey	484	● Guatemala	1,483	● Pakistan	1,601	● Thailand	1,228

● Not in the top five countries the previous decade   ▬ Same ranking as the previous decade
▲ Increased ranking from the previous decade   ▼ Decreased ranking from the previous decade

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[36] "Global Terrorism Database."
[37] "Ibid."; LaFree, "The Future of Terrorism."

By the 1980s, global terrorist activity had shifted primarily to Central and South America, which was home to all five of the countries with the most terrorist attacks during the decade. The five most affected countries from the decade before had been entirely replaced, demonstrating the mobility of terrorist hotspots. Furthermore, due to the high volume of terrorist attacks in the 1980s, the country with the fifth most terrorist attacks experienced the same number as the country with the most attacks a decade before it.[38]

Although global terrorism subsided in the 1990s, hotspots remained. While the number of terrorist attacks in Colombia decreased from the decade prior, it actually moved up the leaderboard to become the country with the most terrorist attacks, largely due to a surge in narco-terrorism and a lack of global competition. During the 1990s, hotspots began to appear more frequently in South Asia, plaguing countries such as India and Pakistan. Turkey returned to the top five countries with the most terrorist attacks in the 1990s, after having last appeared during the 1970s. [39]

Shortly after the new century began, so did a new era in global terrorism. Featuring prolonged military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2000s cemented the shift of terrorist activity to the Middle East and South Asia. Iraq, which made its first appearance on the list, led the world with 5,189 terrorist attacks. India experienced a 44% increase in the number of terrorist attacks from the decade prior, while Pakistan experienced a 24% growth. Afghanistan, which placed fourth in its first appearance on the list, experienced 1,949 terrorist attacks in the 2000s. Meanwhile, Thailand also experienced a surplus of terrorist activity, becoming the first country from Southeast Asia to qualify in the 40-year data sample.[40]

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[38] "Global Terrorism Database."
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

Although only eight years of data are available, reasonable conclusions can be made about terrorism in the 2010s (see Table 2). During the second decade of the Global War on Terror, terrorist activity erupted in the greater Middle East. Iraq, which leads the world in the number of terrorist attacks for the second decade in a row, has already experienced 19,286 terrorist attacks in the past eight years and is on pace to experience a 365% increase in terrorist attacks from the decade prior. To put the dramatic surge into perspective, in the 2010s, Iraq is on pace to experience nearly double the number of attacks experienced by the five most affected countries during the 2000s combined. Similarly, if trends continue, terrorist activity is set to rise 584% in Afghanistan, 567% in Pakistan, and 209% in India. This data demonstrates that global terrorist activity has not only reached unprecedented levels, but its regional concentrations are also being actively cultivated across the Middle East, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia.[41]

Table 2. Countries with the Most Terrorist Attacks (2010-2017)
Source: Global Terrorism Database.[42]

#1	Iraq	19,286	#6	Nigeria	3,569
#2	Afghanistan	10,658	#7	Somalia	3,488
#3	Pakistan	10,571	#8	Yemen	3,145
#4	India	6,348	#9	Thailand	2,395
#5	Philippines	3,898	#10	Libya	2,233

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid. (Notably, Syria is the eleventh most affected country by terrorism, experiencing 2,052 attacks from 2010-2017. Though ISIS occupied swaths of northern and eastern Syria, much of the local carnage has been the product of actions taken by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and the Syrian military).

Terrorism is a Global Problem. In recent years, terrorist activity has reached record frequency levels and continued to spread to more countries around the world (see Figure 4). Today, more than 100 countries are affected by terrorism within their borders, signaling that while terrorism may be concentrated among hotspots, it has an expansive global reach.
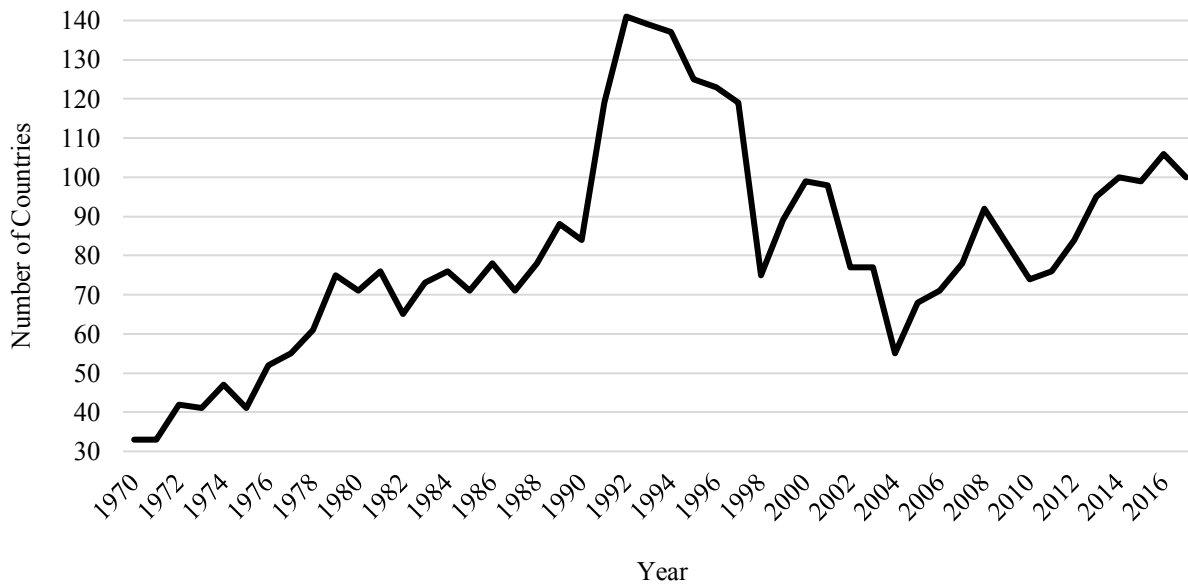
Figure 4. Number of Countries That Experienced a Terrorist Attack (1970-2017)
Note: Data are shown by year. Source: Global Terrorism Database.[43]

The number of countries that experienced a terrorist attack grew steadily from 1970-1990, increasing from 33 to 84 countries at an average annual growth rate of 4.5%. However, from 1990-1992, the number of countries affected by terrorism rose rapidly from 84 to 141 at an average annual growth rate of 29.6%. Though this dramatic surge largely remains an anomaly, it was partially aided by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which produced 15 post-Soviet states.

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[43] "Global Terrorism Database."

The number of countries affected by terrorist attacks remained above 100 until 1998, when the figure began to subside. After a six-year staggered decline, in 2004, the number of countries had dropped to 55, the lowest amount since 1977.[44] However, consistent with the resurgence of global terrorist activity after 2004, more countries began to be affected by terrorist attacks around the world.

Since 2004, the number of countries that experienced a terrorist attack has grown consistently with the exception of 2008-2010, when global terrorism briefly contracted. This growth continued until 2016 when the number of countries affected by terrorism reached 106, a 19-year high.[45] Combined, more countries experienced at least one attack and one terrorism-related death in 2016 than at any other point since data was first collected in 1970.[46] Interestingly, the spread of global terrorism occurred while the total number of terrorist attacks, fatal attacks, and terrorism-related fatalities collectively declined. While the number of attacks dropped by 35% and fatalities dropped by 41% from 2014-2017, the number of countries affected by terrorism remained similar or higher. This means that over the past three years, terrorist activity experienced a disproportionately high geographic presence.

Conclusion

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. For centuries, individuals and organizations have used violence to pursue or achieve political goals.[47] Terrorism is also not confined to a particular ideology or motivation. Organizations and attacks have been inspired by extremism on all kinds.

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] "Global Terrorism Index 2017." *Institute for Economics & Peace*, November 2017, 41, http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf.
[47] Ganor, "Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century," 13.

Over the past 140 years, terrorist activity has generally occurred in four distinct waves. Beginning in 1880, the majority of terrorism was motivated by anarchism, followed by nationalism in 1920, and communism in 1960. Notably, the life cycle of each wave has been contained within a 40-year time frame. However, the fourth wave is on pace to break that trend. Not only will religiously motivated terrorism soon become the longest-lasting, it has also already introduced exponentially higher levels of violence.[48] Like its predecessors, the Religious Wave of terrorism will eventually expire, although it is unlikely to reach its conclusion anytime soon.

Before 9/11, little importance was placed on the collection and analysis of terrorist activity, especially from an academic perspective. As a result, policymakers and practitioners were left uninformed when they needed it the most. Since, institutions in both the public and private sectors have made significant strides in terrorism research. With the creation and curation of open-source databases such as the GTD, researchers are now able to trace the global trends and trajectories of terrorism and create opportunities for informed decision-making.

Through careful analysis of GTD data, several conclusions can be made about the history, status, and future of global terrorism. First, terrorism ebbs and flows. Since 1970, global terrorist activity has experienced periods of growth and decline, but it has recently surged to unprecedented levels. Second, terrorism occurs in hotspots. These highly concentrated areas are disproportionately affected by terrorism and produce the majority of global terrorist activity. Third, terrorism hotspots move over time. Whereas terrorism was once produced primarily in Europe and South America, it now plagues the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Fourth, terrorism is expanding globally. With attacks occurring in 100 countries around the world, terrorism has demonstrated growth in both global reach and intensity.

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[48] Ibid.

In each of these analyses, there is a reoccurring theme: since the onset of the Global War on Terror, terrorism has evolved, exhibiting distinctive characteristics and defining trends. In the eighteen-year history of the Global War on Terror, terrorist attacks have reached record levels in frequency and produced an unprecedented number of fatalities; terrorist hotspots have grown in intensity and spread to new continents; Iraq and Afghanistan have become epicenters of terrorism and are now victims of the most non-state terrorist violence in human history; and terrorist activity continues to expand globally and affect additional countries. Though a definitive, causal relationship cannot be tested or proven, it is safe to assert that the Global War on Terror has not succeeded in defeating terrorist organizations, denying them sanctuary, or diminishing the underlying conditions that terrorist seek to exploit, three goals defined in the 2003 White House National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism.[49] Collectively, the presented data not only defines the status quo of the global threat landscape, but also provides key insights into the trajectories of terrorism in the 2020s, signaling that the terrorist threat is becoming increasingly dangerous, dynamic, and difficult to defeat.[50]

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[49] "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," *The White House*, February 2003, 15, 17, 22, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/Counter_Terrorism_Strategy.pdf.
[50] Ibid., 25.

EMERGING STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

Introduction

Despite nearly two decades of U.S.-led counterterrorism operations, the strain of religious terrorism that has been popularized by al-Qaeda and ISIS is no closer to being defeated. In fact, it has only become more popular and more difficult to combat. A November 2018 study estimates that there are nearly four times as many jihadist militants today as there were on September 11, 2001.[51] The study, published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, calculates that there are now approximately 230,000 active jihadist militants in nearly 70 countries around the world. Though groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have not been able to launch an attack anywhere near the scale of 9/11 since that day, the ideology that leads someone to fly a plane into a building seems to have metastasized.[52]

The Global War on Terror will soon enter its third decade and, while the U.S. and its allies have certainly demonstrated tactical advantages on the battlefield, terrorist groups continue to recruit and grow in record numbers. Though there are likely many contributing factors, one theory to explain why some terrorist groups have prospered is that counterterrorism officials have privileged tactical success at the expense of long-term strategies that address the future of terrorism. Meanwhile, terrorist organizations have been adapting to routine counterterrorism efforts and developing countermeasures of their own. Though extensive research is required, only by identifying and understanding these emerging strategic challenges can counterterrorism officials can be better prepared to combat terrorism in the 2020s.

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[51] Seth G. Jones *et al*., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 2018, 9, https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat.
[52] Eric Schmitt, "Two Decades After 9/11, Militants Have Only Multiplied, *The New York Times,* November 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/us/politics/terrorism-islamic-militants.html.

The Formation of International Alliances

In her book *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, Dr. Tricia Bacon asserts that today's greatest terrorist threats from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are the alliances they are building with other terrorist groups.[53] A former analyst at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism, Dr. Bacon has been exploring the formation of terrorist networks for nearly 14 years. She notes that alliance-building among terrorist groups is not a new development; in fact, it has been embraced by groups throughout history.[54] However, the complex networks of alliances that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have been forging are historically unique and have allowed their organizations to withstand prolonged counterterrorism pressure.

It is important to note initially that these strategic partnerships extend beyond ad hoc transactions, which are the primary means of cooperation between terrorist groups and criminal organizations. Instead, there is protracted cooperation between terrorist groups and their leaders, and an expectation that there will be continued consultation and coordination in the future.[55] Through a comprehensive examination of comparative case studies, Dr. Bacon has determined empirically that terrorist organizations that have these types of partnerships survive longer than those that do not, as they are able to pool their resources in order to recover from significant setbacks. They also tend to be more ambitious and lethal in their operations, and are more likely to seek weapons of mass destruction.[56]

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[53] Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 3.

[54] Tricia Bacon, "Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances," *New America*, filmed on June 21, 2018, YouTube video, 1:34:15, https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/events/why-terrorist-groups-form-international-alliances/.

[55] Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, 7.

[56] Bacon, "Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances."

Dr. Bacon has also determined that alliances are beneficial to terrorist groups because they underpin their organizational health. They allow smaller groups to improve their cachet, or reputation, which often leads to the acquisition of tangible resources, such as money and recruits. They also allow groups to develop new operational skills or become more efficient or effective at things they are already doing.[57] Moreover, they allow groups to adjust their agendas and rejuvenate support, particularly when their original cause begins to wane in terms of its resonance. They also allow terrorist groups to better withstand counterterrorism pressure, especially when their partners can provide safe haven.[58] A prime example of this is the protection the Taliban gave to al-Qaeda within its sanctuary in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, perhaps the most valuable benefit of terrorist alliances is that groups can share best practices and lessons learned. The reality of such cooperation has been made clear by declassified documents recovered from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, which revealed that al-Qaeda's central leadership was providing tactical and strategic guidance to its partners, including advice on how it has learned to avoid or evade U.S. drone strikes.[59]

Dr. Bacon explains that, for many terrorist groups, alliances are formed when organizational survival becomes not just a means of accomplishing their aspired objectives, but an end unto itself.[60] She writes, "Thinly veiled beneath terrorists' declared aims is their belief that they are the ones, perhaps the only ones, who can right the perceived wrongs and precipitate the sought-after change. In other words, terrorist organizations see themselves as indispensable to achieving the change they seek. Consequently, victory depends on organizational survival."[61]

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, 4.

However, terrorist groups inherently pursue competing missions. On the one hand, they seek to stage a violent revolution to achieve social or political change. On the other, they seek to exist and survive. Progress toward their political or social objectives, however, does not guarantee organizational survival.[62] In fact, it often complicates their organizational health. As organizations carry out operations in pursuit of their objectives, they attract increasing counterterrorism pressure. Therefore, one of the primary reasons terrorist groups form international alliances is to compensate for their activities and improve their chances of survival.

Though alliances are critically important for terrorist organizations' endurance, the U.S. has, thus far, failed to disrupt their formation—even though doing so has been a policy priority for over fifteen years.[63] As early as 2003, U.S. counterterrorism strategy asserted, "The interconnected nature of terrorist organizations necessitates that we pursue them across the geographic spectrum to ensure that all linkages between the strong and the weak organizations are broken, leaving each of them isolated, exposed, and vulnerable to defeat."[64] While the U.S. has used counterterrorism tactics that overlap with an effort to deter the formation and success of new terrorist groups, such as designating and sanctioning terrorist organizations and their affiliates, it has not operationalized a specific, concerted strategy to disbanding the alliances themselves.[65] As a result, networks of international terrorist alliances have continued to expand and grow, and show no signs of dissipating on their own.

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[62] Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic, "Beyond Convergence: World Without Order," *Center for Complex Operations*, *National Defense University*, October 2016, 202, https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/books/Beyond%20Convergence/BEYOND%20CONVERGENCE%20%20World%20Without%20Order%20.pdf?ver=2016-10-25-125406-170.
[63] Bacon, "Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances."
[64] "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," 9.
[65] "Tricia Bacon Discusses Her New Book About Terrorist Alliances," *American University School of Public Affairs*, filmed on May 31, 2018, YouTube video, 52:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fd2b8ybRNQ.

While alliance building allows terrorist groups to become more resilient, Dr. Bacon contends that the process actually signals they are suffering from an underlying weakness. In her book, she writes, "Terrorist groups look to form these alliances when they are organizationally weak in terms of their skills, knowledge, or ability to mobilize resources. They experience these problems and they cannot address them on their own. Rather than being a sign of strength, it is fundamentally a sign of weakness."[66] Yet, the U.S. and its international counterparts have been unable to identify and exploit these weaknesses and unsuccessful in disrupting terrorist group alliances once they are formed. Therefore, the lesson for policymakers is to disrupt alliances at an early point, when they are most vulnerable.[67] Otherwise, alliances will continue to be built and terrorist organizations will continue to become more resilient, lethal, and ambitious.

Instead of only facing the threat of terrorism from individual organizations, the world now faces danger from competing terrorist networks, made up of malevolent groups who have rallied behind the perceived successes of organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Smaller groups have pledged their allegiance to these organizations largely because very few other groups have the ability to supply the appropriate funding, training, safe haven, or prestige they desire. Consequently, resource-rich terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State emerge as preferable partners and become hubs around which other groups cluster.[68] Though terrorist alliances and networks share many distinct qualities, no two are the exact same. Therefore, in order to understand network compositions, is it important to analyze them individually.

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[66] "New Book Examines How Terrorist Groups Become Allies," *American University School of Public Affairs*, May 25, 2018, https://www.american.edu/spa/news/how-terrorist-groups-become-allies.cfm.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances," *University of Pennsylvania Press*, Accessed on December 5, 2018, http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15818.html.

The al-Qaeda Network. Al-Qaeda has benefited significantly from the Islamic State's absorption of counterterrorism resources. While the U.S. and other global leaders have largely focused their attention on ISIS, al-Qaeda's central command in Pakistan, often referred to as al-Qaeda core, has expanded its operations throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Fostered by political uprisings during the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda has developed a network of franchises in countries characterized by civil unrest and social instability.[69] In Yemen and parts of Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda has united groupings of Sunni militias to grow its regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a highly lethal franchise that has directed attacks against Western diplomatic facilities throughout the Persian Gulf.[70] In Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, al-Qaeda has also absorbed a number of smaller extremist groups to develop its regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which poses the primary transnational terror threat throughout the Sahara and Sahel.[71] In addition to expanding the geographic range of its operational command, al-Qaeda has formed strategic partnerships with other terrorist organizations. In exchange for training and funding, a number of domestic terrorist organizations, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Shabaab in Somalia, have pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda.[72] These franchises and alliances have allowed al-Qaeda to expand its operations throughout 18 countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and steadily grow a more sustainable regional influence (see Figure 5).[73]

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[69] Katherine Zimmerman, "The al-Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy," *Critical Threats*, September 10, 2013, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-al-qaeda-network-a-new-framework-for-defining-the-enemy.

[70] "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," *Council on Foreign Relations,* June 19, 2015, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap.

[71] "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 27, 2015, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb.

[72] "Al-Shabaab Joining al-Qaeda, Monitor Group Says," *CNN*, February 10, 2012, https://www.cnn.com/2012/02/09/world/africa/somalia-shabaab-qaeda/index.html.

[73] "Counterterrorism Guide: Terrorist Groups," *National Counterterrorism Center*, Accessed on November 14, 2018, https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups.html.

Figure 5. The International al-Qaeda Network
Note: Countries in which al-Qaeda and its affiliates have active operations. Source: Reuters.[74]

Al-Qaeda's rapid expansion has largely been the result of forming mutually beneficial partnerships with smaller, pre-existing groups. By adopting the al-Qaeda brand, local militias garner legitimacy among extremists, enhancing their abilities to recruit and finance. Meanwhile, these strategic partnerships allow al-Qaeda to access new markets, establish diverse footholds, and expand its regional influence.[75] Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is still responsible for charting a strategic course for the network, but it empowers its regional commanders and local partners to conduct operations as they see fit.[76] Consequently, as its network has become increasingly decentralized, al-Qaeda has grown more resilient. Not only do the interconnected affiliate-to-affiliate relationships allow its partners to share best practices, they also ensure that al-Qaeda will survive even if its core leadership does not.

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[74] "Map Shows Selected Locations Where Al Qaeda and Its Affiliates Operate," *Reuters India*, September 4, 2014, https://twitter.com/reutersindia/status/507514960130224129?lang=en.
[75] Alexis Arieff, "Algeria: Current Issues," *Congressional Research Service*, November 18, 2013, 8, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21532.pdf.
[76] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design," *Hudson Institute*, June 1, 2018, https://www.hudson.org/research/14365-how-al-qaeda-works-the-jihadist-group-s-evolving-organizational-design.

The failure to properly understand how the al-Qaeda network operates has confused the global strategy to combat it.[77] First, there is no group at the heart of the network. Al-Qaeda's "central" command continues to outline a strategic direction for the network, but it no longer issues directives.[78] Therefore, operations that only focus on decapitating al-Qaeda's leadership in Pakistan will have a limited effect on the overall network. Second, the lateral connections, or relationships, between al-Qaeda groups create a lattice-like structure that gives the network its strength.[79] Therefore, the U.S. and its international allies must place a renewed focus on exploiting inter-group cooperation and groups' ability to share resources. Third, though many of al-Qaeda's affiliates operate solely on a local level, they fundamentally strengthen the broader al-Qaeda network. Therefore, counterterrorism officials must develop a comprehensive, global strategy to counter al-Qaeda that is also tailored to combat each of their local assets.[80]

Tactical successes against al-Qaeda have not succeeded in weakening its overall network. Instead, al-Qaeda will be more expansive in 2021 than it was at the beginning of 2011 or 2001. The organization has evolved over the last two decades and developed a complex, adaptive, and resilient network that continues to grow. The heart of the organization is now its structure, which is composed of interconnections between al-Qaeda's affiliates and allies.[81] Only by understanding how each group contributes to the al-Qaeda network can policymakers develop a comprehensive strategy to defeat al-Qaeda. Absent that understanding, the U.S. and its allies will continue to engross themselves in tactical engagements that promise battleground victories, but no real prospect of winning the greater war.[82]

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[77] Zimmerman, "The al-Qaeda Network."
[78] Katherine Zimmerman, "Testimony: AQAP's Role in the al-Qaeda Network," *Critical Threats*, September 18, 2013, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/testimony-aqaps-role-in-the-al-qaeda-network.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Zimmerman, "The al-Qaeda Network."

The Islamic State Network. In order to understand the dynamic nature of the Islamic State network, it is imperative to first recognize the inception and evolution of the group we know today. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Qaeda established an affiliate organization in Iraq to fight against coalition forces. The affiliate, known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), was led by a Jordanian extremist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006.[83] After Zarqawi's death, AQI was renamed the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and capitalized on the country's instability to grow its membership. Over the next four years, ISI recruited local Sunni militias to join its fight against the U.S.-backed, Shia government in Iraq. In 2010, an Iraqi national and former U.S. detainee named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader of ISI and, shortly after he assumed power, a civil war began in the neighboring country of Syria.[84] Seeking to expand its ranks, in 2011, ISI helped to establish an al-Qaeda branch in Syria, known as Jabhat al-Nusra, to launch attacks and rebel against the Syrian government. Two years later, in 2013, Baghdadi announced that he was seizing command of Jabhat al-Nusra to form a new group named the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a decision that was explicitly rejected by al-Qaeda leaders.[85] Following a series of ISIS attacks on Muslim communities and fearing that the ruthless brutality of ISIS would tarnish its brand, in February 2014, al-Qaeda renounced its ties to Baghdadi and ISIS; however, this split had little effect on the rapid growth of the organization. By October 2014, ISIS had seized approximately 81,000 square miles of land in Iraq and Syria, a territory larger than the size of Great Britain.[86]

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[83] Jason Hanna, "Here's How ISIS Was Really Founded," *CNN*, August 13, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/12/middleeast/here-is-how-isis-began/index.html.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Rick Noack, "Here's How the Islamic State Compares with Real States," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/12/heres-how-the-islamic-state-compares-to-real-states/?utm_term=.66ac8faa3a1c.

The schism between al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrates that not all terrorist alliances last forever. It also reveals key vulnerabilities within the framework for alliance building. First, it demonstrates that shared enemies and common ideologies do not, by themselves, permanently bind terrorist group alliances. Though these factors may guide partner selection, alliances are dependent on mutually beneficial opportunities to obtain new skills, knowledge, or capacities for resource acquisition.[87] Second, it shows that (at least some) leaders of terrorist organizations are conscious of how public perception will affect their organizational goals—and that personal relationships among leaders can outweigh mutual interests. Third, it highlights that in any conflict or insurgency, there will be competing groups that vie for the same resources and recruits. This was certainly the case between Afghan Mujahideen groups during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and continues to fuel battles between insurgent groups fighting in the Syrian Civil War today.[88] This competition can create inter-organization rivalries within the conflict at large and may have lasting ramifications for terrorist organizations' future relationships with one another.[89]

Rivalries between terrorist groups can also have prolonged and unforeseen consequences. In order to compete with the growing al-Qaeda network—and to compensate for territorial setbacks in Iraq and Syria—the Islamic State has aggressively expanded its area of operations. In the Middle East, the Islamic State has established regional affiliates, which it refers to as *wilayats*, or provinces, in Saudi Arabia and Yemen; groups that have benefited significantly from sectarian conflicts in their respective countries. In North Africa, it has also established footholds in Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, which are among the Islamic State's fastest growing provinces.

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[87] "New Book Examines How Terrorist Groups Become Allies."
[88] Ibid.
[89] "Tricia Bacon Discusses Her New Book About Terrorist Alliances."

Though each of these groups now fights under the unified banner of the Islamic State, many had already worked with one another before the emergence of ISIS. In fact, nearly all of the Islamic State's provinces were formed by adopting groups that splintered from al-Qaeda's affiliates.[90]

Furthermore, the Islamic State has convinced some of al-Qaeda's allies to abandon its network, including the notorious Nigerian terrorist organization, Boko Haram. Formerly a strong ally of AQIM, Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015—the same year it was ranked as the world's deadliest terrorist group by the Global Terrorism Index[91]—and changed its name to the Islamic State in West Africa.[92] Outside of the Middle East and Africa, the Islamic State has developed a province in the Caucasus, a region in Eastern Europe, as well as provinces in several South Asian countries, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Several provinces have also been established in Southeast Asia through international alliances. Domestic terrorist groups in Indonesia and Sri Lanka have carried out attacks on behalf of the Islamic State, and in the Philippines, Abu Sayyaf and the Maute Group have pledged their allegiance and carried out vicious campaigns to establish independently governed territory.[93] Like the Filipino groups and ISIS before it, each of the Islamic State's provinces is dedicated to carving out territory within their respective regions that can then be occupied and expanded; a vicious process that leaves a trail of excruciating violence. Today, the Islamic State has a network of active provinces in at least 13 countries around the world, as well as a number of smaller, but growing, cells (see Figure 6).[94]

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[90] Karen Leigh, Jason French, and Jovi Juan, "Islamic State and Its Affiliates," *The Wall Street Journal*, Accessed on December 6, 2018, http://graphics.wsj.com/islamic-state-and-its-affiliates/.
[91] "Global Terrorism Index 2015," *Institute for Economics and Peace*, November 2015, 41, http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf.
[92] Leigh, French, and Juan, "Islamic State and Its Affiliates." (A small faction retained the name Boko Haram and still operates in Nigeria).
[93] "State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Senior Leaders," *U.S. Department of State*, February 27, 2018, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/02/278883.htm.
[94] Jones *et al.*, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat."
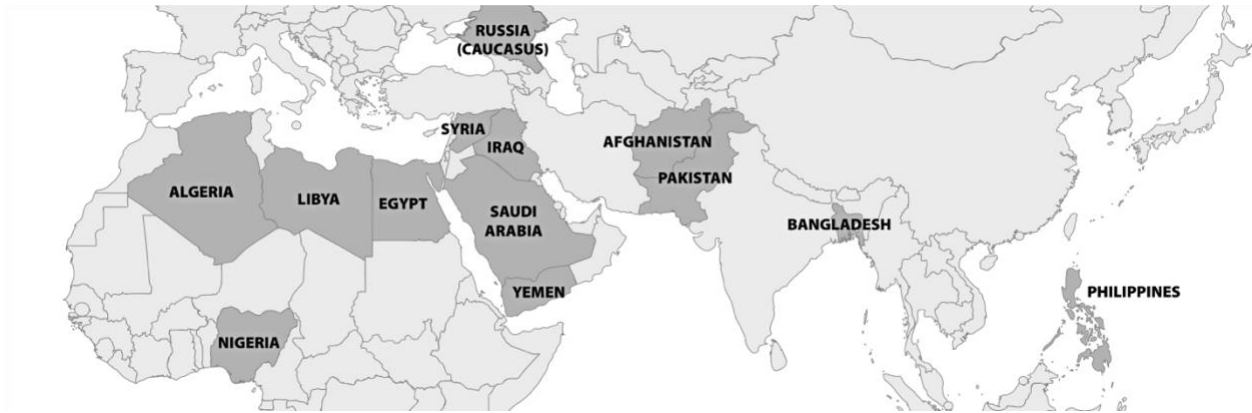
Figure 6. The International Islamic State Network
Note: Countries in which the Islamic State and its provinces have active operations.

Moreover, the Islamic State is still an active threat in Iraq and Syria. In March 2018, the Islamic State lost control of the last sliver of territory it once held in Iraq and Syria.[95] However, their territorial losses should not be mistakenly characterized as an enduring defeat. ISIS has now transitioned into an active clandestine organization and is acting as an insurgency in both countries. Furthermore, instead of fighting to the death to defend their occupation of territory, thousands of ISIS militants retreated to the rural borderlands straddling Iraq and Syria, where they have found refuge in sympathetic communities.[96] In fact, the Pentagon estimates that ISIS has between 20,000-30,000 members divided roughly equally between Iraq and Syria,[97] and is well positioned to regroup and rebuild its dominion.[98] In the 2020s, it is likely that these harbored individuals reorganize and reconstitute either ISIS itself or something similar to it.

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[95] "IS 'Caliphate' Defeated but Jihadist Group Remains a Threat," *BBC News*, March 23, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595.
[96] Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 11 (December 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond/.
[97] Glenn A. Fine, "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018 - September 30, 2018," *Department of Defense*, November 5, 2018, 17, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/05/2002059226/-1/-1/1/FY2019_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q4_SEP2018.PDF.
[98] Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State 'Well-Positioned' to Rebuild Caliphate," *Voice of America*, August 16, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-well-positioned-to-rebuild-caliphate/4530937.html.

Though it is currently experiencing territorial setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State will undoubtedly rebound, relying on its global network of provinces to take more responsibility and keep its brand relevant. More worrying still is that the regeneration process seems to produce even more potent threats. Similar to the transformation from AQI to ISIS, "ISIS 2.0" could emerge as a more dangerous and dynamic threat than what dramatically materialized in 2014.[99]

Summary. As the Islamic State develops its provinces and al-Qaeda's affiliates persevere despite prolonged counterterrorism pressure, it has become imperative to understand both how and why terrorist groups from international alliances.[100] Not only have these networks allowed senior terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to expand their area of operations, they have also supplied smaller groups with the financial and material resources they need to grow. As a result, new terrorist group alliances have begun to rapidly emerge across the world, reinforcing the resilience of both terrorist networks and the global jihadist movement. Moreover, despite nearly two decades of counterterrorism operations, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have only become more popular and more difficult to combat. As a result, the U.S. has found itself engaged in an extended game of cat-and-mouse, in which the greatest military known to man chases a growing phenomenon. In order to prevent the prosperity of terrorism, rather than simply react to it, the U.S. and its allies must place a renewed focus on disrupting terrorist group alliances, denying space for affiliates to emerge, and deterring the growth of international terrorist networks. Otherwise, terrorist organizations will continue to expand and grow, becoming more resilient, lethal, and ambitious in the process.

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[99] Charles Lister, "Trump Says ISIS Is Defeated. Reality Says Otherwise," *Politico*, March 18, 2019, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/18/trump-isis-terrorists-defeated-foreign-policy-225816.
[100] Bacon, "Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances."

The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

As the Islamic State seized territory in Iraq and Syria, it attracted thousands of foreign nationals to join its ranks. However, now that it has lost all of its territorial control, many of those foreign nationals have either returned home or relocated elsewhere. A 2017 study conducted by The Soufan Center estimates that over 40,000 foreign nationals from more than 110 countries traveled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. These individuals left their homes and, in some cases, relocated their families to fight for an alternative to nationalism. When they joined ISIS, they expected to expand its regional occupation. However, as coalition forces definitively liberated its once-held lands, ISIS's foreign fighters have been forced to decide between fighting until their deaths or feeling from the battlefield. Though some have chosen to stay and fight, many of have fled Iraq and Syria by any means possible. Their desperation became especially evident in September of 2017 when more than 300 ISIS fighters surrendered their weapons and boarded buses departing from a former Syrian stronghold.[101] However, the deportation of these radicalized fighters will not remove the threat they pose; it will merely transport that threat from one location to another. As ISIS transitions to its next phase, the world is starting to grapple with a serious problem: thousands of the foreign nationals who migrated to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS are returning home or relocating elsewhere; and, as the number increases every day, the likelihood of containing their violent ambitions within the borders they have fled is becoming wishful thinking, at best.[102]

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[101] Tim Lister, "ISIS' Retreat Accelerates, but Reports of Its Demise Are Exaggerated," *CNN*, September 7, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/07/middleeast/isis-on-retreat-deir-ezzor/index.html.

[102] Tim Meko, "Now That the Islamic State Has Fallen in Iraq and Syria, Where Are All its Fighters Going?" *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4bf874869e00.

Analysis of Returning and Relocating Foreign Fighters. The Islamic State's well-crafted propaganda and exploitation of political mistrust have allowed for the geographical range of its appeal and membership to reach well beyond Iraq and Syria. In fact, only 30% of the 40,000 documented foreign fighters migrated from countries in the Middle East and North Africa.[103] The composition of the remaining 28,000 foreign fighters is rather diverse. More than 8,700 of ISIS's foreign fighters are natives of Russia and former republics of the Soviet Union, which represents the highest number of documented foreign fighters from a particular region.[104] Over 5,750 foreign fighters traveled from Western European countries to fight for ISIS, while another 1,500 migrated from Southeast Asia. The Western Hemisphere was not immune to the ISIS's recruitment, either: 444 documented individuals from North America traveled to Iraq or Syria to fight for the terrorist group (see Figure 7).[105]

Despite the rush of foreign fighters that poured into Iraq and Syria after ISIS declared its *caliphate*—an independent territory governed by strict Islamic law—on June 29, 2014, the flow of foreign fighters slowed significantly, and eventually halted, when it began to lose its territorial control.[106] Consequently, as their caliphate collapsed, thousands of ISIS fighters abandoned their pseudo-state and returned home. In October 2017, The Soufan Center estimated that at least 5,600 foreign fighters from 33 countries had already returned to their native homelands—and that number has continued to grow daily.[107] Added to these figures is the unknown number of foreign fighters who have returned to countries that have failed to document their arrival or simply lost count.

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[103] Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Center*, October 31, 2017, 11 http://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/.
[104] Ibid., 10.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 9.
[107] Ibid., 5.

BY COUNTRY

RUSSIA	SAUDI ARABIA	JORDAN	TUNISIA	FRANCE
3,417	3,244	3,000	2,926	1,910

NUMBER RETURNED

RUSSIA	SAUDI ARABIA	JORDAN	TUNISIA	FRANCE
400	760	250	800	302

BY REGION

8,717	Former Soviet Republics
7,054	Middle East
5,778	Western Europe
5,356	The Maghreb
1,568	S and SE Asia
845	Balkans
444	North America
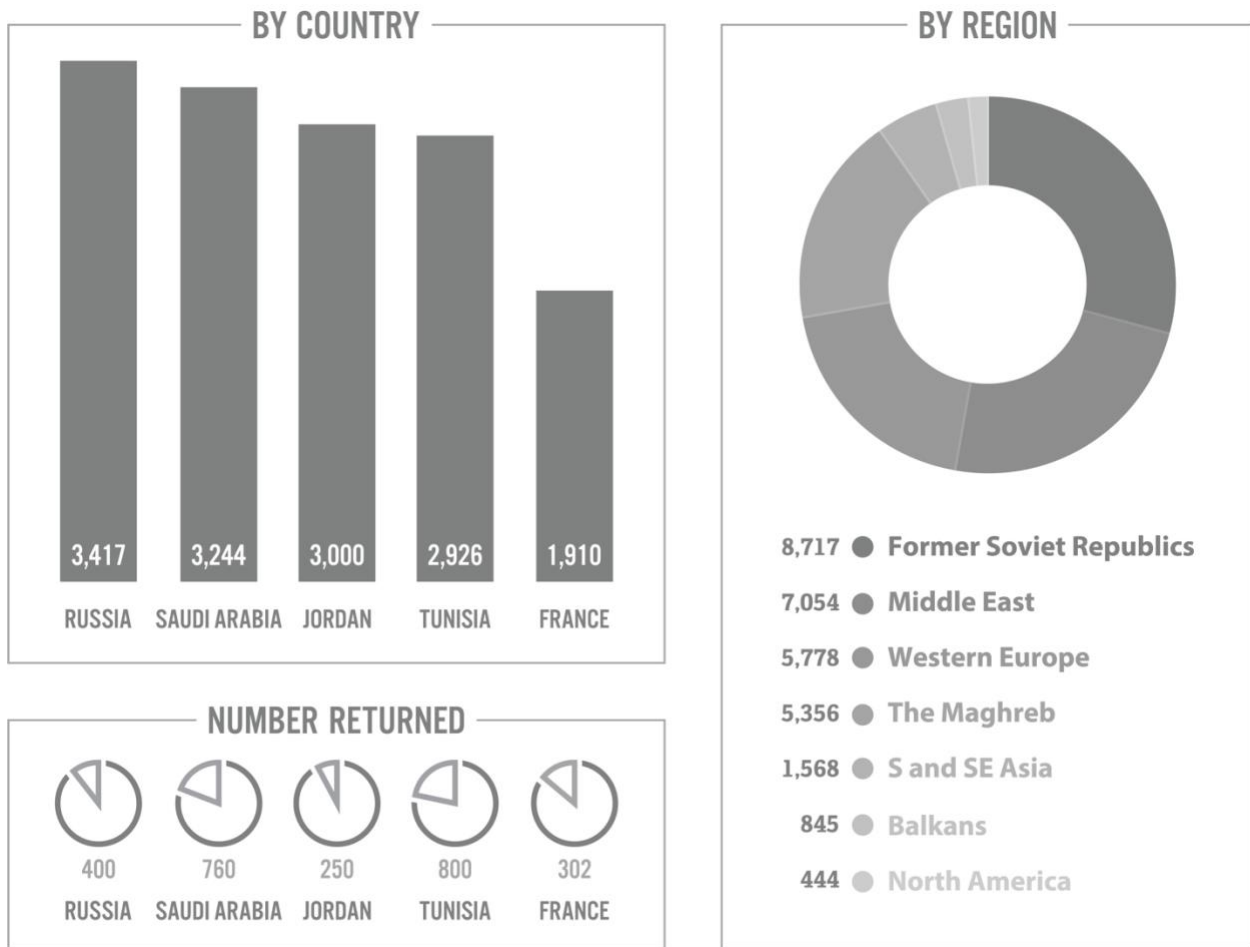
Figure 7. Origins of ISIS Foreign Fighters
Note: Countries and regions with the highest numbers of documented ISIS foreign fighters.
Source: The Soufan Center.[108]

There are several reasons why ISIS foreign fighters may have decided to return to their home countries. Some may have become disillusioned or remorseful and wanted to return to their former lives. Others may still be driven by the ideology but decided to escape Iraq and Syria to avoid their foreseeable death. More alarming, some may have been sent home to plan or execute an attack, or felt they could do more for the jihadist movement at home than abroad.[109]

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[108] Ibid., 10-11.
[109] "Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families," *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, July 2017, 15, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf.

Other foreign fighters have chosen to relocate to new countries, rather than return to their homelands. This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa, where countries with porous borders provide safe haven for extremist migrants.[110] Countries in Southeast Asia have also seen an influx of foreign fighters who are unable or unwilling to go home.[111] As thousands of foreign fighters relocate around the world, many are believed to be searching for new battlefields.[112] Inevitably, some foreign fighters will remain committed to the ideology that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have popularized.[113] Instead of attempting to reintegrate into society, these individuals may look for the next jihadist cause. With sectarian violence occurring throughout the Eastern Hemisphere, they will have several theaters from which to choose.

Foreign fighters may choose to transfer to another one of the Islamic State's provinces, which continue to grow in strength and numbers around the world.[114] They would undoubtedly be welcomed there by like-minded confederates. Radicalized, yet relocating because of ISIS's defeat, they could also find refuge in al-Qaeda's international network. Al-Qaeda has been known to recruit trained members of other jihadist organizations in order to grow its membership. In fact, the group was founded on that very strategy. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden created a training base for thousands of foreign fighters who traveled to Afghanistan to defend the Muslim country. The base, which in Arabic translates to *al-Qaeda*, became the breeding grounds for the emerging terrorist organization's recruitment.[115] Today, al-Qaeda may seek to lure fleeing ISIS foreign fighters into becoming its newest recruitment class, providing human resources to strengthen its competing international network.

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[110] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 11.
[111] Robin Wright, "ISIS Jihadis Have Returned Home by the Thousands," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/isis-jihadis-have-returned-home-by-the-thousands.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 7.
[114] Wright, "ISIS Jihadis Have Returned Home by the Thousands."
[115] Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 130.

When assessing the threat posed by today's foreign fighters, refer to the havoc caused by those who fought in the Soviet-Afghan War. During the ten-year war, which lasted from 1979-1989, approximately 20,000 foreign fighters traveled to Afghanistan. After the Soviets withdrew, some of the foreign fighters—one of whom was Osama bin Laden—went on to form al-Qaeda and carry out lethal attacks on Western targets.[116] Comparatively, from 2013-2016, approximately 40,000 foreign fighters traveled to Iraq and Syria. The difference: ISIS attracted twice as many foreign fighters in less than a third of the time. Though the foreign fighters who fought in Afghanistan were energized from victory and those in Iraq and Syria are recovering from defeat, the latter's potential to regroup, recruit, resurge, and recreate what they have lost should be underestimated—especially with their ability to communicate today.[117] A March 2018 UN report states that ISIS's foreign fighters are likely to be "the most operationally experienced, lethally skilled, and highly networked group of foreign fighters to date."[118]

Any foreign fighter who wishes to continue fighting will find a way to do so. As the Islamic State navigates its future, its leadership will likely be looking to its trained foreign fighters to keep its brand alive.[119] This may very well result in a surge of terrorist attacks that are carried out on its behalf. Between 2014 and 2016, the perpetrators of 38 of the 42 terrorist attacks carried out in Western nations were connected to or inspired by the Islamic State.[120] Although only 18% of attackers were known foreign fighters, the attacks they carried out were among the most lethal, leading to an average death toll of 35 fatalities per attack.[121]

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[116] Wright, "ISIS Jihadis Have Returned Home by the Thousands."
[117] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 7.
[118] "The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives," *United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate*, March 2018, 6, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CTED-Trends-Report-March-2018.pdf.
[119] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 15.
[120] Wright, "ISIS Jihadis Have Returned Home by the Thousands."
[121] "The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 9.

Legal Challenges for Returnees. Though the international community agrees that ISIS alumni will pose a serious threat for decades to come, they have not reached a consensus on how to best handle those who have returned. Most countries have established legal frameworks for prosecuting and incarcerating returning foreign fighters; however, once incarcerated, they often attempt to radicalize other inmates and develop recruitment networks within the prison system. Some countries have focused on developing reintegration programs, which are notoriously difficult to design and run.[122] Others have chosen to deny legal responsibility for their native foreign fighters by stripping them of their citizenship, which can complicate international law.

There is also a subset of returnees that is even harder for nations to address: the women and children who traveled to Iraq and Syria or, in the case of some children, were born in ISIS's caliphate.[123] Though some women willfully joined ISIS and directly participated in terrorism-related offenses, others were brought to Iraq and Syria by their spouses and assumed the roles of non-combatants. As these women have returned to their native countries, prosecutors have been challenged with distinguishing the level of individual participation. Moreover, from 2014-2016, ISIS is believed to have taught more than 2,000 boys between the ages of nine and fifteen how to use weapons and kill.[124] Added to this number are those younger than nine who have been indoctrinated through propaganda and educational materials that have desensitized them to violence and dehumanized their perceived enemies. As these children return or relocate, they are in desperate need of proper mental health treatment and deradicalization programming to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate into society.[125]

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[122] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 27.

[123] Yuliya Talmazan, "ISIS Returnees Pose Big Questions for Home Countries, Soufan Center Says," *NBC News*, October 24, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-returnees-pose-big-questions-home-countries-soufan-center-says-n813596.

[124] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 24.

[125] Talmazan, "ISIS Returnees Pose Big Questions for Home Countries."

United States Policy. To manage foreign fighters that hold U.S. citizenship, the U.S. has relied on its criminal justice system, primarily charging foreign fighters with providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization. According to The Soufan Center, more than 250 Americans attempted to join ISIS, 129 of whom successfully reached Iraq and Syria.[126] Of the 129 foreign fighters, researchers at George Washington University's Program on Extremism have tracked 12 who have returned to the U.S., nine of whom have been arrested and charged with terrorism-related offenses. The remaining three have not faced charges due to lack of sufficient evidence of their activity in Iraq and Syria, a hurdle that continues to complicate convictions around the world.[127] As of March 2019, 177 individuals have been charged in the U.S. with terrorism-related offenses for their interactions with the Islamic State and 125 have been convicted, resulting in an average sentence of 13.4 years.[128] Many of these 177 individuals were arrested while attempting to make the journey to Iraq and Syria—some of whom successfully made it abroad, only to be detained and extradited back to the U.S. However, 57 of these individuals were directly involved in plots to carry out attacks on U.S. soil.[129]

Although prosecutions are undoubtedly a necessary first step, they alone are an insufficient measure to respond to American foreign fighters.[130] In addition to convicting foreign fighters of their crimes in federal court, the U.S. government needs to develop complementary responses, especially in the U.S. prison and parole systems. Currently, there are no deradicalization or disengagement programs targeted toward incarcerated terrorists in the U.S.

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[126] Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate," 17.

[127] Seamus Hughes, Bennett Clifford, and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. "The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq," *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, February 2018, 2, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf.

[128] "ISIS in America," *George Washington University Program on Extremism,* Accessed on March 20, 2019, https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Hughes, Clifford, and Meleagrou-Hitchens, "The Travelers," 80-81.

federal prison system.[131] In this regard, the U.S. lags behind many other Western nations. The status quo—allowing individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses to serve out sentences without any intervention—is lousy, solely relies on the deterrent effect of prison sentences, and ignores the potential for both recidivism and further radicalization.[132] Like many other current counterterrorism policies, this approach sacrifices long-term strategy in favor of short-term solutions; a style of policymaking that has allowed terrorist groups to survive and succeed.

Summary. In total, more than 40,000 foreign nationals traveled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. Of those, at least 5,600 have already returned home—and that number continues to grow by the day. Added to these figures is the unknown number of foreign fighters who have returned to countries that have failed to document their arrival or simply lost count. Thousands of foreign fighters have also chosen to relocate to new countries, rather than return to their homelands; many of whom are suspected to be looking for new theaters of war. The exodus of foreign fighters will undoubtedly pose a significant threat to international security as thousands of individuals who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State disperse throughout the world, transporting their radical ideologies and combat training with them. Historically, foreign fighters have played a critical role in creating new terrorist groups, strengthening existing ones, and radicalizing and recruiting their future peers.[133] Moreover, the potential for ISIS foreign fighters to plan or conduct attacks in their home countries is a growing threat that will challenge national security and law enforcement entities for years to come. However, what to do with foreign fighters when they return or relocate is less certain. The complexity of this whole-of-society issue will only add to the strategic challenges that ISIS foreign fighters will pose in the 2020s.

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] "The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 12.

The Emergence of Cyberterrorism

For years, terrorist groups have used the internet to spread propaganda, recruit operatives, and inspire lone-wolf attacks. However, they are now expanding their digital horizons beyond mere social media and messaging platforms; they are slowly developing cyber warfare capabilities to rival those of state actors.[134] Terrorist groups have long used unconventional means to pursue their goals and drive their agendas; they embrace guerilla tactics to counter conventionally superior foes. So, it comes as no surprise that they are now pursuing offensive cyber weapons to spread fear and uncertainty, finance their operations, and promote their brand.[135] Cyberspace is a profound equalizer—it allows small groups to compete on the same playing field as corporations and governments. Additionally, because the internet can facilitate a strong degree of anonymity, cyber-terrorists are able to tailor their operations to project their desired amount of exposure. Subtle penetrations can be used to gain information and resources, while disruptive attacks can foster notoriety and fear. The threat of a cyberattack, however, is not limited to the domain it exploits. The information and wealth acquired from cyberattacks can be used to inform battlefield strategies and fund physical attacks, as well.[136] In order to harness these advantages, several terrorist organizations have developed units devoted to offensive cyber activity. Others have outsourced their technical work, relying on hackers-for-hire to fulfill their cyber ambitions. Consequently, although terrorist groups have been thus far unable to conduct a major computer network attack, the gap between their aspirations and capabilities is quickly closing.

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[134] Levi Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack," *The Cipher Brief*, December 3, 2017, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/terrorists-learn-hack.
[135] Ibid.
[136] James Scott and Drew Spaniel, "The Anatomy of Cyber Jihad: Cyberspace is the New Great Equalizer," *Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology,* June 2016, 5, https://krypt3ia.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/icit-brief-the-anatomy-of-cyber-jihad1.pdf.

Cyberterrorism, Defined. Cyberterrorism is commonly defined as "the unlawful attack or threat of attack against computers, networks, and the information stored therein to intimidate or coerce a government or its people in furtherance of political or social objectives."[137] Unlike cybercriminals or hacktivists, cyber-terrorists' intentions involve more severe, permanent damage, which may include loss of life or severe economic collateral. Cyber-terrorists are especially complex adversaries. They not only seek to exploit valuable data and information but also to impair critical infrastructure in an effort to disrupt social order. They do not fear reprisal and, in many cases, seek to fundamentally destabilize society by undermining its technological dependency.[138]

In cyberspace, a threat actor is an adversary who has the motive, means, and opportunity to impact an individual or organization by exploiting a vulnerability in such a way that risk is transformed into a measurable loss or harm.[139] In order to analyze the threat of cyberterrorism, it is important to explore these definitional qualities, as well as the methods that terrorists have used in the past and could plausibly use in the near future.

Motives. Terrorist groups aspire to inflict harm, create chaos, and disrupt services in the nations and organizations they oppose. They are increasingly motivated to adopt defensive cyber capabilities, such as encryption applications and anonymity tools, to evade law enforcement and intelligence agencies. They are also actively developing offensive cyber warfare capabilities, such as malware or spyware, to damage networks, disrupt operations, and divert resources, and to gather information, generate revenue, and grow their influence.

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[137] Irina Rizmal, "Cyberterrorism: What Are We (Not) Talking About?" *DiploFoundation*, August 3, 2017, https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/cyberterrorism-what-are-we-not-talking-about.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Scott and Spaniel, "The Anatomy of Cyber Jihad," 10.

Methods. Terrorist groups have been unable to effectively penetrate the networks that

control critical security infrastructure. However, they have been practicing. According to a

2015 report published by the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, each year,

law enforcement and intelligence agencies record a rising number of cyber-terrorist attacks,

which have typically fallen into one of three categories:[140]

- Defacement: The attacker gains access to a website by exploiting misconfigurations or vulnerabilities, and replaces the original content with propaganda or a claim of credit. A motivated attacker may also delete files from the compromised server or upload malware.[141]

- Data Breach: The attacker breaks into a secured database to access, download, and in some cases publicize the private information contained within. The attacker may infiltrate the target system directly by finding security flaws in the database infrastructure or indirectly through social-engineering attacks such as phishing, which take advantage of human error.[142]

- Denial of Service (DoS): The attacker renders a website inaccessible by overwhelming it with traffic. A DoS attack can be launched from a single computer, but its effectiveness increases with the number of computers engaged, as it is harder for cybersecurity systems to handle malicious traffic from multiple IP addresses. Those launched from multiple machines are referred to as distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.[143]

Moreover, as cyber weapons proliferate and tech-savvy recruits multiply, terrorist groups will

continue to strengthen their cyber arsenals. This will allow individuals and organizations to

carry out more sophisticated attacks, such as:

- Ransomware: The attacker uses propagating cyber weapons that scale and replicate automatically, allowing one string of code to potentially dismantle a high number of networked systems or infrastructure. These attacks can be deployed with the push of a button and, depending on their configuration, can often be deactivated just as easily. This allows the attacker to hold the system for ransom and then release it upon receiving payment.[144]

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[140] Eric Liu, "Al-Qaeda Electronic: A Sleeping Dog?" *Critical Threats*, December 2, 2015, 1, https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Al_Qaeda_Electronic-1.pdf.
[141] Ibid., 2.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Patrick Tucker, "NSA Chief: Rules of War Apply to Cyberwar, Too," *Defense One*, April 20, 2015, https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2015/04/nsa-chief-rules-war-apply-cyberwar-too/110572/?oref=defenseone_today_nl.

Since mid-2015, known terrorist operatives have been discussing the potential use of ransomware on popular hacking forums on the dark web—part of the internet that is invisible to standard search engines and can only be accessed through the use of an anonymizing browser. Ransomware is particularly advantageous for terrorist organizations because it could provide a mode of both disrupting social order and raising financial resources. Given the accumulating costs that ransomware produces, especially when it disrupts critical infrastructure such as hospitals or transportation hubs, corporations and governments may be coerced into meeting the demands of terrorist organizations. The potential for a terrorist organization to acquire and launch a ransomware attack is not illusory. Preconfigured cyber weapons are not very difficult to obtain and do not require much technical expertise to deploy, and there are clear aspirations within terrorist organizations to expand their offensive cyber capabilities using malevolent cyber weapons.[145]

Means. There is a plethora of ways that terrorist groups can acquire cyber weapons. Dark web forums and marketplaces make malware and technical expertise widely available. From discussing useful exploits and attack vectors to gaining anonymity tips and operational know-how, these underground chat rooms provide a form of customer service for terrorists who are aspiring to carry out cyberattacks—and, with plenty of hackers-for-hire and malware for sale, refined technical skills are no longer a requirement. Moreover, through their publication of classified documents, WikiLeaks has made an abundance of hacking tools available to the public and has exposed cyber vulnerabilities that terrorist organizations may very well attempt to exploit.[146]

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[145] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."
[146] Ibid.

With a modest budget, setting up properly layered cyberattacks is relatively easy; all one needs is a target and a reason.[147] Well-funded terrorist organizations can easily outsource more sophisticated attacks. Hacking-as-a-service is a growing industry and criminal groups could wittingly or unwittingly act on behalf of terrorist groups, for the right price.[148] Terrorist organizations could also purchase preconfigured and potent cyber weapons to exploit or attack networked infrastructure, or exfiltrate personal data from the U.S.'s virtually unprotected internet of things (IoT).[149] They can also conduct smaller, less-sophisticated cyberattacks that are more of a nuisance than a major threat but compliment other activities. Terrorist organizations can launch centrally coordinated attacks, or they can provide inspiration, guidance, and instruction for cyber-savvy lone-wolves. Terrorist organizations can also recruit individuals who may not have strong cyber skills but have physical access to Western assets that would otherwise be difficult to hack.

For example, in 2016, German authorities monitoring a jihadist forum on the dark web discovered a plot to attack the network of a Berlin financial institution. A janitor who worked the overnight shift at the corporation had planned to load malware provided by an ISIS-linked hacker onto a USB device and plug it into one of the institution's computers, which would have allowed the ISIS affiliate to remotely hack into its network.[150] This insider threat has become a grave concern for corporations and governments alike, and will likely continue to grow in popularity among terrorist groups in the years to come.

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[147] Harriet Taylor, "The 'Cyber Jihad' Is Coming, Says This Security Think Tank," *CNBC*, June 21, 2017, https://www.cnbc.com/2016/06/15/the-cyber-jihad-is-coming-says-this-security-firm.html.
[148] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."
[149] Scott and Spaniel, "The Anatomy of Cyber Jihad," 3.
[150] Taylor, "The 'Cyber Jihad' Is Coming."

Growing Terrorist Group Capacity. A number of terrorist organizations are practicing their cyber skills, and some have already demonstrated the means to carry out offensive cyberattacks:

Al-Qaeda. In a 2012 video, al-Qaeda declared its intentions to conduct "electronic jihad" against the U.S., and compared vulnerabilities in vital American computer networks to the flaws in aviation security before the 9/11 attacks. In the video, an al-Qaeda operative calls upon the "covert mujahidin," a term al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups have used to inspire lone-wolf terrorist attacks, to launch cyberattacks on U.S. government networks and critical infrastructure, including the electric grid.[151] Moreover, senior U.S. military officials have warned that al-Qaeda operatives are actively pursuing advanced cyber weapons to stage crippling attacks against U.S. networks and could purchase the capabilities to do so from expert criminal hackers.[152]

Hamas. In 2017, Hamas operatives successfully managed to hack the cell phones of dozens of Israeli soldiers. Hamas created fake social media profiles pretending to be young women and persuaded dozens of Israeli soldiers to download a fake dating app on their mobile devices, which in effect proved to be a vehicle to install malware. This allowed Hamas to monitor their calls, texts, and emails to obtain information on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) units, training exercises, and operational plans.[153] Hamas directed a similar ploy in June 2018 using an app that tracked World Cup scores, which they advertised in Hebrew on Facebook. Once the malicious app was installed, it granted Hamas the ability to track IDF soldiers' locations and use the phone as both a listening device and video camera.[154]

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[151] Jack Cloherty, "Virtual Terrorism: Al Qaeda Video Calls for 'Electronic Jihad'," *ABC News*, May 22, 2012, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/cyber-terrorism-al-qaeda-video-calls-electronic-jihad/story?id=16407875.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Amir Rapaport, "The Truth Behind Hamas' Cyber Warfare," *Israel Defense*, December 1, 2017, http://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/28217.
[154] Oliver Holmes, "Hamas Created Fake Dating Apps to Hack Soldiers' Phones," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/03/israel-hamas-created-fake-dating-apps-to-hack-soldiers-phones.

Hezbollah. As Iran continues to develop its cyber warfare capabilities, Hezbollah is expected to be a major beneficiary. Increasing evidence suggests that Iran is looking to commit cyberattacks against the U.S. and Israel. Iran's state sponsorship of terrorism may take on a new dimension in cyberspace, where it could develop a powerful cyber weapon and pass it on to its ally, Hezbollah, to launch on its behalf. [155] This would not only allow Iran to avoid direct attribution but would also provide Hezbollah with the opportunity to bolster its legitimacy.

The Islamic State. The Islamic State has demonstrated the capacity to deploy a wide variety of offensive cyber weapons. The terrorist group has launched a number of doxing campaigns, through which they sought to uncover personally identifiable information (PII) related to security or military personnel, publicize that information, and encourage others to conduct physical attacks against those individuals.[156] In 2015, an ISIS-linked hacker published personal data of more than 1,300 U.S. military and government officials, including names, addresses, and other sensitive information, as a "kill list" to inspire lone-wolf attacks against those individuals and their families.[157] While the lasting ramifications remain uncertain, at least one individual living in the U.S. has been indicted for using the information to plan an attack.[158]

In a few instances, the Islamic State has demonstrated more sophisticated cyber capabilities, such as the use of malware and preconfigured cyber tools. In 2013, ISIS operatives sent spear-phishing emails to opposition groups in Raqqa, Syria, which contained hidden malware. When the emails were opened, they returned the victim's IP address and geolocation information to ISIS operatives, which they later targeted during their invasion in 2014.[159]

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[155] Cloherty, "Virtual Terrorism."
[156] Mark Pomerleau, "How ISIS Harnesses Commercial Tech to Run Its Global Terrorist Network," *C4ISRNET*, August 15, 2017, https://www.c4isrnet.com/show-reporter/dodiis/2017/08/15/how-isis-harnesses-commercial-tech-to-run-its-global-terrorist-network/.
[157] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."
[158] Ibid.
[159] Scott and Spaniel, "The Anatomy of Cyber Jihad," 10.

Moreover, in December 2016, ISIS hackers launched a volley of DDoS attacks against government targets in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq, resulting in the disruption of several servers that hosted confidential information.[160]

Perhaps the Islamic State's most significant cyber capability, however, is its potential to inspire lone-wolf cyber-terrorist attacks. The Islamic State operates what can best be described as a 24-hour help desk, staffed by tech-savvy recruits around the globe. Operatives are available to address technical questions, such as how to send encrypted messages or how to leverage one's physical access to facilities to launch cyberattacks. They also share tutorials and tools with aspiring cyber-terrorists, and try to recruit other tech gurus to join their ranks.[161]

In the past, ISIS-inspired cyber-terrorists have frequently resorted to website defacement, particularly targeting government sites. In January 2015, an ISIS affiliate successfully hacked the U.S. Central Command's Twitter account and posted a number of tweets and pictures about the growing technological capabilities of the Islamic State.[162] In June 2017, a number of U.S. government websites were also defaced with messages in support of ISIS.[163] Defacements, which are relatively simple from a technical standpoint, remain the most common type of cyber-terrorist attack; however, not all who hack for the Islamic State launch such elementary attacks. The Islamic State has also formed alliances with a number of sophisticated hacking collectives who possess considerable cyber capabilities. These groups have launched cyberattacks that have incapacitated Arab media outlets and, in 2016, one group that pledged its allegiance to ISIS successfully infiltrated NASA's public network and attempted to seize command of a drone.[164]

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[160] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."
[161] Taylor, "The 'Cyber Jihad' Is Coming."
[162] Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Military Social Media Accounts Apparently Hacked by Islamic State Sympathizers," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/01/12/centcom-twitter-account-apparently-hacked-by-islamic-state-sympathizers/?utm_term=.42254f6d56a4.
[163] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."
[164] Scott and Spaniel, "The Anatomy of Cyber Jihad," 9.

The Prospect of a Cyber 9/11. As modern societies have become increasingly dependent on technology to improve government and corporate efficiencies, the potential damage of a major cyberattack has become increasingly destructive. Today, a major cyberattack can compromise the stability of medical, food, and water systems, disrupt transportation, or even destabilize nuclear plants.[165] In fact, the Department of Homeland Security's National Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIAC) recently warned that there is a "narrow and fleeting window of opportunity before a watershed, 9/11-level cyberattack" is attempted against critical U.S. infrastructure.[166] It is likely only a matter of time before a major cyber-terrorist attack targets the U.S. power grid, communications systems, or financial institutions; however, the means to respond remain uncertain, as many of the most sensitive systems operate under independent, private sector control.[167]

Although terrorist organizations have explicitly expressed their ambitions to conduct a major, 9/11-style cyberattack, they have been unable to do so thus far. Counterterrorism and cybersecurity experts have sponsored dozens of studies, held numerous panel discussions, and written countless articles on the topic. They widely agree that while many have warned of cyberterrorism targeting critical infrastructure, such operations are far more complex than any cyber-terrorist attack to date and require a deep understanding of the physical engineering of these systems.[168] Some suggest that the perceived difficulty of attacking U.S. networks deters terrorist organizations from going to such lengths when they have alternative, physical means that have been proven to incite fear and generate publicity. Another possibility is that

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[165] H. Rodgin Cohen, "America Isn't Ready for a 'Cyber 9/11'," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-isnt-ready-for-a-cyber-9-11-1499811450.
[166] Mark Rockwell, " White House Advisory Group Warns of '9/11-Level Cyber Attack'," *Federal Computer Week*, August 22, 2017. https://fcw.com/articles/2017/08/22/white-house-cyber-advice-rockwell.aspx.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack."

cyberattacks do not meet terrorist groups' preferences for strong visual effects.[169] However, make no mistake; as the global community becomes more dependent on networked infrastructure, terrorist groups will continue to hone their cyber skills. Although terrorist groups have yet to conduct a major computer network attack, the gap between their aspirations and capability is quickly closing.

Summary. Terrorist groups are arming themselves with the technical tools and expertise needed to attack the networked systems that stabilize Western governments, companies, and critical infrastructure. Although they are not known for being particularly sophisticated in their use of technology beyond social media and encrypted messaging services, terrorists are aggressively seeking ways to bridge gaps in their technical knowledge. Terrorist groups are actively recruiting tech-savvy operatives and procuring advanced cyber weapons to wreak havoc on modern society. Because cyberspace is a profound equalizer, terrorist groups are able to compete on a level playing field with corporations and governments, providing an elevated posture for an already dangerous enemy. Moreover, cyberterrorism is a serious threat and one that will only continue to grow and hyper-evolve. Although to date, the cyberattacks launched by terrorist groups have lagged behind those of state actors in both sophistication and scale, the potential danger they pose should not be overlooked. Unless corporations and governments react to preempt the threat of cyberterrorism, it is only a matter of time before terrorist organizations match their abundant will to carry out crippling cyberattacks with the appropriate means to do so. A major cyberattack could be just around the corner and officials should never (again) make the mistake of underestimating terrorist organizations or the type of weapons they may use.

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[169] Angela-Gabrielle Palmer, "How Vulnerable Are We? The Threat of Cyber-Terrorism," *The Governance Post, Hertie School of Governance*, April 7, 2017, https://www.hertie-school.org/the-governance-post/2017/04/vulnerable-threat-cyber-terrorism/.

Conclusion

The Global War on Terror will soon enter its third decade and, while the U.S. and its allies have demonstrated tactical advantages on the battlefield, there are nearly four times as many jihadist militants today as there were on September 11, 2001. Over the past eighteen years, the counterterrorism community has learned a number of lessons, but so too have terrorist groups. They are now adapting to routine counterterrorism tactics and developing countermeasures of their own. Today, terrorist organizations are building international alliances that enable their groups to share resources and withstand counterterrorism pressure; foreign fighters are dispersing across the globe and have the potential to form new terrorist groups, strengthen existing ones, or carry out lethal attacks of their own; and terrorists are pursuing offensive cyber weapons that are capable of crippling critical infrastructure. The diversity and severity of these threats will only add to the challenges counterterrorism officials will soon face. In order to prevent the prosperity of terrorism, rather than simply react to it, the U.S. must place a renewed focus on the issues that will test counterterrorism in the years to come. Thus, by identifying and understanding emerging strategic challenges, such as the formation of international alliances, the foreign fighter phenomenon, and the emergence of cyberterrorism, counterterrorism officials will be better prepared to combat terrorism in the 2020s.

OPPORTUNITY ANALYSIS FOR U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

Introduction

In response to 9/11, the U.S. quickly constructed a counterterrorism strategy that was focused on removing the safe haven al-Qaeda used to plan their attack. Within three months, U.S. troops entered Afghanistan, drove the Taliban from power, and forced al-Qaeda to flee. Though the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan began with a quick and decisive victory, prolonged counterinsurgency operations and failed nation-building set an ineffective standard for twenty-first-century counterterrorism. Eighteen years later, the War in Afghanistan endures; now the longest war in American history and often characterized with no end in sight.

Despite a cost of nearly six trillion dollars and the loss of nearly 7,000 U.S. military service members,[170] the Global War on Terror continues to underpin U.S. counterterrorism—even though the term itself has become archaic. For nearly two decades, the U.S. has relied on the same military-centric strategy that has proven itself unable to resolve complex foreign policy issues around that globe.[171] With military engagements in countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, the U.S. has found itself stuck in a perpetual stalemate: unable to make progress against global terrorism but unwilling to give up.

U.S. counterterrorism strategy is now in dire need of a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in its approach and expectations. Many of the conflicts that comprise the Global War on Terror are fueled almost entirely by local sectarian strife, meaning there is little that a Western country and its military can actually do on the ground to influence outcomes for a sustained

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[170] Ivan Eland, "A Damning Measure of the War on Terror's Failure," *The Independent Institute*, December 20, 2018, https://www.independent.org/news/article.asp?id=11663.

[171] "Intel Brief: The Staggering Cost of the Never-Ending 'Global War on Terror'," *The Soufan Center*, November 19, 2018, http://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-staggering-cost-of-the-never-ending-global-war-on-terror/.

period of time.[172] Though comprehensive military campaigns may be necessary instruments to combat terrorist organizations staging an insurgency or occupying land, they should not be the backbone of U.S. strategy. Instead, the U.S. should place a renewed focus on undermining terrorist groups' abilities to recruit and finance, and thereby regenerate and survive. Prioritizing such initiatives can lead to long-term success, unlike the game of cat-and-mouse that has become the Global War on Terror. Otherwise, U.S. counterterrorism efforts will continue to spiral, fighting today's enemy while creating tomorrow's.

Refining the Role of Law Enforcement

Before 9/11, U.S. counterterrorism was led by law enforcement and geared toward prosecution. Consistent with its traditional law enforcement approach, the FBI investigated international terrorist attacks in order to develop criminal cases against the conspirators. However, the FBI was also highly involved in preventing foreign-born attacks on U.S. soil. Though proactive counterterrorism investigations required extensive resources, the FBI was often successful in thwarting attacks, and many of the perpetrators of these plots were arrested, prosecuted, and convicted.[173]

On September 11, 2001, the FBI was limited in several areas that are critical to effective, proactive counterterrorism operations. Agents and analysts who worked on counterterrorism did so despite limited intelligence collection and analysis capabilities, a restricted capacity to share information both internally and externally, insufficient counterterrorism training, overly

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[172] Ibid.
[173] U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *Law Enforcement, Counterterrorism, and Intelligence Collection in the United States Prior to 9/11: Staff Statement No. 9*, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2004, 1, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/staff_statement_9.pdf.

complicated legal boundaries, and inadequate human resources.[174] However, in the eighteen years since, many of these limitations, as well as those identified in the 9/11 Commission Report, have been addressed. Law enforcement has been granted new legal authorities, intelligence gathering has been positively reformed, information sharing has improved, counterterrorism laws have been updated or created, and the FBI's counterterrorism division has multiplied in size many times over. The FBI and its federal law enforcement counterparts are now equipped with the tools they need to lead successful counterterrorism investigations and U.S. counterterrorism strategy greatly benefits from their involvement.

Exploiting the Crime-Terror Nexus. Since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent decline of state-sponsored terrorism, organized criminal activity has become a major revenue source for terrorist groups worldwide.[175] Building on the precedent set by narco-terrorism in the 1980s, terrorist organizations in the 1990s began to rely on profitable crimes such as drug trafficking to finance their operations.[176] Over the past 20 years, the nexus between crime and terror has grown stronger, and the emergence of international terrorist organizations and transnational organized crime have demonstrated that two traditionally separate phenomena have many operational and organizational similarities.[177] Today, terrorist organizations appear to be learning from one another's criminal endeavors, adapting to each other's successes and failures, and expanding their collective *modus operandi*. Therefore, it has become imperative for policymakers to acknowledge and understand the crime-terror nexus in order to formulate effective counterterrorism strategies and combat these evolving and converging threats.[178]

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004): 130, https://www.iracm.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/makarenko-global-crime-5399.pdf.
[176] Ibid., 130.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., 142.

Terrorist groups operate much like street gangs. They are made up of loosely affiliated cells that can act autonomously, rather than the rigid chains of command commonly associated with traditional insurgent groups. They attract marginalized youth who are looking for a sense of purpose, most of whom are males in their late teens or early 20s. They market themselves as providers of social identity, protection, status, excitement, and emotional fulfillment.[179] Both terrorist groups and street gangs broadcast their violence to bolster their group's reputation, display dominance over rivals, intimidate local residents, and establish territorial borders. Moreover, in keeping with the practices of profit-oriented gangs, terrorist groups have transitioned from conventional crimes such as robbery and extortion to more intricate exploits such as human and drug trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, and cybercrime.[180]

Like gangs, terrorist organizations are inherently criminal. Because they depend on criminal activity to finance their operations, law enforcement is uniquely positioned to undermine them. Financing is essential for any organization to sustain its activities, and terrorist networks are no different.[181] Both small terrorist groups and international terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State rely on illicit finance to fund their training, payroll, and overhead. Though terrorist attacks themselves are relatively low-cost compared to the damage they inflict, the operational costs of sustaining a terrorist organization are significant.[182] As a result, terrorist organizations must exercise diverse methods of raising and laundering money.

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[179] Matthew Phillips and Matthew Valasik, "The Islamic State Is More like a Street Gang Than like Other Terrorist Groups," *The Washington Post,* November 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/15/the-islamic-state-is-more-like-a-street-gang-more-than-its-like-other-terrorist-groups/?utm_term=.3de16ff6d652.

[180] Ibid.

[181] Celina B. Realuyo, "Following the Terrorist Money Trail," in *Toward A Grand Strategy Against Terrorism*, ed. Christopher Harmon, Andrew Pratt, and Sebastian Gorka, McGraw-Hill: New York, 210.

[182] "AML Professionals and Addressing the Challenges of Combatting Terrorist Financing," *Association of Certified Anti-Money Laundering Specialists*, accessed on February 10, 2019, https://www.acams.org/aml-resources/combatting-terrorist-financing/.

However, the money trail they leave cannot only provide clear criminal evidence for an effective prosecution but also serve as an efficient way to identify, interdict, and isolate terrorist organizations and their financiers.[183] Determining how, when, where, and from or to whom money has been transferred are reliable data points that law enforcement and intelligence agencies can use to map out terrorist organizations, identify individual and organizational facilitators, and disrupt their activities.[184] Though tracking down, rounding up, and arresting members of terrorist organizations is a worthy endeavor, dismantling a terrorist group's financial support structure can significantly reduce its strength and effectiveness, leaving its workforce unproductive and its operations unsustainable. Illicit finance is the lifeblood of international terrorist networks. Therefore, implementing aggressive initiatives directed by law enforcement and designed to detect, disrupt, and deter terrorist finance can lead to the dissipation of the networks that foster and fund global terrorism. In fact, according to research, efforts like these from law enforcement are some of the most effective means of defeating terrorist organizations.

How Terrorist Groups End. All terrorist groups eventually end, demonstrating that, for the most part, terrorist groups are impermanent adversaries. The fact that they are transient, however, raises several important questions. How have terrorist groups been defeated in the past? Is there a statistical significance, meaning their defeats can be attributed to a specific cause or causes? If so, what are the most common? In order for the U.S. to construct an effective counterterrorism strategy, policymakers must first find answers to these questions and understand through what measures and under what circumstances terrorist groups have historically come to an end. With this information, they will have a better understanding of what has been successful in the past and what will likely be effective in the future.

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[183] Realuyo, "Following the Terrorist Money Trail," 210.
[184] Ibid.

The overwhelming majority (66%) of terrorist organizations dissolve within the first year (see Figure 8). Only a third last long enough to celebrate their first anniversary and only a quarter experience their second.[185] Though the likelihood of organizational survival declines as groups age, there remains a significant number that makes it to their tenth year and beyond. Around 9% of terrorist groups survive at least a decade, signaling that the groups that reach this threshold have developed a resilience that is difficult to resolve. This echoes a familiar assessment made by Dr. Tricia Bacon, who contends that terrorist groups are most vulnerable in the early stages of their development and more difficult to combat after reaching seniority.[186]
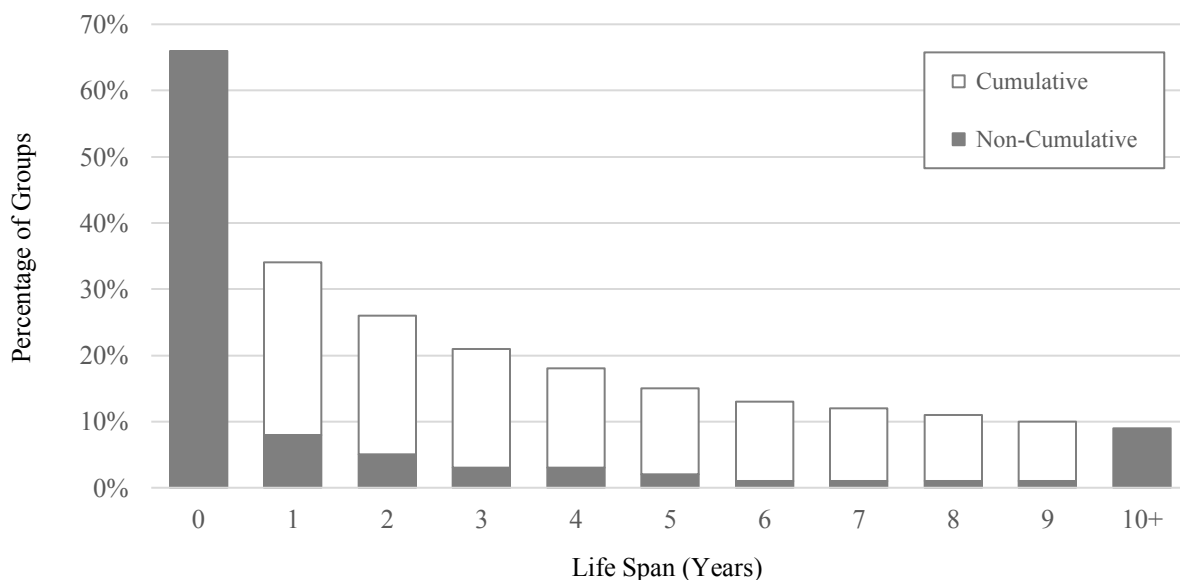
Figure 8. Life Spans of Terrorist Groups (1970-2016)

Note: Data are shown in years. Data are partially represented as cumulative to demonstrate the total percentage of terrorist groups that remained in operation over time. Data are partially represented as non-cumulative to demonstrate the exact percentage of terrorist groups that remained in operation for the exact number of years shown. Source: Global Terrorism Database.[187]

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[185] "Global Terrorism Database."
[186] Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, 280.
[187] "Global Terrorism Database"; LaFree, "The Future of Terrorism."

Moreover, a recent study conducted by the RAND Corporation investigates the reasons why terrorist groups end. By analyzing a roster of terrorist organizations that existed worldwide between 1968-2006, RAND researchers were able to pinpoint the primary cause of each organization's dissolution (see Figure 9).[188] Additionally, they were able to determine how a group's ideology and size affected organizational survival. In this regard, they found that, historically, religiously motivated terrorist groups have taken longer to eliminate than other groups and that groups exceeding 10,000 members have been victorious more than 25% of the time—two characteristics shared by both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The RAND study shows that a total of 648 terrorist organizations were active at some point between 1968-2006. Of those organizations, 268 ended definitively, 136 splintered into other groups, and 244 remained active as of 2006.[189] The study determined that the most common reason groups stopped committing terrorism is because they became a non-violent political party. In fact, 43% of groups that ended between 1968-2006 reached peaceful political accommodation with their respective governments.[190] However, simply verifying a terrorist group as a political party does not necessarily end their terrorist activity outright. Hezbollah holds numerous seats in Lebanon's parliament but continues to support and conduct terrorism.

Moreover, 10% of terrorist groups ended because their goals were achieved; though that is not to say they were directly responsible for the overall success. An example is the National Liberation Front, which ceased all terrorist activities after Algeria achieved independence from France, but whose terrorist activities were insufficient in achieving such results on their own.[191]

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[188] Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End: Implications for Countering al Qa'ida," *RAND Corporation*, 2008, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9351.html.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 14,
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741-1.pdf.

The study also found that military force has rarely been the primary reason a terrorist group has ended, effective in only 7% of cases. This has profound policy implications for the Global War on Terror, which, for two decades, has been at the forefront of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.[192]
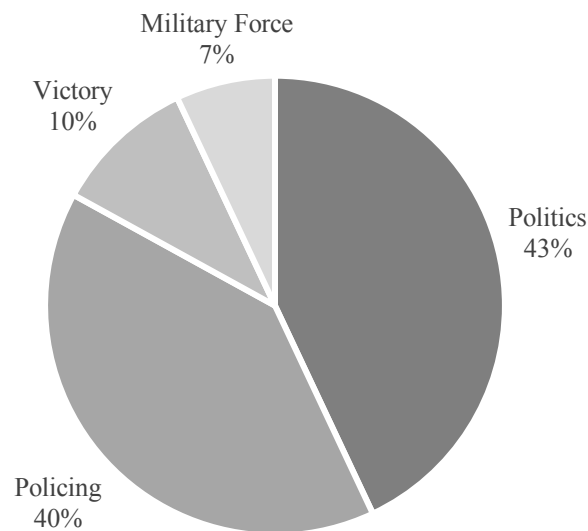
Figure 9. How Terrorist Groups Have Ended (1968–2006)
Note: Data are shown as percentages of the 268 terrorist groups studied. Source: RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents.[193]

Interestingly, 40% of terrorist organizations have ended as a result of policing. In fact, for organizations that cannot or will not abandon terrorism to achieve their goals, policing is likely the most effective counterterrorism tactic.[194] Operations conducted by police and intelligence agencies have been significantly more effective than the use of military force and even rival the success rate of political accommodation. Though this may come as a revelation to

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[192] Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End: Implications for Countering al Qa'ida."
[193] Ibid.
[194] Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida*, 27.

some policymakers, it is logically quite simple. Police and intelligence services are better fit to disrupt terrorist finance, allowing them to combat terrorist groups in a way that military forces traditionally cannot.[195]

The RAND study concludes that policing is a highly effective component of international counterterrorism and should receive greater attention in U.S. strategy. It contends that organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are made up of interconnected networks of individuals and organizations across multiple continents that need to be systematically identified and investigated.[196] While a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy requires layering a range of policy instruments, including public diplomacy, police and intelligence work, and targeted military operations, policymakers need to understand where to prioritize their efforts and where finite resources are best spent. According to the results of this study, police and intelligence efforts are far more effective in defeating terrorist groups than brute military force, a revelation that has significant policy implications for post-9/11 counterterrorism strategy.

Strengthening International Counterterrorism Capacity. U.S. law enforcement cannot be expected to police global terrorism on its own, however. In order to strengthen international counterterrorism capacity, foreign law enforcement agencies must take an active role, as well. Fortunately, the U.S. is able to provide assistance to foreign police and intelligence agencies to enhance their ability to "deter terrorists and terrorist groups from engaging in international terrorist acts."[197] In 1974, the U.S. Congress adopted §660 of the Foreign Assistance Act, prohibiting the U.S. from providing law enforcement training and internal security assistance to foreign governments—namely, through the use of the U.S. military.

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[195] Ibid., 124.
[196] Ibid., 124
[197] Ibid., 27-29.

However, a 1983 amendment allows the U.S. to provide training and equipment to foreign law enforcement as long as it relates to the detection, deterrence, or prevention of terrorism.[198]

Strengthening partnerships with foreign law enforcement agencies is critically important. It not only allows for greater information sharing but also improves apprehension and detention efforts. Local police and intelligence know the language, people, culture, and terrain better than U.S. agencies. They are also able to build lasting internal security measures. However, they can benefit from U.S. resources. U.S. law enforcement can assist local agencies in building cases and advise foreign governments on criminalizing activities that are necessary for terrorist groups to function, such as illicit finance. By strengthening these partnerships, U.S. law enforcement is able to work "by, with, and through" local agencies, making efforts by both entities more effective.[199] Improving foreign agencies' capacity to counter terrorism within their borders inherently increases U.S. security and creates opportunities for sustainable success.[200]

Summary. We cannot eliminate the threat of terrorism any more than we can eliminate crime. We can, however, mitigate it.[201] By strengthening international partnerships and constructing new initiatives focused on combating terrorist finance, U.S. law enforcement can make a meaningful difference in disrupting global terrorism. Illicit activity is the lifeblood of international terrorist networks, and law enforcement is uniquely equipped with the tools and authorities to investigate and isolate their assets. Though U.S. and international law enforcement entities will likely require additional resources to reach their full effectiveness, they remain one of the most effective means of definitively defeating terrorist organizations.

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[198] U.S. Congress, House and Senate, *Legislation on Foreign Relations Through 2002*, 108th Cong., 1st sess., 2003, 274, https://www.atlascorps.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/faa.pdf.
[199] Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida*, 129.
[200] Ibid., 27.
[201] Andrew Colvin, "Combatting Transnational Threats: Policing Crime and Terrorism in a Borderless World," *Center for Strategic & International Studie*s, filmed on June 14, 2018, YouTube video, 59:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=394lpw0Ke4w.

Charting A Path Toward Delegitimization

In addition to increased participation by U.S. and international law enforcement agencies, U.S. counterterrorism strategy can benefit from new initiatives that focus on undermining the ideology that fuels twenty-first-century terrorism. Frankly, groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State cannot be permanently defeated by war.[202] Nearly two decades of experience demonstrates this. War has failed to undermine the ideology and sever the support structures that allow terrorist groups to survive. In fact, evidence suggests it acts as a negative force multiplier. With an estimated four times as many jihadist militants today as there were on 9/11, the U.S. must seriously reconsider the lasting effects of the Global War on Terror being the centerpiece of its counterterrorism strategy.[203]

Terrorist organizations are not formal military structures like national armies that can be defeated by traditional warfare. They are largely decentralized and amorphous. Their human resources are usually desperate and aggravated youth who are frustrated by political participation and have given up on the possibility of peaceful political change.[204] Most of these individuals are from countries that lack democracy and basic human rights, including freedom of speech. In their frustration, these individuals become convinced that violence is the only way to make their voices heard and bring about change.[205] This explains why al-Qaeda resurged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, why ISIS emerged during the ruins of the Arab Spring, and why widespread civil war has produced domestic terrorist groups that have destroyed progress toward peaceful and positive developments throughout the Eastern Hemisphere.[206]

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[202] Mohammad Ayesh, "Daesh Cannot Be Defeated by War," *Middle East Monitor*, February 12, 2019, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190212-daesh-cannot-be-defeated-by-war/.
[203] Jones *et al*., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat."
[204] Ayesh, "Daesh Cannot Be Defeated by War."
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.

As long as terrorist organizations are able to market themselves as righteous and effective forces for change, they will continue to recruit and replenish any forces they lose. It is for this reason why, despite tremendous financial and human resources, the U.S. and its allies' military victories are largely short-lived. When one terrorist is captured or killed, another takes his or her place—if not two or three more—allowing terrorist organizations to regenerate and survive. Unfortunately, this has been the unintentional product of misguided counterterrorism; strategy that focuses heavily on direct military engagements but often ignores that larger ideological war.

Deterrence by Delegitimization. To suffocate the seemingly endless supply of recruits, U.S. counterterrorism strategy should implement policies aimed at delegitimizing terrorism. Delegitimization is a strategy that seeks to eliminate the ability to justify behavior, thereby reducing its popularity. In terms of counterterrorism, it seeks to strengthen and spread opinions that contradict the legitimacy or justification of violent extremism.[207] The objective of this strategy is to persuade individuals who are contemplating or participating in terrorism to alter or abandon their activity on the basis that they can no longer justify the ideology or tactics. Like conventional deterrence, delegitimization attempts to change an adversary's behavior; however, it does so by degrading the rationales that inform terrorist violence, rather than by punishment or denial.[208] Delegitimization is an effective, long-term deterrent that can be used to challenge perverse religious interpretations, magnify the repugnance of terrorist violence, and recognize the innocence of its victims. It can also be used to erode the authority of terrorist leaders or the efficacy of terrorism itself.

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[207] Alex Wilner, "Deterring the Undeterrable: Coercion, Denial, and Delegitimization in Counterterrorism," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 26, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2011.541760?scroll=top&needAccess=true.
[208] Ibid., 27.

Groups' Center of Gravity. The target market of a delegitimization strategy should be an organizations' center of gravity, a concept developed by Carl Von Clausewitz in the 1800s that is still relevant in today's operational environments (see Figure 10).[209] The U.S. Department of Defense defines an organization's center of gravity as the source of power that provides its moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.[210] In terms of terrorism, a group's center of gravity is made up of several tiers of support that provide both moral and physical defense for the organization's tactics, ideology, and membership. The deeper a group's center of gravity, the more legitimacy it has. Therefore, for delegitimization to be successful, it must first erode the lower levels of support before climbing the tiers that maintain the organization itself.

Figure 10. A Terrorist Group's Center of Gravity
Source: Missouri State University, Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies.[211]

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[209] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 29.
[210] DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, *Department of Defense*, 2019, 33, https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp1_02.pdf.
[211] Curtis McGiffin, "21st Century Deterrence of Non-State Actors, Sub-State Actors and Rogue States," Lecture, Missouri State University, Graduate Department of Defense & Strategic Studies, Fairfax, VA, November 7, 2017. https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/18u098T7U6eIsYgvum21EAT7m_fCaDK2iGVPhsJbvmxI/edit?usp=sharing.

Damaging the legitimacy of an adversary is accomplished by persuading its sympathizers, passive and active supporters, and potential recruits that the organization and its leadership are unattractive and unworthy of supporting or joining.[212] When this is accomplished, a terrorist's center of gravity will begin to shrink, allowing it to become more vulnerable to defeat. However, post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism strategy has largely ignored these fundamental support structures. Instead, it has been too narrowly, and at times exclusively, focused on the removal of active members and leaders of terrorist groups. As a result, when a terrorist organization losses members and suffers a setback, supporters and sympathizers who want to see it succeed often offer to take a more active role, providing the additional human resources that allow terrorist groups to regenerate and survive.

Constructing Counter-Narratives. To chart a path toward delegitimization and erode terrorist groups' centers of gravity, counterterrorism officials must utilize a network of methods that are designed to discredit terrorist participation.[213] These methods must be centered around carefully constructed counter-narratives, consistent messaging that deconstructs terrorist propaganda and promotes positive alternatives using compelling arguments that resonate with potential recruits.[214] For counter-narratives to be effective, they must appeal to terrorist prospects more strongly than terrorism itself.[215] This means that counter-narratives must address their most significant personal concerns and propose effective alternatives to terrorist violence.

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[212] Ibid.

[213] Patrick Sookhdeo, "Ideas Matter: How to Undermine the Extremist Ideology Behind al Qaeda" in *Toward a Grand Strategy Against Terrorism*, ed. Christopher Harmon, Andrew Pratt, and Sebastian Gorka, McGraw-Hill: New York, 2001, 243.

[214] Tanya Silverman *et al.*, "The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a Year-Long Cross-Platform Pilot Study of Counter-Narrative Curation, Targeting, Evaluation and Impact," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, August 2016, 52, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf.

[215] Michael Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons from Cases of Terrorist Dropouts," *The Washington Institute*, January 2010, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/learning-counter-narrative-lessons-from-cases-of-terrorist-dropouts.

Terrorist groups often seek to exploit local grievances that, in many cases, have a legitimate basis, including political oppression, poverty, and persecution. To combat their recruitment, effective counter-narratives must include positive messaging that promotes community solidarity and peaceful avenues for addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.[216] Moreover, counter-narratives should expose and refute the flaws and hatred that comprise terrorists' appeals. These arguments should address the same concerns that terrorists seek to exploit and propose alternative avenues for conflict resolution, justice, and empowerment.[217] However, to craft messaging that resonates with would-be terrorists, counterterrorism officials must understand all aspects of the radicalization cycle, including not only why people are attracted to joining these groups but also why some have chosen to quit.[218]

Why Terrorists Quit. Numerous individuals have decided to drop out of terrorist groups and studying their motivations to quit is very useful for crafting effective counter-narratives.[219] Some have chosen to leave after becoming disillusioned with the group's ideology or tactics. Others have departed because they no longer believed in the group's leadership. Some have decided to quit because they have been influenced to do so by family or friends,[220] while others have reconsidered their commitment after being confronted in combat. Yet, some have even cited more petty grievances, such as poor living conditions and unfair pay.[221]

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[216] Gustavo Meza-Cuadra Velasquez, "Open Meeting on Countering Terrorist Narratives and Preventing Terrorist Use of the Internet," *United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED),* May 29, 2018, 3, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Opening-Remarks-Chair-FINAL.pdf.

[217] Michele Coninsx, "Open Meeting on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2354 (2017) on Countering Terrorist Narratives," *United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED),* May 29, 2018, 3, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ED-closing-statement-Open-CTC-meeting-2354-29-May-2018-final.pdf.

[218] Michael Jacobson, "Why Terrorists Quit," *CTC Sentential* 1, 8 (July 2008), https://ctc.usma.edu/why-terrorists-quit-gaining-from-al-qaidas-losses/.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Julie Chernov-Hwang, "New Research Shows Why Terrorists Quit Terrorism," *The Washington* Post, July 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/12/new-research-shows-why-terrorists-quit-terrorism/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5321e42b89bd.

[221] Jacobson, "Why Terrorists Quit."

Though each of these motivations differ in terms of aggravation and influence, they all demonstrate proven opportunities for disengagement and should be utilized in forming effective counter-narratives. First, counter-narratives should undermine the authority and legitimacy of leaders of terrorist groups.[222] These narratives should portray leaders as flawed and cruel, rather than idolized Western targets—the latter of which became an unintended consequence of the global pursuit to capture or kill Osama bin Laden. Second, counter-narratives should characterize terrorists as criminals who fail to live by just and reasonable principles.[223] When the violence terrorist organizations facilitate resembles mere thuggery, their objectives become suspect and their supporters unnerved.[224] Third, counter-narratives should magnify the reality that terrorist groups intentionally target and kill innocent civilians in their attacks.[225] Groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are astutely aware that terrorist attacks are deeply unpopular with a vast majority of those with whom they claim to defend and in whose religion they claim to act.[226] Therefore, counter-narratives should broadly communicate the cruelty of terrorism and defend religious and community leaders who contradict and condemn its use. Fourth, counter-narratives should focus on the difficult, financially unstable, and fear-filled life of a terrorist.[227] The life of a terrorist is neither glamorous nor comfortable. There is often infighting regarding poor living conditions and disparities in pay, as well as the persistent paranoia of being captured or killed. Communicating these frequent troubles to prospects can demonstrate just how unattractive it is to be a terrorist.

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[222] Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons."
[223] Ibid.
[224] Alex Wilner, "Delegitimizing Terrorism: A Better Way to Counter Radicalization and Recruitment in the West," *Atlantic Institute for Market Studies*, March 31, 2016, 6, http://www.aims.ca/site/media/aims/DelegitimizingTerrorism.pdf.
[225] Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons."
[226] Wilner, "Delegitimizing Terrorism," 6.
[227] Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons."

Yet, just as important as the message is the messenger. We know that counter-narratives are more likely to be effective if they exploit and emphasize real contentions. It is for this reason why studying individual disengagement is so important. However, they are also more likely to be effective if they are communicated by individuals who know firsthand what motivates individuals to join—and quit—terrorist groups. Therefore, there are no better orators for these counter-narratives than former extremists, individuals who can communicate their personal experiences and rationales before joining, while participating, and after quitting. Former extremists have a unique understanding of the radicalization and deradicalization processes and are capable of constructing compelling arguments that resonate with potential recruits. Their leadership can also serve as an example, enabling existing extremists to imagine a life after terrorism and apart from their organizations.[228]

Summary. Bombs, bullets, and boots on the ground may kill terrorist fighters, but they will not kill the ideology fueling their struggle.[229] If the U.S. and its allies want to eliminate groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and all of their manifestations, it must begin to chart a path toward delegitimization. Delegitimizing an organization or ideology is undeniably difficult. It requires a deliberate and persistent, coordinated campaign that will likely take years to bear fruit. However, it is undisputedly worthwhile. A successful delegitimization strategy results in not only the dissipation of terrorist groups who subscribe to the targeted ideology, but also a fundamental unraveling of the ideological movement itself. Delegitimization is an effective, long-term deterrent to radicalization and should be what any comprehensive counterterrorism strategy strives to achieve.

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[228] Chernov-Hwang, "New Research Shows Why Terrorists Quit Terrorism."
[229] Ayesh, "Daesh Cannot Be Defeated by War."

Marginalizing Terrorists Online

While the U.S. and its allies have been fighting terrorism from the air and on the ground, terrorist organizations have established a foothold in a new domain. Over the past twenty years, terrorist groups have adopted advanced asymmetric warfare capabilities and wielded what is perhaps the most dangerous technology to date: the internet. With all eyes on the greater Middle East, the counterterrorism community has largely neglected terrorist groups' online insurgencies, which are far more difficult to counter than physical conquests and produce unpredictable ripples of violence. Online, terrorists are shielded from the counterstrikes that would typically force them to flee their strongholds. Instead, they have planted digital roots with an understanding that they are welcome to stay as long as they would like.

Terrorist groups know their strengths and weaknesses. They are also aware of those of their adversaries. Instead of consolidating their efforts on the battlefields, where they know they will be inevitably confronted by superior lethal force, terrorist groups have made a strategic decision to exploit online platforms, where they can mitigate risk and do far more global damage. Through burgeoning social media and digital communication platforms, terrorist groups have been able to communicate, construct plots, coordinate attacks, claim credit, and convince others to join their ranks. These platforms have become their primary distribution channels for propaganda, their preferred recruitment pipelines, and a modern requirement for international terrorist operations. Therefore, it has become imperative for U.S. counterterrorism strategy to recognize and counter these online insurgencies. Preventing terrorist groups from dominating digital territory will reduce their public exposure, restrict the replenishment of their ranks, and destroy their most fundamental means of external communication.[230]

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[230] Jared Cohen, "Digital Counterinsurgency," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015 Issue, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/digital-counterinsurgency.

Removals and Suspensions. Terrorist groups have leveraged the invention, growth, and evolution of social media platforms to distribute their content to audiences across the world. Some smaller social media platforms, often idealistic about free speech and ignorant of terrorists' efforts to incite violence, have turned a blind eye to removing terrorist content. As a result, terrorists have been afforded anonymity, enabled to exchange ideas, and allowed spread propaganda with minimal interference. Terrorist groups have also heavily utilized popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, where they can radicalize and recruit a much larger audience. Although these larger platforms have strict terms of service that they regularly enforce, they are consistently plagued with so much nefarious content that they have difficulties removing it all in a timely manner. Recent U.S. Congressional hearings have pressured both small and large platforms to take a more active role in identifying and removing terrorist propaganda; however, the process unavoidably resembles an online game of whack-a-mole, as terrorist operatives create new accounts and upload content faster than the platforms can recognize, review, and remove the malicious material.[231]

Despite being the most popular tactic to counter online terrorist activity, removing content and suspending accounts has not been an effective deterrent. When terrorists' accounts are suspended, most simply create a new one, proclaiming their newfound notoriety and renewed resolve. Others migrate to more hospitable platforms such as Telegram or WhatsApp, which offer encryption.[232] However, both of these outcomes are equally troubling. Those who remain online despite numerous suspensions become influencers in the online terrorist community and

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[231] Christopher C. Harmon and Randall G. Bowdish, *The Terrorist Argument: Modern Advocacy and Propaganda* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2018), 214.
[232] William Braniff and Audrey Alexander, "Marginalizing Violent Extremism Online," *Lawfare*, January 21, 2018, https://www.lawfareblog.com/marginalizing-violent-extremism-online.

have often used their status to mobilize foreign fighters or incite homegrown attacks.[233] On the other hand, those who move from open to encrypted platforms can no longer be monitored by law enforcement and, although they are no longer broadcasting content in popular public forums, they remain able to communicate in online ideological echo chambers with relative impunity.[234]

Although removing terrorist propaganda as quickly as possible is preferred, poorly timed account suspensions can complicate law enforcement investigations. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies often monitor flagged social media accounts, which can produce valuable intelligence, allow authorities to intervene before an attack, and lead to arrests and prosecutions. When those accounts are suddenly suspended during an investigation, law enforcement loses visibility and is left uninformed. Therefore, law enforcement and social media companies can benefit from establishing strong working relationships to facilitate communication regarding ongoing investigations and persons of interest.

Moreover, law enforcement and intelligence agencies can use account activity to map terrorist groups' virtual networks.[235] By tracing account interactions and identifying where identical content is posted, law enforcement and intelligence agencies can distinguish which accounts are posting the original content first, therefore likely belonging to the terrorist group, which accounts are rapidly disseminating it, likely belonging to members and supporters, and which accounts are merely engaging with it, likely individuals who may not be directly affiliated with the group itself, but display an active interest and attraction to their propaganda. Such an understanding can also create opportunities for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to covertly infiltrate online terrorist networks and identify their ringleaders: the recruiters.

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[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Cohen, "Digital Counterinsurgency."

To combat the presence and prevalence of online terrorist recruitment, counterterrorism efforts should target recruiters' willingness to operate in the open.[236] For example, law enforcement can work with the news media to aggressively publicize arrests that result from online sting operations. If every new account a recruiter interacts with carries the risk of belonging to an undercover agent, it becomes exponentially more hazardous to recruit new members.[237] Similarly, law enforcement can publish material showing how much intelligence can be gathered on a suspected terrorist and his or her associates simply from their online activity. This content demonstrates that the investigation of a single user's account can lead to many arrests, thereby telling the cautionary tale that maintaining an active presence online can lead to the arrest of both the recruiter and his or her entire online network.[238]

The Redirect Method. In addition to combatting those who are producing online terrorist content, an effective counterterrorism strategy should address those consuming the information, as well. To its detriment, a reliance on account suspensions has undercut efforts to offer flagged users off-ramps to extremism, such as counter-narratives.[239] Since users can set up new accounts in seconds, suspensions are not an effective deterrent to consuming propaganda. They also fail to recognize the root of the problem. Consumers of terrorist content are online answer-seekers; individuals who are intentionally reading or watching terrorist propaganda to inform their worldview. They are fundamentally hungry for knowledge. Therefore, an effective counterterrorism strategy should focus on feeding these individuals with an abundance of wholesome content that effectively dilutes the toxicity of online terrorist propaganda and allows individuals to build up antibodies to extremism.

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[236] Cohen, "Digital Counterinsurgency."
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Braniff and Alexander, "Marginalizing Violent Extremism Online."

To expose consumers of online terrorist propaganda to sober, opposing viewpoints, the counterterrorism community should work with private sector partners to develop a comprehensive communications plan that broadcasts custom counter-narratives. First, the coalition will need to construct content that resembles what the consumer is seeking. The content should not blatantly denounce terrorism or a particular terrorist group, especially at first glance, or else the intended consumers will not engage with it.[240] Instead, by replicating the styles of existing terrorist propaganda and crafting headlines that draw the consumer's interest, the content will likely have a high engagement rate from the audience it seeks to attract. Next, the coalition should use targeted online advertising to reach individuals who have previously searched for similar substance and suggest viewing the curated content that debunks terrorist recruitment messaging.[241] This strategic advertising can help mitigate the number of consumers who have repeatedly searched for and engaged with terrorist content and redirect them to custom counter-narratives, providing individuals with the opportunity to change their mind and access a different path toward empowerment.[242]

Summary. Marginalizing terrorist content and activity online should be a critical component of U.S. counterterrorism. Not only would neutering terrorist groups' online activity contain the dissemination of their propaganda, it would also make groups' physical defeat more imminent.[243] Without their preferred method of recruitment and incitement, terrorist groups will struggle to replenish their ranks and remain relevant. Moreover, as the digital platforms and communication channels they rely on become less accessible, groups will find it harder to

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[240] Ross Frenett, Yasmin Green, and Richard Stengel, "Panel Discussion on Disrupting ISIS Recruitment Online," moderated by William McCants, *The Brookings Institution*, filmed on September 7, 2016, YouTube video, 1:11:26, https://www.brookings.edu/events/disrupting-isis-recruitment-online/.
[241] Kent Walker, "Four Steps We're Taking Today to Fight Terrorism Online," *Google in Europe*, https://www.blog.google/around-the-globe/google-europe/four-steps-were-taking-today-fight-online-terror/.
[242] Braniff and Alexander, "Marginalizing Violent Extremism Online."
[243] Cohen, "Digital Counterinsurgency."

coordinate their physical attacks, as well.[244] However, perhaps the most significant benefit of immediately implementing a comprehensive strategy to defeat terrorist groups online is the valuable experience the counterterrorism community will gain. As if today's terrorist groups were not already difficult enough to defeat, lessons learned from constructing an effective online strategy will be beneficial for when the time comes to fight the next preeminent international terrorist organization, which will undoubtedly be more technologically advanced than al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or any other group before it.

Conclusion

Eighteen years into the Global War on Terror, it is difficult to assess if the U.S. and its allies are winning. Though the U.S.-led coalition has demonstrated tactical superiority on the battlefield, terrorist groups have demonstrated a proven ability to survive, despite their repeated losses. It has become undoubtedly apparent that defeating these groups requires a dynamic approach. While targeted military force can be an effective component of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, it should not be its centerpiece. Empirically, law enforcement is far more effective than militaries in defeating terrorist groups. It is better equipped to investigate and undermine the financial and logistical support structures that maintain terrorist operations despite high turnover rates in personnel. Likewise, U.S. counterterrorism strategy would benefit from a fundamental reprioritization that moves away from fleeting battle victories and toward the larger ideological war. Two decades of evidence suggests that capturing or killing every terrorist in the greater Middle East is not a realistic strategy. Instead, decision-makers should place a concerted focus on understanding and addressing why individuals choose to become terrorists.[245]

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[244] Ibid.
[245] Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons."

Through the construction and communication of compelling counter-narratives, the counterterrorism community can begin to chart a path toward delegitimizing the ideology and organizations that comprise twenty-first-century terrorism. Additionally, U.S. counterterrorism would benefit from implementing new initiatives designed to combat terrorists' use of the internet. By marginalizing the primary source of propaganda that enables radicalization and recruitment, policymakers and practitioners can depreciate the hold that terrorists have online and degrade a critical instrument for international terrorist operations.[246]

Over the past two decades, the U.S. has become impressively adept at achieving military gains against terrorist groups, but it has repeatedly failed to translate tactical victories into strategic success.[247] As a result, terrorist organizations have adapted to routine counterterrorism efforts and developed countermeasures of their own. In order to initiate the decline of global terrorism, rather than continue to overlook its endurance, U.S. counterterrorism should prioritize combating the structures that allow terrorist groups to operate, such as illicit finance, online recruitment, and the perverse ideology that fuels their violent extremism. If the U.S. and its allies can undermine the mechanisms that maintain terrorist groups, organizations will struggle to survive. Though an effective, comprehensive counterterrorism strategy will require a whole-of-government approach, enabling law enforcement, delegitimizing extremism, and marginalizing terrorists online will undoubtedly improve current U.S. strategy and create opportunities to deteriorate international networks, deter the formation of new groups, and distribute definitive defeats to terrorist organizations around the world.

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[246] Braniff and Alexander, "Marginalizing Violent Extremism Online."
[247] Lister, "Trump Says ISIS Is Defeated."

CONCLUSION

Since 9/11, defensive counterterrorism tactics have prevented another large-scale, foreign-born terrorist attack on U.S. soil. However, since 9/11, offensive counterterrorism tactics have been largely counterproductive, often creating more challenges than they solve. Today, there are nearly four times as many jihadist militants as there were on September 11, 2001, signaling that the Global War on Terror has unintentionally produced more terrorists than it has removed. Similarly, despite two decades of active combat, terrorist organizations have only continued to expand and grow, reaching record levels in both size and strength.

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon and studying its history can prepare officials to combat its future. For centuries, individuals and organizations have used violence to pursue political goals. However, over the past 140 years, there have been four distinct waves of terrorism, the most recent of which has been comprised of religiously motivated terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Though each wave has eventually expired, the wave we face today has no end in sight; on pace to be the longest-lasting and having already produced unprecedented levels of violence. By tracing empirical data, several conclusions can be made about the history, status, and future of terrorism. Historically, terrorism has ebbed and flowed, occurred in hotspots, moved geographically, and been a global problem. However, today's terrorist activity is more frequent and lethal than ever before. Terrorism has become highly concentrated in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, but is simultaneously growing in both global reach and intensity. Moreover, the global trends and trajectories of terrorism demonstrate that in the 2020s, terrorist activity will continue to evolve, becoming increasingly dangerous, dynamic, and difficult to defeat.

Over the past eighteen years, the counterterrorism community has learned a number of lessons, but so too have terrorist groups. They are now adapting to routine counterterrorism tactics and developing countermeasures of their own. Today, terrorist organizations are transforming from condensed groupings to global networks as they build international alliances that enable their organizations to share resources and withstand counterterrorism pressure. Foreign fighters are dispersing across the globe and have the potential to form new terrorist groups, strengthen existing ones, or carry out lethal attacks of their own. Terrorists around the world are also pursuing offensive cyber weapons capable of crippling critical infrastructure. Though there are a number of existing challenges that will continue to haunt counterterrorism officials in the next decade, including the longevity of lone-wolf terrorism and terrorist group's pursuit of CBRN weapons, those identified in this project are emerging and immediate strategic challenges that lack an appropriate appreciation in current U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

Furthermore, the Global War on Terror will soon enter its third decade, yet the international community is no closer to defeating twenty-first-century terrorist organizations. Despite tremendous financial and human resources, the U.S. and its allies' military victories have been short-lived. When one terrorist is captured or killed, another simply takes his or her place. This has largely been the product of misguided counterterrorism; strategy that fights today's enemies while unintentionally creating tomorrow's. In the 2020s, this must absolutely change. U.S. counterterrorism would greatly benefit from refining the role of law enforcement, delegitimizing the ideology that fuels modern terrorism, and marginalizing terrorists online. Only by eroding the mechanisms that sustain terrorist operations, such as terrorist recruitment and finance, will terrorist groups become vulnerable to a definitive defeat.

As we enter a new decade, there will be a number of ways in which terrorist operations evolve. However, the new decade also presents a timely opportunity for policymakers to refresh U.S. counterterrorism strategy and refocus it on eliminating terrorist groups' abilities to regenerate and survive. International terrorist networks will likely continue to grow and harden, foreign fighters will likely assemble to create the terrorist organizations of the future, and cyber-terrorists will likely expand their arsenal of digital weaponry. Though each of these challenges will be difficult to solve on their own, U.S. counterterrorism strategy must first focus on undermining the underlying mechanisms that allow terrorist groups to sustain their operations. Otherwise, counterterrorism efforts will continue to play catch-up, terrorist groups will continue to adapt and evolve, and by the time policymakers develop sensible strategies, terrorist groups will have discovered new ways to challenge international order. To prevent perpetual participation in the everlasting Global War on Terror, policymakers should prioritize initiatives that erode the resilience of terrorist groups. By doing so, the U.S. and its allies can begin to chart a new course in twenty-first-century counterterrorism, creating opportunities to moderate the global threat landscape and mitigate terrorism in the 2020s.

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