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Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024

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A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Acknowledgments

List of Abbreviations

ABM	Ansar Baid al-Maqdis
ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BBIED	Body-borne Improvised Explosive Device
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CAM	Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
DIA	U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency
DND	Canadian Department of National Defence
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DVE	Domestic violent extremist
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army)
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GUD	Groupe Union Défense
HAD	Hurras al Din
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
IMVE	Ideologically motivated violent extremism
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force
IS-M	Islamic State-Mozambique

ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
ISYP	Islamic State Yemen Province
ITS	Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (Individuals Tending to the Wild)
JAD	Jamaah Ansharut Daulah
JAS	Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wat wa'l Jihad
JI	Jamaah Islamiya
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MIT	Mujahideen Indonesian Timur
MVE	Militia violent extremist
NCTC	U.S. National Counterterrorism Center
NIC	U.S. National Intelligence Council
OAS	Organization of American States
ODNI	U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
RAM	Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche (Ancestral Mapuche Resistance)
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RMVE	Racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist
RS	Reacción Salvaje (Wild Reaction)
SDF	Syrian Defense Forces
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
SOCPAC	U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific
STC	Southern Transitional Council
TPNPB	West Papua National Liberation Army
TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan
UNCCT	UN Counter-Terrorism Centre
VBIED	Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device
WAM	Weichan Auka Mapu
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defense Units)

Contents

Executive Summary

More than 20 years after the September 11 attacks, terrorism is no longer the leading international threat to the United States or its top defense priority. Still, the United States and its allies and partners continue to face challenges related to an increasingly diverse set of violent extremist ideologies. The threat from Salafi-jihadist groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State is relatively low in comparison to recent decades, and ethnonationalist threats are largely contained. However, a broader patchwork of violent far-right and far-left extremist ideologies has become more prominent on the global stage, including through the cultivation of transnational links and influences.

This report leverages a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide U.S. and other Western analysts both a high-level analysis of new developments in the global terrorism threat landscape and a detailed threat assessment of specific countries and regions facing terrorist threats from groups and individuals of various ideological backgrounds. In its macro-level analysis, the report identifies three primary trends in global terrorist activity.

First, the threat to the United States and its closest allies from Salafi-jihadist groups is low in comparison to the past two decades. Salafi-jihadist groups, including those affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, primarily pose a localized threat within their home regions, including a moderate threat to U.S. or other Western interests in the region. While the Middle East was long home to the most powerful Salafi-jihadist organizations, their affiliates in Africa—particularly in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and Somalia—are now the most active. Groups affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State maintain the will to attack the United States and other Western powers, but most lack the capabilities required to plan and execute external attacks. Of all Salafi-jihadist groups, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and al Shabaab are most likely to cultivate the ability to directly threaten the U.S. homeland in the near to medium term. Nonetheless, this threat is no longer as imminent as it was in the decades following 9/11.

Second, amid a decrease in the global Salafi-jihadist threat, other forms of terrorism are on the rise, particularly from violent far-right and, to a lesser extent, far-left extremists. Although these ideologies have traditionally been viewed as a domestic security challenge, contemporary extremist movements have established global ties. These relationships are largely facilitated by the internet and social media platforms, which extremist networks regularly use for propaganda, recruitment, information sharing, and coordination. Since the post-9/11 counterterrorism infrastructure in most Western countries—including the United States—was built to manage international threats, governments now face mismatched authorities and internal divisions in responsibilities that make it difficult to effectively coordinate security responses to domestic terrorism. In the United States, for example, domestic and international intelligence and security authorities remain intentionally separated, with organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security focused on domestic threats and the Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Defense tracking international threats. Similarly, in allied countries such as France, domestic and international threat oversight is split between law enforcement agencies and the armed forces, respectively. Furthermore, with many extremist groups and networks originating in the United States but driving political violence and violent conspiracy theories abroad, U.S. policymakers must confront the nation's role as an incubator and exporter of some forms of terrorism and extremist ideologies.

Third, state adversaries such as Iran and Russia support or enable terrorist activity in pursuit of their own political and military interests. For example, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force maintains relationships with a range of non-state actors, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, which it uses as proxy forces to attack and coerce adversaries both within and outside of the Middle East. Russia has used disinformation operations to foment domestic unrest, and potentially domestic terrorism, in countries such as the United States. In addition to these direct state overtures to terrorist networks, the growth in terrorist violence in regions such as West Africa creates opportunities for Russia, China, and other adversary states to intervene, simultaneously spreading influence and advancing their own goals.

As the global terrorism ecosystem evolves and diversifies, the United States and its partners and allies must balance efforts to defend against and counter a mix of domestic, international, and state-sponsored terrorist threats while simultaneously shifting priorities to address competition with adversarial states. Terrorism—particularly Salafi-jihadist terrorism—poses a

lower and less imminent threat to U.S. interests and the homeland than it has throughout most of the post-9/11 era. At the same time, the United States faces a significant and growing threat from China, ongoing threats from Russia and other state adversaries, and heightened security risks from climate change, pandemic outbreaks, and other global challenges. While terrorism will never disappear, it has become a lower policy priority as it returns to a more contained, manageable level. Nonetheless, U.S. policymakers have important opportunities to improve U.S. and allied counterterrorism capabilities, as well as to apply some portions of the carefully crafted counterterrorism apparatus to tackling state-based threats.

Chapter 1

The State of Terrorism

The United States and its allies and partners currently face a wide variety of terrorist threats, including from domestic actors, international groups and networks, and terrorist organizations with ties to state adversaries such as Russia and Iran. As U.S. assistant attorney general Matthew G. Olsen remarked in a June 2022 keynote address, "This is among the most challenging and complex threat landscapes that I have seen in over 20 years working in counterterrorism."[1] As international, domestic, and state-sponsored threats ebb, flow, and coincide, U.S. policymakers need accurate and timely data and analysis in order to allocate counterterrorism resources and efforts toward threats to the U.S. homeland and interests abroad.

Moreover, since the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, U.S. policymakers have turned their attention from international counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts to competition with state adversaries such as China and Russia, further limiting the resources available.[2]

Still, particularly as state actors continue to support proxy forces that regularly employ terrorism and other forms of political violence, counterterrorism cannot be wholly divorced from international competition.

Despite the complex and evolving international terrorism landscape, there is a scarcity of publicly available global analysis of the threat environment and the consequences for the United States and its allies and partners. To address this gap in open-source analysis, this report aims to distill high-level global trends in terrorist activity and their implications for U.S. and allied policymakers, as well as to provide brief assessments of the terrorism landscape and threat level in each major region of the world.

Definitions and Methodology

The report focuses on terrorism, which it defines as the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact.[3] It does not encompass the broader

topics of hate speech or hate crimes, although there is some overlap between these categories and terrorism when hate crimes include the use or threat of violence.[4] The report also does not address other forms of violent crime—including transnational criminal activities—that lack a political motivation or an intent to generate broad psychological impact, such as gang activity, narcotrafficking, smuggling, or piracy.

The terrorist entities addressed in this report include terrorist groups motivated by religion, ethnonationalist separatist groups, and far-right and far-left violent extremist movements. Religious terrorists are motivated by a faith-based belief system, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or other faiths. The most common type of religious terrorism addressed in this analysis is conducted or inspired by groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State that are motivated by a Salafi-jihadist ideology. Ethnonationalist terrorists are motivated by ethnic or nationalist goals, including self-determination. Violent far-right terrorists are generally motivated by ideas of racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority, including perceived overreach related to issues such as Covid-19 policies; misogyny, including incels ("involuntary celibates"); hatred based on sexuality or gender identity; belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory; or opposition to certain policies, such as abortion.[5] Violent far-left terrorists are motivated by an opposition to capitalism, imperialism, or colonialism; Black nationalism; support for environmental causes or animal rights; pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support for decentralized political and social systems, such as anarchism.[6]

The report employs a mixed methods approach. It focuses heavily on the quantitative analysis of data sets that track terrorist attacks and related violence. The report provides additional quantitative and qualitative analysis based on government publications, court documents and criminal complaints, reports by international organizations, and primary sources—including publications, videos, and social media postings by extremists. The research team also conducted interviews with a range of subject matter experts and stakeholders, including those in academia and in U.S. and partner governments. Additional sources, such as news media, primarily augment other forms of analysis. The report focuses on security and counterterrorism developments through the end of 2023, though most quantitative analysis extends to the end of 2022 due to data availability.

Assumptions and Limitations

Terrorist groups are notoriously difficult to study. They are covert organizations that depend on secrecy for survival. Many terrorist groups also operate in areas where data collection is difficult for reasons beyond the groups' need for secrecy, such as poor infrastructure, limited internet access, and active conflict. This report draws on multiple data sets that are widely used by researchers, but issues with data quality are unavoidable despite the best efforts of the organizations collecting that data. To minimize the problems associated with data gathered under such circumstances, researchers compared multiple data sets whenever possible to ensure that the trends observed were consistent across them.

The threat a group poses is assumed to be a product of that group's intent to conduct various types of attacks against particular targets along with the capabilities possessed by that group.[7] Capability is a key concept when assessing a threat, but it is not a uniform quantity that can be measured and compared. This study generally assumes that greater involvement in violence indicates greater capability for violence, but it acknowledges that this is not always the case: for instance, greater involvement in violence could also result from greater counterterrorist pressure on a group, which would be expected to decrease a group's capabilities. Quantitative analysis of violent incidents involving terrorist groups was therefore disaggregated by perpetrator when possible and was always considered alongside contextual analysis of ongoing counterterrorist operations.

Capabilities also come in different types. The ability to conduct a complex attack on a military base in a group's country of origin does not imply the ability to conduct even a small-scale shooting on another continent, for example. The types of attacks a terrorist group conducts were also therefore examined, with particular attention paid to the types of capabilities that would allow terrorist groups to overthrow a government or conduct mass-casualty attacks beyond their historical areas of operation.

A group also must develop a capability before it conducts a successful attack, and groups will seek to hide these capabilities until they are ready to strike. Capabilities that a group is not currently using are therefore extremely difficult to discern for open-source analysts. This is especially important for a strategic-level analysis such as this report, which deals with multi-year timeframes and attempts to distill the key trends in terrorist activity that will shape the terrorist landscape in the coming

years. Predicting the development of terrorist capabilities would likely be impossible even for states leveraging human and signals intelligence against the groups. This report therefore does not attempt to predict the exact capabilities that a terrorist group might develop in the coming years. It instead focuses on key enablers of capability development: control of territory or access to safe haven; wealth; state support; hierarchical command and control; and links with other terrorist groups.[8] These characteristics are assumed to grant a terrorist group the operating space needed to plan and train for new types of activities, access to the expertise needed to conduct novel operations, and the resources to support the development or acquisition of new tools and skills.

Intent is even more difficult to assess than capabilities. Intent is a product of ideology and strategy; the former is usually expressed publicly, and the latter is usually obscured. Terrorists' ideologies influence their goals, tactics, and targets. They are openly expressed in propaganda, are documented by researchers, and usually draw on well-established political or religious schools of thought. Strategies, on the other hand, are usually obscured in order to prevent disruption by groups' adversaries. This report therefore relies foremost on propaganda and ideology to assess intent, turning to an analysis of groups' strategies only in exceptional circumstances where credible evidence of strategic planning exists.

Still, terrorist propaganda is not a foolproof indicator of intent. If a group calls for or celebrates attacks on a particular target in its propaganda, this report will usually interpret it as expressing a desire to harm that target, but groups can make such calls for other reasons. Intra-group or intra-movement politics can constrain terrorist leaders, for example, pushing them into making statements that seem to indicate aggressive intent but do not. That said, absent a much more detailed picture of intra- and inter-group dynamics than could feasibly be gained in the time frame of this report, statements of violent intent must be taken at face value. The risk associated with dismissing actual intent is greater than the risk associated with assuming intent is nonexistent.

This report also assumes that terrorist intent can change, but that it changes slowly. Attacks conducted in 2021, for example, are assumed to represent an intent to conduct similar attacks in 2024, barring public statements to the contrary. And such public statements themselves can be deceptive: while terrorist groups often publicize their intent to conduct attacks, statements that they intend to refrain from attacks cannot be reliably assessed without access to members of the group or information gathered by national intelligence agencies. Even a long period of reduced activity might only be the result of authorities foiling plots that never reach open sources or failed efforts to develop the capabilities required to conduct attacks.

Terrorist ideologies are often well documented, but they may not always be well understood. A group's official ideology may have changed since its last major public articulation, may not be shared by all members, or may not be as strongly held as propaganda would indicate. Ideology does not always translate clearly into action, as demonstrated by the Taliban's clear failure to articulate what form the Islamic Emirate it fought for over the course of three decades would take beyond the broadest strokes. As a result, this analysis avoids assuming that an ideological stance straightforwardly translates into intent to conduct attacks, although trends emerge from the data when looking at groups based on their ideological orientations.

Several chapters of this report focus on a region's terrorist insurgencies—groups engaged in civil wars or insurgencies that are affiliated with transnational terrorist organizations or explicitly call for violence against civilians as a major part of their strategy. These chapters do not seek to assess the use of terrorism in civil wars but instead focus mostly on civil wars that involve terrorist organizations, almost all of which are Salafi-jihadist groups associated with al Qaeda or the Islamic State. In many ways, these groups are insurgents typical of internal conflicts. Most of their violence involves clashes with the security forces and targeted killings rather than indiscriminate violence against civilians. What distinguishes them from other insurgencies, justifying their inclusion in this report, is their connections with transnational groups that have engaged in terrorism as a core part of their strategy and their willingness to engage in terrorism outside of the countries in which they are fighting.

A focus on terrorist insurgencies brings with it a methodological problem—civil war blurs the line that separates terrorism from warfare, making acts of terrorism extremely difficult to distinguish from the general backdrop of violence, including against civilians.[9] When assessing the threat posed by a terrorist insurgency, these chapters analyze trends in the full spectrum of violent acts a terrorist insurgency commits, from tradi-

tional terrorism to mass killings to attacks against security forces. While a capacity for violence is not fungible across all types of violence, growing capacity for one type of violence suggests growing capacities for others, especially if accompanied by increasing access to other enablers such as control over territory, diverse recruiting pools, financial resources, and international linkages.

A final limitation arises from the particular timing of this report. It was in the final stages of editing when Hamas conducted its October 2023 attacks against Israel. The scale of the attacks suggests that they will influence the threat landscape, but how they will do so is uncertain. The above limitations are all magnified by the fact that the crisis was ongoing during editing. The strategic implications will not just depend on the facts of the incident, many of which remained unknown at time of writing, but also the nature of the Israeli response, which had not yet taken shape. The assessment concludes that the threat from Salafi-jihadist groups to the United States and Europe is low relative to the past two decades, but it remains possible that the attacks will reinvigorate broader terrorist efforts to target the West or drag the United States or Israel into a direct military conflict with Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Either outcome would merit a significant revision of the conclusions reached by this report.

Key Findings

This report identifies three key global trends in the terrorism threat landscape, all of which stand in stark contrast to the past two decades of U.S. counterterrorism and national security policy, which primarily focused on combatting urgent Salafi-jihadist terrorism threats. These trends are:

1. The threat to the West from Salafi-jihadist groups is low relative to the past two decades. Salafi-jihadist groups, including those affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, primarily pose a local or regional threat.

2. The terrorist ideological ecosystem is increasingly diverse, and traditionally "domestic" threats are growing transnationally. The most pressing terrorist threats facing the United States and its closest allies currently come from violent far-right and, to a lesser extent, far-left extremists.

3. States such as Russia and Iran provide both direct and indirect assistance to violent extremist groups and movements as a form of irregular warfare to

advance their political and military goals.

The remainder of this report is divided into six chapters. Chapters 2 through 6 provide terrorism threat assessments for the following regions, respectively: Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania, Europe, and the Middle East. Each of these chapters is further divided into subsections that include analysis of the primary groups or ideological movements that are fueling political violence in specific countries or subregions, as well as key dynamics and trends in the regional terrorism landscape. Chapter 7 provides brief implications for policymakers, including a summary of emerging trends to monitor.

Chapter 2
Africa

Terrorist groups in Africa are involved in more violence, control more territory, and are growing their reach faster than groups on any other continent. The expansion of Salafi-jihadist groups in the Sahel has driven violence to new heights, even as affiliates of al Qaeda and the Islamic State have come under increasing military pressure elsewhere on the continent. The power of groups based in the Sahel may be growing, but only Somalia's al Shabaab has demonstrated an intent to conduct attacks outside of Africa. Most terrorists in Africa appear more focused on local conflicts, but there is no way to guarantee that this state of affairs will last, especially if Africa's Salafi-jihadists are mobilized by the conflict in Palestine the way previous generations were motivated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The increasing capabilities of many of these groups mean that their potential for violence is high, and a shift in ideology or strategy could rapidly increase the risk of attacks outside of their current areas of operation.

Despite the expanding violence, most terrorist groups in Africa are insurgencies focused on local or regional goals. The only group in Africa that poses a direct threat to the United States is al Shabaab. It was plotting a 9/11-style attack on the U.S. homeland as recently as 2019, attacked a U.S. military facility in Kenya in 2020, and continues to call for attacks against Americans. It almost certainly retains the intent to attack U.S. interests in Africa and likely desires to attain the capacity to conduct attacks outside of the continent. The short-term threat posed by al Shabaab may have decreased as its fighters have concentrated their efforts against the Somali government, but the long-term threat depends on the current counterterrorist campaign breaking the groups' ties with local communities, degrading its ability to finance its operations, and eliminating its capacity to conquer and hold territory. There is little sign that the tides have turned decisively against the group, and it therefore will remain the most significant terrorist threat emanating from the African continent in the coming few years.

Terrorism in Africa also poses a broader indirect threat to U.S. and Western interests, although the United States historically has had limited security interests in Africa. The insecurity created by intensifying terrorist insurgencies has been associated with a series of coups d'état and geopolitical realignments in the Sahel region over the past few years. The coup in Mali played a major role in the de facto government expelling French military forces and partnering with the Wagner Group—a Russian private military company (PMC) that served the Putin regime's foreign policy interests at least until the group's short-lived mutiny in June 2023—often at the expense of local civilians and U.S. influence in the country. With similar threats intensifying in Burkina Faso, 2022 saw significant speculation that Wagner would soon be invited in by the new government, which came to power in a coup last year, as a counterterrorism partner.[1] Even if the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023 leads to the dissolution or transformation of Wagner, there will likely be other similar Russian PMCs that could fill such a role for the Burkinabe government.

Terrorist violence also appears to be expanding southward, suggesting that political stability in the Gulf of Guinea will decrease in the coming years if the spread of terrorist activity is not stopped. The continent's complicated geopolitics also interact with the terrorist threats in a way that increases volatility. For example, a seemingly successful offensive in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by Ugandan and DRC forces risks inflaming tensions between Rwanda and Uganda, which have a history of proxy and direct conflict in the DRC. The continent's complicated international politics both are impacted by and have an influence on the Salafi-jihadist threat, and the trends point toward increasing instability.

The one area in which the terrorist threat appears to be decreasing is North Africa. Jihadist groups there are small, decentralized, and unable to conduct high-profile attacks. They have likely suffered from a combination of counterterrorist pressure and an increasing focus on sub-Saharan Africa as the global epicenter of jihad.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections, which assess the current terrorism threat landscape in West Africa, East and Central Africa, and North Africa, respectively. The first two sections begin with a brief discussion of key trends and proceed to a country-level analysis of the terrorist threat in the region. The third section consists entirely of a summary of key trends.

West Africa

Salafi-jihadist insurgencies in West Africa pose a severe and expanding threat to local civilians and regional states. They are conducting a growing number of attacks over an increasing geographical area, directly endangering civilians and security forces. Their activity has contributed to political instability, which harms both people and governments. Frustrations with the deteriorating security situation played a role in four regional coups d'état in the past two years as well as in an accompanying shift away from France and toward Russia as a military partner. The groups active in the region have thus far demonstrated little interest in conducting high-profile attacks outside of it, but their size, income, and control over territory will aid them in doing so should their priorities change. The remainder of this section provides a brief analysis of key trends throughout the region, then assesses the specific threat landscape in the following geographies: Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, the littoral states, Cameroon, and Chad.

Key Trends

Salafi-jihadist violence is expanding and intensifying.

Salafi-jihadist groups constitute the main terrorist threat in West Africa and have increased their activities in almost every country in which they are operational (Figure 2.1). The greatest threats are to Mali and Burkina Faso, where violence associated with Salafi-jihadist groups has increased most dramatically. A less developed threat exists in Benin, Cameroon, and Togo, where Salafi-jihadist groups are growing more active. Terrorist violence also remains a latent threat in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Chad, but ongoing trends suggest that terrorists will become increasingly active in these countries if security forces increase their pressure on terrorist groups' non-violent activities, such as recruiting, trafficking, and logistics, or if any of the countries undergoes an irregular transfer of power.

Terrorist violence is likely to worsen in the coming few years. The expansion of terrorist activity is a result of the groups' control over territory and access to financial resources combined with the increased political instability and government weakness that terrorist violence causes. There are few clear signs that the situation is likely to improve, and there are several scenarios for

Figure 2.1

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in West Africa by Country

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED, accessed February 2, 2023, https://acleddata.com/.

increased deterioration. A coup in any of the region's democracies, a Russian PMC's entry into Burkina Faso, or a rebellion or civil unrest in Chad would all accelerate an already negative set of trends.

Terrorist overlap with local conflict creates uncertainty and prolongs the terrorist threat.

Throughout West Africa, Salafi-jihadists coexist with a wide variety of armed groups that do not pose a significant terrorist threat but that complicate the political and security landscape. Many of these armed groups are based on ethnic or communal ties and lack a national-level political agenda, although some have separatist aspirations. The region's Salafi-jihadists have worked with many of these groups at certain times and fought them at others, and their recruitment of particular ethnic communities increases the potential for expansion. Ethnic groups in West Africa are spread across many countries, and the possibility for terrorist insurgency to

mutate into ethnic conflict (or vice versa) therefore provides a clear pathway for the violence to spread across the wider region.

These recruitment patterns also make the terrorist threat to the world beyond West Africa more uncertain. The use of local grievances for recruiting may decrease the motivation of these groups to conduct difficult attacks abroad, or the lack of such attacks might represent a current lack of capability. Terrorist groups may also link local and international attacks, as occurred when al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) attacked Côte d'Ivoire in 2016 in retaliation for the government's cooperation with Malian authorities against the group—and when the AQIM emir implied that his group intended to conduct attacks in France as a result of the French government's role in Africa.[2]

Worsening violence also drives increased political instability in countries already plagued by crises of legitimacy and governance. Intensifying terrorist violence almost certainly contributed to the coups in

Mali and Burkina Faso in the past two years and drives lower-level mutinies by military forces that can grow into higher-level crises.[3] Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Cameroon, Nigeria, Mali, and Chad are all listed as among the 30 least-stable countries in the world by the Fragile States Index, but the instability predates the terrorist threat for most of the affected countries.[4] Although Chad is home to very little terrorist violence, it is considered one of the 10 least-stable countries in the world, making it less stable than regional countries that face active terrorist insurgencies.[5]

In addition, the region's political instability makes it difficult to transform battlefield victories into lasting progress against terrorist groups. Governments in the region have conducted relatively successful offensives against Salafi-jihadist groups but have not demonstrated the staying power that keeps terrorists from returning. A series of coups, the withdrawal of French military forces, and the increasing role played by the Wagner Group and other Russian private military companies in military operations have contributed to a more permissive environment for terrorist groups.[6] The result is a vicious circle in which increasing violence worsens conflict within the governing elite or among ethnic communities, which relieves pressure on terrorist groups or gives them opportunities to expand recruitment, which increases violence. This cycle will be increasingly difficult to break as the dynamics of terrorist violence and political instability become more entrenched in West Africa.

Increasing intra-terrorist conflict worsens violence but decreases the overall threat.

Salafi-jihadist groups associated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State have an uneven history of accommodation and competition in West Africa, making intra-jihadist competition an important factor in the future of terrorism in the Sahel. From the emergence of the Islamic State's West African affiliate in 2015 until approximately July 2019, the groups affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State coexisted and even cooperated despite a worldwide struggle between the two umbrella organizations.[7] This state of affairs came to an end in 2019, when differences in ideology, competition for fighters, and pressure from global Islamic State leadership sparked deadly conflict between the al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in West Africa.[8] The warring terrorist groups reached a short-lived ceasefire in mid-2022 but have since resumed open conflict.[9] The violence is distributed across these terrorist groups' areas of operation and is likely to inten-

sify, although sporadic ceasefires will continue to occur.

The intra-jihadist fighting represents a boon to state security forces, although not to local communities. During their period of cooperation, tactical alliances of Salafi-jihadist groups were able to stage attacks on security forces that appeared to exceed their individual capabilities.[10] Decreases in the number of clashes between terrorist groups also occurred alongside periods of increased activity by the region's largest terrorist organization, an al Qaeda affiliate, suggesting that military pressure from the local Islamic State branch absorbs some of the larger group's capacity that would otherwise be directed toward challenging security forces. The trend of increasing conflict between Salafi-jihadist groups shows no sign of abating, but a return to active cooperation would represent something approaching a worst-case scenario for the region. As a whole, West Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups are involved in more violence against civilians and security forces than during the period of their initial cooperation, and the combined impact of them joining their capabilities while lifting the military pressure they currently impose on each other would lead to a dramatic increase in threat to the governments in Bamako and Ouagadougou—and likely drive greater insecurity in the wider region.

Mali

Salafi-jihadist groups affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State pose an acute threat to Malian civilians and the Bamako government. They control increasing amounts of territory and endanger the stability of the governments of Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso, although their ability and desire to conduct attacks outside of the region are uncertain. The expansion of both terrorist groups means that the security situation in Mali will remain dire absent a significant commitment of international forces—as occurred during France's Operation Serval, which returned northern Mali to government control in the wake of the 2012 Tuareg uprising. Based on their performance over the past year, the current presence of Wagner Group personnel in the country will not serve this role for the Malian government. The strength of Mali's terrorist groups will therefore continue to grow as their insurgencies expand and consolidate their control within the country.

The terrorist organization responsible for the most violence in Mali is Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an alliance between several al Qaeda-aligned

Salafi-jihadist groups. The coalition was formed in 2017 through the merger of the Sahelian component of AQIM, Katiba Macina (also known as the Macina Liberation Front), Ansar Dine, and Al-Mourabitoun.[11] Several smaller groups have since joined JNIM, although not all have formally been declared part of the alliance. It is not a centralized organization with a unified command structure but instead operates as an umbrella for several groups that share key interests.[12] Its component groups operate in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the West African littoral states.
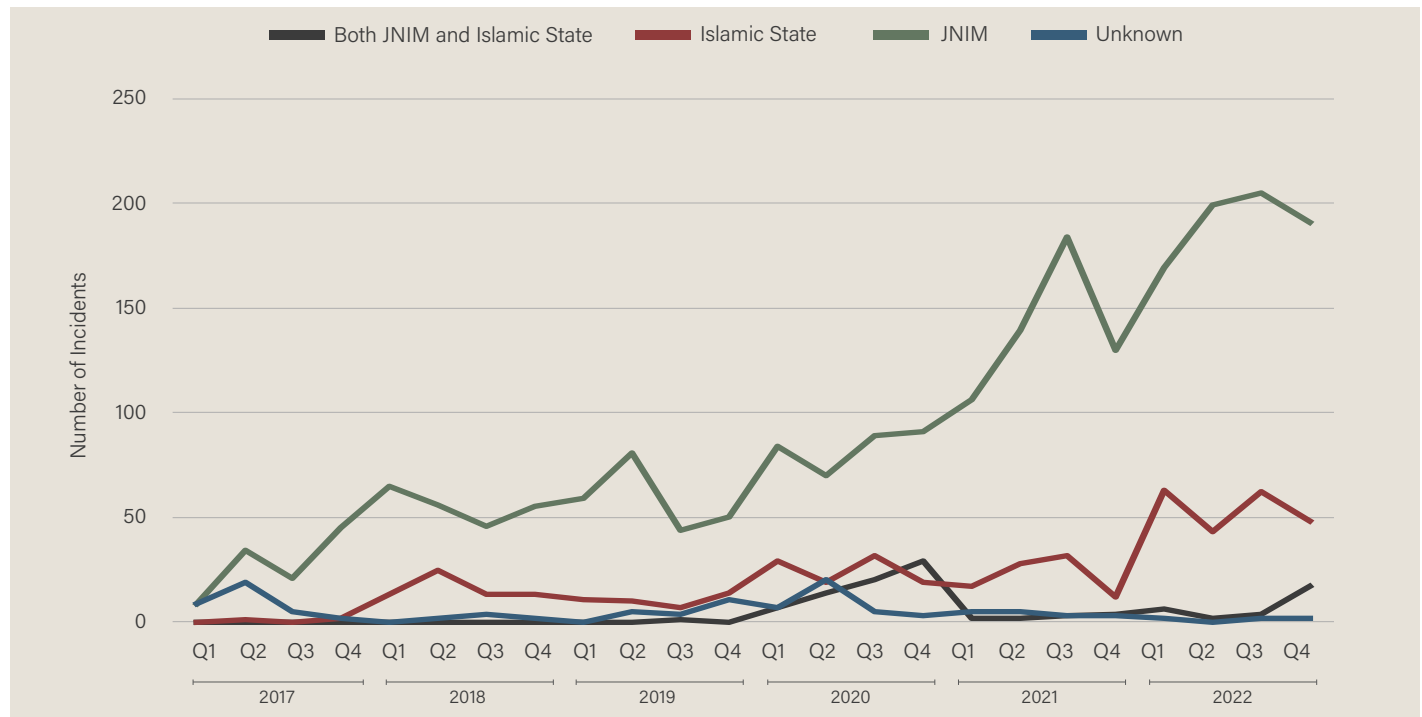
Ansar Dine founder Iyad Ag Ghaly is formally the emir of JNIM, but his ability to exert command and to control JNIM's various subgroups is unclear. JNIM and its component groups seek the formation of what they consider to be an Islamic government, enforcing a conservative interpretation of Sharia in the areas they control.[13] The alliance's component groups also often seek to recruit using preexisting ethnic grievances and have displayed a degree of pragmatism when enforcing their interpretation of Sharia, especially when compared with the region's groups affiliated with the Islamic State.[14] The alliance has also shown itself willing to pursue its objectives through negotiations, although talks between militants and gov-

ernments have resulted in little progress.[15] The alliance conducts most of its attacks against targets associated with the military and anti-JNIM militias, although its component groups engage in varying degrees of violence against civilians.[16] The alliance draws on the area's illicit economies for financing. It enables smugglers—including of illegal drugs—and artisanal gold miners in exchange for "protection money," kidnaps foreigners for ransom, and commits carjackings to obtain 4x4s for logistics and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) components.[17]

The other main Salafi-jihadist group in Mali is the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP). It initially emerged as a splinter from al-Mourabitoun in 2015 and claimed its first attack in 2016.[18] The group operated in West Africa for almost 10 years as a semi-autonomous branch of the Islamic State-West Africa Province before being declared an independent province in 2022.[19] It is not a hierarchical organization, consisting instead of geographically dispersed cells with significant operational autonomy.[20] Overall, the group seeks to establish a transnational caliphate in line with the ideology of the broader Islamic State movement. Its implementation of

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Figure 2.2

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Mali by Group Involvement, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

Sharia in areas it controls has been more extreme compared to JNIM.[21] It has also rejected dialogue with other local and regional actors as illegitimate.[22] It conducts attacks against military targets, local militias, civilians, and other Salafi-jihadist groups in the areas in which it operates.[23] Less information on ISSP financing is available than on JNIM financing, but there is little reason to believe that the two groups differ significantly in their sources of revenue. West Africa's illicit economies are well established, and ISSP has comparable access to the same resources and trafficking routes.

Violence associated with both groups has been increasing for the past several years, although fighting between the two groups temporarily stunted the growth in ISSP violence. JNIM demonstrates greater capacity for violence than ISSP, conducting more attacks at a more quickly increasing rate. JNIM's desire to conduct attacks beyond the Sahel is less clear, however, and it has previously signaled that it is willing to pursue dialogue with the Bamako government. ISSP, in contrast, aspires to form a transnational caliphate similar to the original Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and has rejected all attempts at dialogue. It likely has greater international ambitions but a lower capability to fulfill them. Neither group poses a threat outside of the region due to lack of desire (JNIM) or capability (ISSP), but JNIM activity will increasingly endanger the stability of the Bamako government in the coming years.
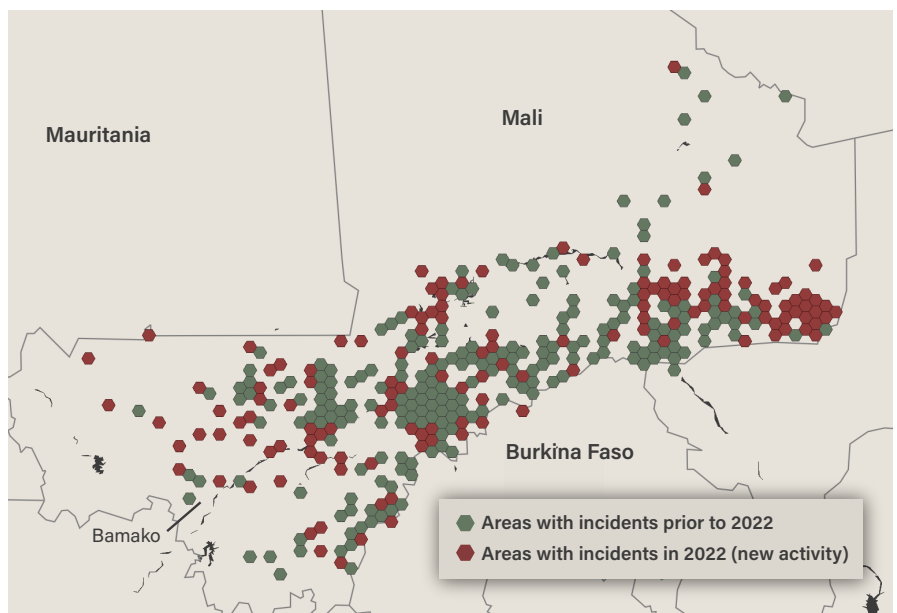
The specifics of JNIM attacks suggest that the group possesses a set of capabilities that poses a major threat to civilians and government forces in Mali. In particular, JNIM-affiliated groups have repeatedly demonstrated their capability to strike hard military targets. The most dramatic of these attacks was a Katiba Macina assault on the Kati army barracks outside of Bamako in July 2022. The attackers demonstrated the ability to coordinate VBIEDs, indirect fire, and ground forces—including a body-borne improvised explosive device (BBIED) attacker—at the heart of Mali's military power.[24] Katiba Macina's ability to assault the base that essentially serves as the headquarters of the Malian army, and therefore the government, demonstrates a remarkable ability to operate in the areas that should be most difficult for it

to penetrate.[25] Nor was the attack an isolated incident: JNIM affiliates have increased pressure on Mali's cities over the past few years and have made attacks within 100 miles of Bamako a regular occurrence.[26] These attacks are also part of a broader trend of increasing violence. The growing number and geographical spread of violent incidents involving JNIM affiliates suggests increasing capacity for violence, and their growing ability to conduct and plan attacks near Bamako represents a worrying trend for Mali. JNIM's precursor groups once controlled major cities in the country's north, and the alliance may once again seek to fully supplant the government in the parts of the country where it is strongest.

Even though the alliance might desire to conquer Mali's smaller cities, it has not demonstrated the capability to seize population centers through force, likely because overrunning them would be difficult and costly and they face little need to do so.[27] The group has competing priorities, such as expansion into Burkina Faso and defending against attacks by the Islamic State. The fact that it operates as a loose alliance rather than as a unified hierarchy may also limit its ability to conduct operations as complicated as an attempt to seize and hold an entire city. The group will be content to maintain its grip over the countryside until it feels less pressure

Figure 2.3

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Mali, 2021–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

from the Islamic State or runs out of room for expansion into other weak states. While not a guarantee of future offensives against major cities, these conditions would increase both JNIM's capacity and its incentives to over-run Malian population centers.

ISSP poses less of a threat to Malian civilians and the Bamako government. It is active over a much smaller area than JNIM, mainly operating in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region, although it is attempting to expand its territorial reach.[28] The group appears less capable than the JNIM alliance, but it was involved in a growing number of violent incidents in 2021 and 2022.[29] The group has also increased its recruitment within Fulani communities in the areas in which it operates, which will expand the manpower available to the group.[30] The ability of ISSP to grow will be limited as long as JNIM remains united in opposition to the group, but cracks in the JNIM coalition or a return to the collaboration that characterized ISSP's earliest phases of growth would mean an expansion in ISSP violence in Mali.

The overall outlook for Mali is dire. Terrorist groups are more active than ever before, and they pose a greater threat to the Malian government than at any time since the 2012 uprising and French intervention. While Mali's terrorist groups have not yet demonstrated the ability or desire to conquer cities and hold them against government counteroffensives, they have isolated several cities and are conducting attacks on the capital's doorstep. Pressure to negotiate or to escalate the conflict will only increase as the Salafi-jihadists grow in strength, even as their increasing power makes a successful resolution to Mali's conflict less likely. Mali's terrorist groups pose little threat outside of the region relative to the threat they pose within it however, and are extremely unlikely to conduct attacks outside of West Africa in the coming year.

Burkina Faso

The terrorist threat in Burkina Faso closely resembles the threat in Mali. The main al Qaeda-affiliated groups are Katiba Macina—a JNIM member that operates in both Mali and Burkina Faso—and two Burkinabe groups known as Katiba Serma and Ansarul Islam.[31] These JNIM subgroups largely share the ideology, funding sources, and tactics of the broader JNIM alliance. The main Islamic State group in Burkina Faso is also ISSP, and its operations in the country are an extension of its activi-

Figure 2.4

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Burkina Faso, 2021–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

Figure 2.5

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Burkina Faso by Group Involvement, 2017–2022
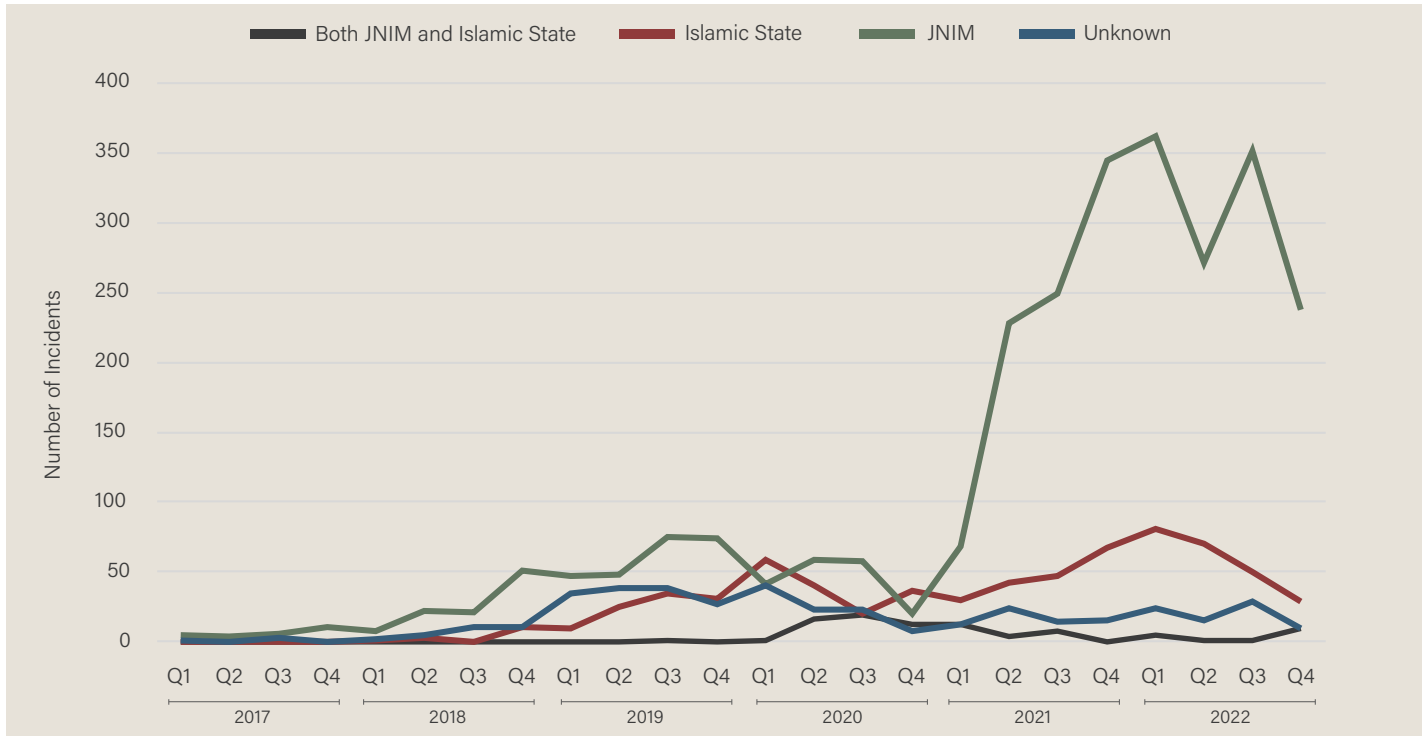

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

ties in Mali. The threat from both actors is intensifying, and the outlook for the terrorist threat in the country is one of increasing violence and instability.

Salafi-jihadist groups operate over a wide and growing area in Burkina Faso. Attacks are concentrated in the country's north and east, where terrorists can take advantage of the nearly nonexistent borders with Mali and Niger. There is also a pocket of activity near the southern border with Côte d'Ivoire, where Katiba Macina conducts operations. The violence is hardly contained in these areas, however, and militant activity continues to spread toward Burkina Faso's Centre Region—where the capital is located—and the country's southeastern border with Togo. Salafi-jihadist activities are beginning to threaten the capital with encirclement, although the rate of expansion suggests that a true threat to the capital will not arise for a few years.[32] The groups have not yet demonstrated an ability to seize control of cities, and major assaults on weaker cities will precede attempts to overthrow the government in Ouagadougou. However, they are poised to increase their pressure on the government in the coming years. The result will almost certainly

be a continuing increase in violence and political instability.

The security situation in Burkina Faso deteriorated rapidly in 2021 and 2022 as Salafi-jihadist groups intensified and expanded their activities. Violence associated with terrorist groups surged, and JNIM affiliates now control territory in the country's north, east, and southwest.[33] The alliance has pushed the Islamic State out of many areas it previously controlled and has resisted the group's attempts to regain territory. Control over Burkinabe territory will only strengthen groups associated with JNIM because it provides opportunities to operate training camps and levy taxes on smuggling and artisan gold mines.[34] Unless the groups' gains can be reversed, the trend toward increasing Salafi-jihadist violence will continue beyond 2023.

JNIM affiliates in northern and eastern Burkina Faso are capable of complex military operations and pose a major threat to government forces. JNIM has conducted high-impact, complex attacks on the Burkinabe military and its facilities.[35] In 2022, for example, the alliance con-

ducted a high-profile attack on a convoy attempting to deliver supplies to the besieged northern city of Djibo. The ambush was staged over a length of approximately three miles and destroyed nearly 100 vehicles despite the presence of a Burkinabe military escort.[36] The complex attack served as a potent demonstration of the group's ability to coordinate activities over a wide operational area, to defeat Burkinabe military units, and to isolate Burkina Faso's cities. These are capabilities that are demonstrated frequently in a less dramatic fashion in the country's east, where the group is pressuring the main north-south highway.[37]

The outlook for Burkina Faso is almost as negative as it is for Mali. Terrorist groups are more active than ever before, and they pose a direct threat to government forces and their control over territory. They have not yet demonstrated the ability or desire to conquer cities and hold them against government counteroffensives but have succeeded in isolating several cities and are poised to threaten all ground routes in and out of the capital in the coming years. As in Mali, pressure to escalate the conflict will increase as the Salafi-jihadists grow in strength, even as their expanding capabilities make a successful resolution to Burkina Faso's conflict less likely.

Nigeria

Nigeria is home to a wide variety of armed groups based on communal or ethnic identity, but the main terrorist threat arises from groups that emerged from a 2016 schism in the Salafi-jihadist organization most frequently referred to as Boko Haram.[38] The split gave rise to two groups: the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) and a weakened version of Boko Haram commonly referred to as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wat wal Jihad (JAS).[39] ISWAP struck a significant blow against JAS when it conducted an operation that resulted in Shekau's death by suicide vest in 2021, triggering the near-collapse of the group.[40] Ansaru—another Boko Haram splinter group—has also recently reemerged in Nigeria, further complicating the country's terrorist landscape and posing the threat of escalation in the coming years.

Figure 2.6

Violent Incidents Involving ISWAP in Nigeria by Event Type, 2017–2022

"Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

Figure 2.7

Violent Incidents Involving JAS in Nigeria by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

ISWAP represents a threat to civilians and security forces in northeast Nigeria, although it does not pose nearly as dire a threat as JNIM does in Mali and Burkina Faso. It is mainly active around the city of Maiduguri, although 2022 saw several incidents that demonstrated increasing willingness or capacity to conduct attacks farther afield. It is capable of small-scale gueril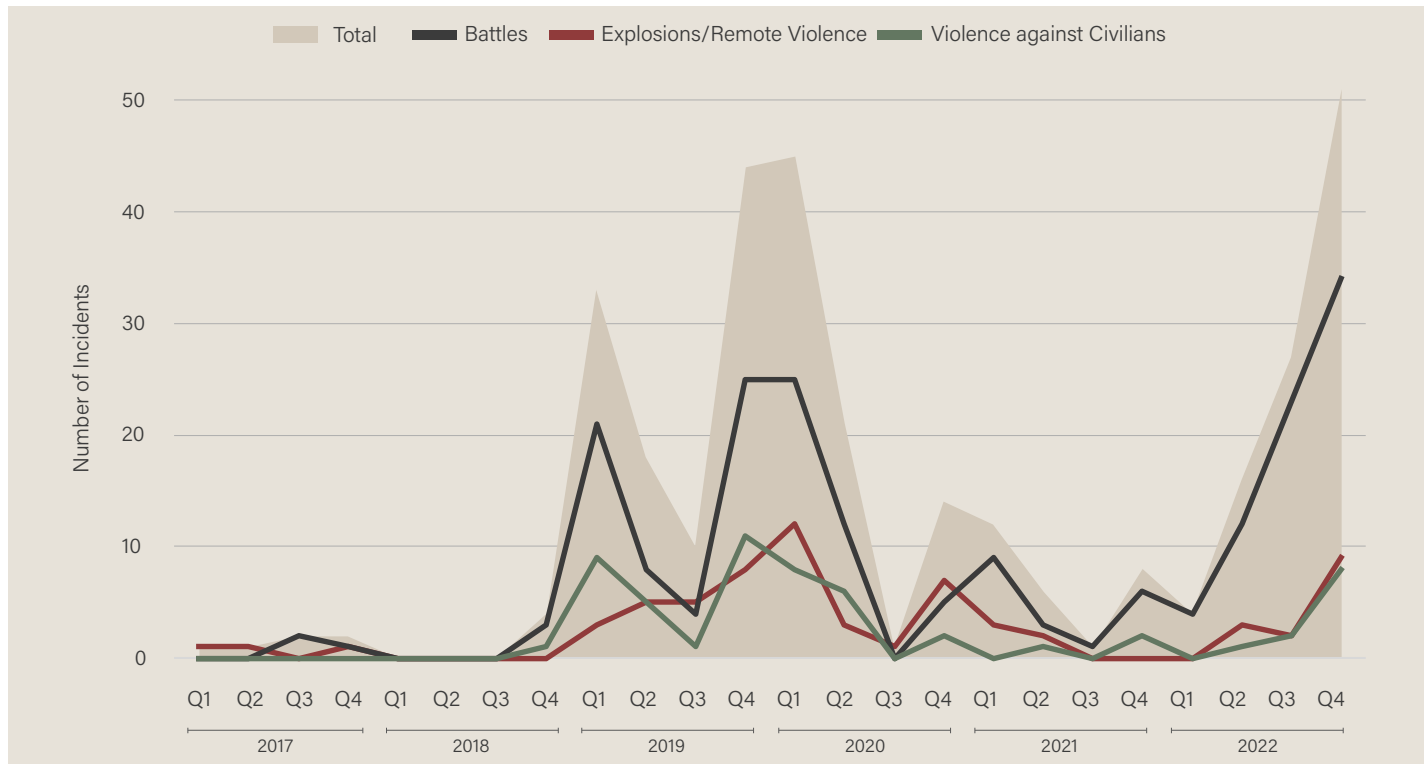la attacks and larger coordinated assaults on hardened positions. A series of prison breaks in 2022 showed that the group can conduct complex attacks on well-secured targets, even in Nigeria's capital city.[41] These latter attacks do not demonstrate intent to contest government control of major cities; they are aimed at directly increasing ISWAP's fighting power by freeing its members from prison rather than at sowing fear among the general population.

ISWAP represents a greater threat to the government than the original Boko Haram—although it currently represents less of a threat to civilians—and controls more manpower and territory than JAS.[42] Its approach to financing has developed beyond the raiding approach favored by Shekau, instead favoring taxation in areas it controls.[43] However, it does still

engage in raiding—including against military facilities—and kidnapping for ransom as sources of funds.[44] It primarily operates in parts of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad around Lake Chad. Although ISWAP still represents a relatively local threat in a country that sees high rates of political violence not associated with terrorist groups, these attacks combined with its development into a more state-like entity suggest that it is likely grow into a threat to government control across much of northern Nigeria.

Once one of Africa's most notorious terrorist groups, JAS maintains Boko Haram's name and its Salafi-jihadist ideology, although it controls no territory and is not currently capable of imposing its interpretation of Sharia on civilian populations for any extended period of time. The group is highly decentralized, its leadership structure was broken by the death of Shekau, and most of its fighters either joined ISWAP or surrendered to the Nigerian government. [45] JAS demonstrates limited capability to conduct operations beyond a few scattered areas in northern Nigeria. Remnants of the group remain active north and west of Lake Chad, where

Figure 2.8

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadists in Western Niger, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

in December 2020 and has claimed several attacks in the past two years.[50] Ansaru may be able to draw on the strength of JNIM, with which it shares connections.[51] It also appears to be recruiting along ethnic lines, issuing propaganda in Fulfuldé to Nigerian Fulani communities.[52] Although information about the group remains scarce and its operational presence appears limited, the reentry of al Qaeda into Nigeria means that the threat is only growing more complicated. The group's rise could drive intra-jihadist conflict as well as increase terrorist violence targeting security forces and civilians in coming years.

Niger

With Burkina Faso and Mali to its west and Nigeria to its south, Niger faces two distinct terrorist threats in its border regions. JNIM and ISSP are active in western Niger, while ISWAP and JAS are active in the south. The violence in Niger is an extension of the violence already taking place in the adjoining countries and has followed most of the same trends: increasing intensity, conflict between Salafi-jihadist organizations, and threats to civilians. These trends are less pronounced than in the country's neighbors, however, and Niger does not appear to be the primary theater for West Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups. The main exception is the relative importance of western Niger to ISSP. While JNIM affiliates are active across nearly all of Mali and Burkina Faso, ISSP's operational reach is more limited. The result is that it depends more on Nigerien territory than JNIM affiliates do. As a result, it accounts for a greater proportion of violence.

Western Niger represents the main site for Salafi-jihadist expansion in the country. (Figure 2.8) While the operational reach of ISWAP in eastern Niger has remained stable since 2019, jihadist activity in western Niger has continued to expand. The violence has also worsened, reaching a new height of intensity in 2021, when Salafi-jihadists conducted several massacres in western Niger.[53]

Rates of violence associated with terrorist groups in Niger declined slightly in 2022, but the 2023 coup d'état in the country represents a major threat to counterterrorist efforts in the region. The United States operates

they continue to clash with ISWAP, and near the Nigeria-Cameroon border, where they are mainly involved in raids on civilian locations.[46]

The most centralized of the remaining subgroups maintains a maritime capability on Lake Chad.[47] The mobility offered by its motorized canoes allows it to remain a threat to communities on the lake, but it does not appear to have the vehicles to allow its fighters to challenge ISWAP's dominance on land.[48] Although JAS has become involved in more violence since 2020—which suggests that its threat did not die with Shekau—the group's lack of territorial control, small size, and highly decentralized structure suggest that it poses little danger beyond the areas in which it currently operates.

The reemergence of Ansaru in Nigeria provides a potential vector for further increases in insecurity. Ansaru is an al Qaeda affiliate that went "underground" after the 2013 French intervention in Mali.[49] After several years of degradation at the hands of Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces, the group pledged allegiance to AQIM

two bases in Niger, and unmanned aerial systems (UAS) operations were impacted by the attempted coup.[54] The junta also requested support from the Wagner Group, which has done little to stem the expansion of Mali's terrorist insurgency.[55] The drawdown of the U.S. military presence, the replacement of Western forces with Wagner personnel, or conflict between the Nigerien junta and other regional states would be a boon for the Sahel's terrorist insurgent groups, especially ISSP.

West African Littorals: Benin, Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire

Salafi-jihadist groups active in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger pose a small but growing threat to the littoral states on the Gulf of Guinea. This threat mostly consists of insurgent-style violence in northern border areas of the littoral states, where the presence of Salafi-jihadists has been observed in the past few years.[56] These activities do not yet appear to have opened a new offensive front in the Sahelian jihad, but terrorist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger could do so if their leaders desire.

The threat is greatest in Benin. Violent incidents associated with Salafi-jihadist groups increased to 41 in 2022 from 5 in 2021, with all the attacks concentrated in border areas.[57] Terrorist insurgencies use the country's nature reserves to facilitate cross-border activity and evade security forces, which leads to conflict with the countries that patrol the parks within West Africa's littoral states. For example, jihadists in Park W mainly use the reserve to enable their activities in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger but have also conducted attacks on local security forces and exerted their control over communities in the park area.[58] Terrorists use the dense tree cover to avoid notice by drones and manned aircraft, smuggle materiel between connecting countries, tax artisanal gold mining, and stock cattle.[59] This generates income and enables their operations in Burkina Faso.

Northern Togo faces a comparable threat. Insurgent-style attacks increased in 2022, although to a lesser extent than in Benin.[60] Salafi-jihadist groups maintain freedom of movement in the border areas, although they seem less committed to a permanent presence, apparently using the area primarily for logistics purposes.[61] The Togolese government responded to the threat by declaring a state of emergency in 2022 that was later extended to March 2023.[62] The military increased its presence in the northern border areas, although these troops

have been accused of repressing demonstrations in the Savanes region—which could itself contribute to recruitment by armed groups.[63] Ethnic and religious tension, a thriving trafficking economy, and a porous international border also contribute to insurgent activity by providing incentives or enabling terrorist groups' activities in northern Togo.

Ghana faces no active terrorist insurgency, but reports of Salafi-jihadist activities in the country's north suggest a latent threat. Terrorist groups based in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso recruit in Ghana, and approximately 200 Ghanaians are fighting in JNIM or ISSP.[64] Weaknesses in the Ghanaian economy, popular dissatisfaction with public services and institutions, and looming disruptions from climate change suggest that violent extremism could find fertile ground in the country in the coming years.[65] The Ghanaian government scores better on a variety of government and stability indicators than its neighbors—even before they have witnessed increases in violence—suggesting that it is more capable of containing any terrorist insurgency than Togo and Benin. Even so, the length of Ghana's border with Burkina Faso and the ongoing signs of Salafi-jihadist expansion into Togo and Benin suggest that Ghanaian authorities must remain vigilant.

Côte d'Ivoire also faces a potential danger due to its proximity to Burkina Faso and Mali, but terrorism does not yet pose more than an occasional threat to local civilians or government entities. An increase in Salafi-jihadist violence in 2021—mostly attributed to the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina—did not develop into a trend in 2022.[66] The risk is therefore currently one of potential terrorist expansion rather than one of ongoing violence. Although an AQIM attack on a resort near Abidjan in 2016 remains the deadliest terrorist attack conducted in West Africa's littoral states, it is still an isolated incident.[67] Groups could conduct such attacks in the future but have not demonstrated the intent nor capability to do so regularly.

Cameroon

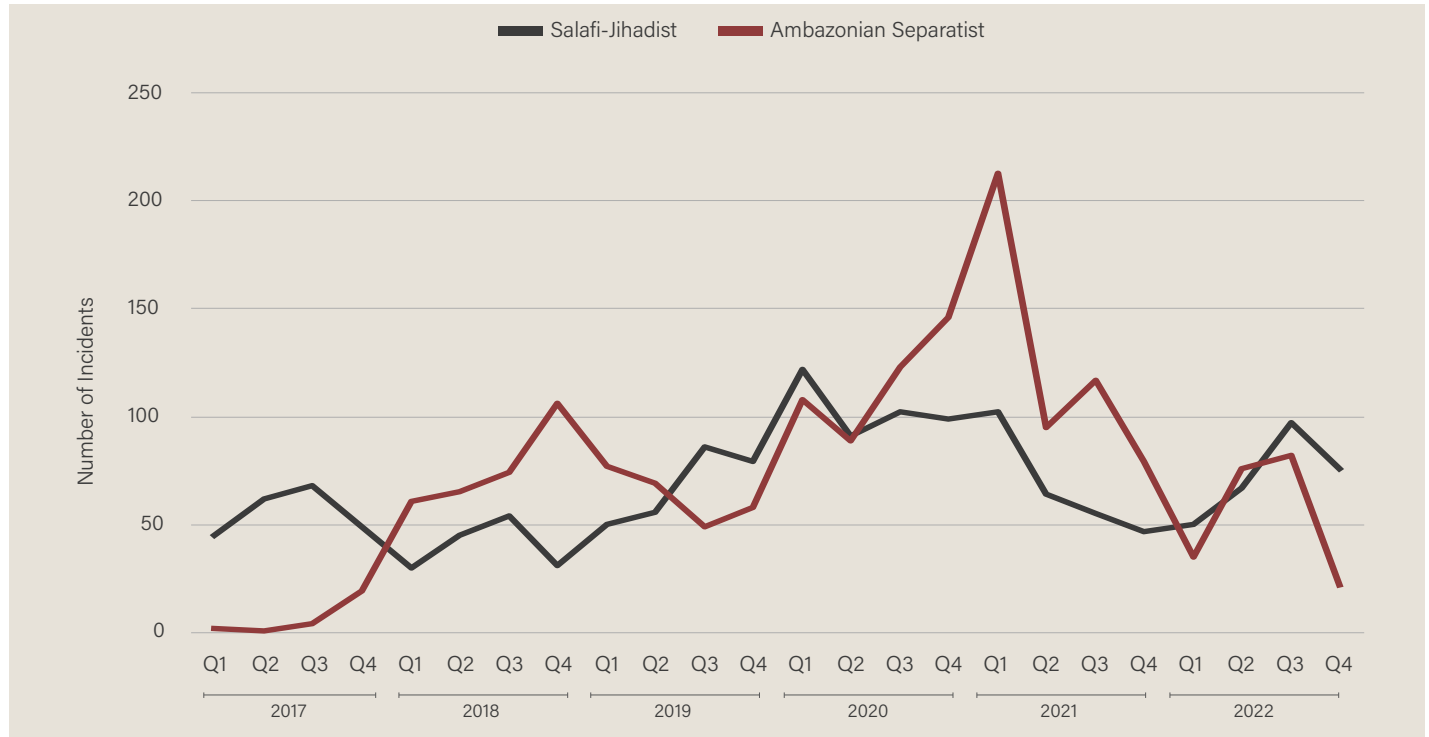Cameroon faces terrorist threats from two main sources. The first is a separatist insurgency in the country's southwest, and the second is a Salafi-jihadist threat to the country's north. There is little sign that the conflict is close to resolution despite a decrease in violence since early 2021. The most likely trajectory is therefore a resurgence in separatist violence that splits the government's

Figure 2.9

Violent Incidents Involving Prominent Non-state Armed Groups in Cameroon by Ideological Alignment, 2017–2022

Note: The ideological affiliation variable was coded based on the identity of the involved non-state armed group.
Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

attention and permits continued growth of Salafi-jihadist activity in the north.

The threat in southwest Cameroon is driven by Anglophone groups committed to self-rule in an area known as "Ambazonia." Rather than a single organization with a coherent structure, the Ambazonian separatists are a constellation of groups linked by their desire to achieve independence for Cameroon's English-speaking regions. They assassinate government personnel, conduct attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and assault fixed government positions.[68] Separatist groups have undertaken terrorist attacks against civilian targets, displaying an intent to generate publicity and deny the government benefits.[69]

Although capable of conducting deadly attacks in their areas of operation, these groups do not currently demonstrate any intent to attack targets beyond southwest Cameroon. They are also unlikely to develop the capabilities to do so. Although they control some territory, the

movement is not unified into a hierarchy that would ease development of more sophisticated capabilities, nor do they possess the partnerships that would be helpful to the development of such capabilities. Some of the groups benefit from cross-border ties with separatist groups in Nigeria, but none of them have demonstrated the operational sophistication and global objectives of a group such as al Qaeda or the Islamic State.[70] These external partnerships therefore will not dramatically change the Ambazonian movement's operational, strategic, or ideological trajectory.

The Ambazonian conflict is unlikely to be resolved in the coming years. Violence reached a peak in 2020, driven by several factors—including separatist infighting, the 2020 Cameroonian elections, and security measures undertaken due to the Covid-19 pandemic—but has since declined. Despite reports that a peace process would be mediated by Canada, government figures denied the existence of such a process, and reports of progress were non-existent in the year following initial reports of

Figure 2.10

Violent Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Cameroon by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

its inception.[71] There are few reasons for optimism: all past attempts to resolve the conflict through dialogue have failed. The presence of a mediator might help if the government buys into the process, but the separatists' territorial objectives and the lack of a single Ambazonian leadership structure will make the negotiations difficult.[72] The most likely outcome is renewed conflict in the country's Anglophone regions.

The threat that Salafi-jihadist groups pose to Cameroon is currently contained to the country's northernmost areas, where ISWAP conducts attacks as part of its operations in the wider Lake Chad region. ISWAP appears to be attempting to expand into areas formerly under the influence of JAS and Boko Haram in the vicinity of Lake Chad, and violence associated with the group is increasing again in 2022 after a relative lull in 2021.[73] Although attacks south of ISWAP's historical areas of operation have been recorded in the past few years, the issue has not yet escalated beyond a local concern. Continued ISWAP territorial expansion would undermine regional stability, however, and the group's consolidation of power in northern Nigeria suggests that the threat will persist absent a shift in Cameroon's security activities toward counterterrorism

in the country's north. Such a shift is unlikely unless the country's Anglophone crisis is resolved.

The overall outlook for the terrorist threat to Cameroon is therefore one of persistent local threats. A successful peace deal with the Ambazonian separatist groups would permit Cameroon to focus its attention on its Salafi-jihadist problem while reducing the terrorist threat from separatist groups, but such a deal remains distant. The most likely scenario is therefore a continued insurgency in the country's southwest and a growing Salafi-jihadist threat in the country's far north. The Ambazonian insurgency will remain a local problem absent significant changes in the separatists' ideology or strategy, but the jihadists are part of a regional threat. ISWAP is consolidating its power and control in northwest Nigeria, and the violence in Cameroon will only worsen as it does so.

Chad

Despite its proximity to Nigeria and Niger, Chad has been spared most of these countries' struggles with terrorism. After several years of relative calm, however, Salafi-jihadist activity underwent an unusual but short-

lived increase in July and September of 2022. The July incidents consisted of a series of mortar attacks during the night of July 5, which occur occasionally in the areas near Chad's border with Nigeria. More troubling was the apparent ISWAP conquest of two villages in September, which prompted an operation by security forces to take back the villages and free several hostages.[74] This attack thus far represents an isolated incident, although cross-border raiding and attacks on Chadian security forces near Lake Chad still occur infrequently. As long as Chad avoids a major political crisis such as a coup, terrorism will likely remain limited to cross-border raiding and small indirect fire attacks. If the political instability currently affecting many regional governments spreads to Chad, however, ISWAP or JAS would seek to take advantage of any security vacuums that open in Chad's border areas.

East and Central Africa

East and Central Africa are home to a wide variety of non-state armed groups, but only three pose a meaningful threat beyond the local communities in which they are based: Somalia's Harakat al Shabaab al-Mujahideen (best known as al Shabaab), the Allied Democratic Forces (also known as the Islamic State-Democratic Republic of the Congo), and the Islamic State-Mozambique (also known as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo, Ansar al-Sunna, or al Shabaab).[75] Of these groups, only Harakat al Shabaab al-Mujahideen is likely seeking to strike targets outside of Africa, having plotted such attacks within the past five years. Somalia is also home to a small Islamic State affiliate, but its role in the international terrorist system is less to conduct attacks than to enable the activities of other Islamic State provinces. The remainder of this section provides brief analysis of key trends throughout the region and then assesses the specific threat landscape in the following countries: Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mozambique.

Key Trends

Terrorist groups remain deadly despite military pressure.

All three major terrorist groups in the region are facing ongoing offensives by government or multinational forces. While these offensives appear to have reduced their ability to conduct attacks, none of the region's terrorist groups face a decisive defeat. Al Shabaab has proved resilient and remains capable of seizing and holding territory and conducting attacks in Somalia's capital. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the DRC and Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M) have fared worse but have adapted to the pressure rather than suffering a lasting defeat.

The current offensive against al Shabaab will not defeat the group in the next few years. Al Shabaab remains large and well resourced, and the government offensive has not yet threatened the group's main sources of support. The United Nations estimates that al Shabaab continues to field a force of between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters and "remains undiminished in capacity" since the beginning of the offensive.[76] The group maintains a sizeable war chest and earns between $100 million and $150 million per year from levying taxes on all aspects of the Somali economy.[77] Most important to the group's resilience is its ability to tax civilians even in areas nominally under government control.[78] Government efforts to starve al Shabaab of funding will fail as long as the group maintains that capability.

The government's successful offensive against al Shabaab has thus far involved attempts to disrupt the group's finances, a UAS campaign targeting the group's command structures, and reliance on the support of clan militias.[79] All of these can degrade the group, but none will do so quickly because the group's financial reserves and ability to tax government-controlled areas mean that it is unlikely to run out of money any time soon. Sustained UAS campaigns seem to have played a major role in degrading groups such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula by forcing them to adopt more restrictive operational security measures and killing particularly talented individuals, but success takes time to materialize.[80] The willingness of traditional authorities to throw their support behind the government has also played a key role in successes such as that observed in Anbar, Iraq, but Somalia's clans are not yet united against al Shabaab due to inter-clan politics.[81]

The result is that al Shabaab will remain a threat for years to come. Even if the government can extend its control into the group's strongholds, al Shabaab will maintain operational capability absent large-scale surrenders in the face of overwhelming government pressure. The offensive may also increase al Shabaab's desire to attack foreign targets in order to pressure them to withdraw support for the Somali government. The most likely candidate targets are the United States

and Turkey, which provide prominent support for the Somali government and have been the targets of al Shabaab attacks in the past.

Offensives against the ADF and IS-M have met with greater success, but both terrorist groups have adapted and continue to conduct attacks. In the DRC, the ADF operates over a much wider area than before the offensive, possibly due to the group's shift toward a structure composed of small mobile bands as its base areas have come under attack by military forces. Its capabilities have also expanded, with the ADF incorporating suicide attacks into its repertoire. This trend has continued despite military pressure and is therefore likely to remain an increasingly common feature of ADF activity. In Mozambique, IS-M has shown early signs of adapting to the new level of military pressure, expanding into new areas, and attempting outreach to civilian organizations in a manner consistent with a population-based insurgency. Its ability to adapt successfully remains unproved, and it faces the highest likelihood of military defeat of the three major terrorist groups in East and Central Africa.

Progress against terrorist insurgencies is sensitive to changes in international politics.

The ongoing offensives against East and Central Africa's terrorist groups are all multinational affairs. The countries most impacted by terrorism in East and Central Africa are generally fragile states without a strong monopoly on the use of force within their territory or that lack political legitimacy in key areas. These governments require outside support if they are to suppress the terrorist threat within their borders. Somalia's campaign against al Shabaab has been supported by Ethiopia, Turkey, and the United States, which have contributed troops and UASs. The DRC's campaign against the ADF has been conducted in tandem with Ugandan forces. Mozambique has benefitted from the involvement of troops from Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community Mission to Mozambique (SAMIM), a multinational force consisting of troops from Angola, Botswana, the DRC, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.[82] The need for multinational cooperation goes beyond the use of troops or military hardware from multiple countries. Terrorist groups also tend to use border areas to seek refuge and extract resources, which gives them the ability to resist and rebound from military pressure. To deny them these benefits requires cooperation between the countries on either side of the border, many of which have their own disputes with their neighbors or the communities that live in the border areas.

The need for cooperation makes successes fragile. Counterterrorist gains depend on resources from multiple countries, many of which have tense relationships in areas unrelated to counterterrorism. The region has contentious international relations, including a history of proxy wars between countries that share an interest in defeating terrorist groups. This history has driven suspicions that countries' apparent campaigns against terrorism serve to obscure attempts to undermine the interests of their neighbors.[83] These campaigns may therefore decrease the terrorist threat while increasing the potential for interstate conflict, which would provide terrorists another opportunity to resurge. The result is that careful management of both international and domestic politics is necessary to sustain success against terrorist insurgencies.

The "ISIS-ization" of East and Central Africa's Islamic State-affiliated groups increases the threat to civilians.

Both the ADF and IS-M have grown closer to the Islamic State's rhetorical and operational style. In 2021, the ADF claimed more attacks through official Islamic State media than in the preceding two years combined, including several beheading videos that echoed the Islamic State's approach to extreme violence.[84] IS-M also appears to be increasing its violence against Christians, a consistent theme in Islamic State propaganda.[85] Whether these trends represent an organic development originating in the groups' grassroots, a top-down effort driven by international Salafi-jihadist ideologues, or some combination of the two, they suggest that terrorist violence is likely to intensify in the coming years in East and Central Africa even if counterterrorist pressure makes attacks less frequent. Affiliates of the Islamic State espouse an even more extreme interpretation of Salafi-jihadism that al Qaeda, conduct more attacks—especially against civilians—and cause more fatalities.[86] The increasing influence of the Islamic State on the ADF and IS-M thus heralds a probable shift toward even more extreme violence, particularly against non-Sunni civilians in their areas of operation.

Somalia

Somalia is home to two main terrorist organizations: al Shabaab and the Islamic State-Somalia. Al Shabaab rep-

resents the greatest direct threat to civilians, the Somali government, and the international community. The local Islamic State affiliate poses a more indirect threat. Although it is small, conducts few attacks, and controls little territory, the group's Al Karrar office serves as an important financial and command hub for other Islamic State affiliates, including the ADF, IS-M, and Islamic State Khorasan Province in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Harakat al Shabaab al-Mujahideen, better known simply as al Shabaab, is a Salafi-jihadist group that traces its roots to Somali participants in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s.[87] Although its precursor group, the Islamic Courts Union, effectively ruled Somalia for approximately six months in 2006, an Ethiopian intervention pushed the group out of Mogadishu and led to al Shabaab's emergence as the main actor in the Somali insurgency.[88] The group is an al Qaeda affiliate and seeks to control Somalia, impose a hardline interpretation of Sharia, and conduct transnational terrorist attacks.[89] It is a relatively hierarchical organization with developed institutions for taxation, policing, counterintelligence, public relations, and military operations.[90]

Al Shabaab poses an acute threat to Somalia's government and civilians. It controls territory, attacks military and civilian targets, and aspires to overthrow the Somali government. It also has both the intent and the capability to conduct attacks outside of Somalia, although its operational reach is currently limited to the immediate region. Al Shabaab targets the interests of states supporting the Somali government, both in Somalia and in their capital cities, and also operates in eastern Kenya. Furthermore, al Shabaab poses a direct and indirect threat to the United States. It has targeted U.S. forces in Somalia and Kenya, seeks the capabilities that would allow it to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States outside of the region, and supports other al Qaeda affiliates with money, guns, and training.[91]

Al Shabaab has been under nearly unprecedented pressure since August 2022, when the government began a new offensive against the group, supported by the United States, Turkey, and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia.[92] The offensive has not broken al Shabaab, which continues to seize and hold territory and to conduct high-casualty, complex attacks in Mogadishu. In August, al Shabaab fighters stormed the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu, killing more than 20 people over the course of a 30-hour siege.[93] In October, the group detonated a pair of car bombs in the capital, killing more

than 100 people.[94] In November, the group overran the Hotel Rose, killing eight civilians and one member of the security forces.[95] The current offensive has done little to decrease the group's ability to conduct terrorist attacks in the capital and is unlikely to do so unless al Shabaab's urban networks are degraded and its ability to move weapons and fighters into the city is destroyed—tasks with little prospect of quick success. A lasting defeat is also impossible until the government retakes far more territory; while it has reclaimed some ground since the beginning of the current offensive, the group's strongholds in Jubaland remain essentially untouched.[96] Until the government advances into these strongholds, its impact on security will not last and Somalia's civilians and government personnel will face a continued threat of al Shabaab attacks.

Al Shabaab also targets countries that support the Somali government. It has conducted high-profile attacks in the capitals of both Uganda and Kenya, attacked U.S. military forces in Somalia and Kenya, and waged a campaign of attacks against Turkish interests in Somalia.[97] All of these countries provide troops or weapons to the Somali government or the African Union Mission in Somalia, strengthening the campaign against al Shabaab. Al Shabaab statements imply that most of its attacks against foreign interests have been intended as retaliation for this support.[98] Governments that support Somalia's government should therefore continue to assume that al Shabaab threatens their interests and will continue to plot attacks in their major cities.

Al Shabaab also desires to conduct attacks in the United States, although it has not demonstrated the capabilities to do so. The group was seeking additional capabilities that would allow it to conduct high-profile attacks in the United States as recently as 2019.[99] A propaganda publication issued at the beginning of 2021 also explicitly threatened U.S. civilians.[100] Although the group is currently under significant pressure, it may be even more motivated to strike U.S. interests due to U.S. support for the Somali government. Even if the group is unable to gain the capabilities necessary to conduct attacks in the United States, al Shabaab could seek to strike U.S. forces in Somalia or Kenya or conduct maritime attacks on shipping off the coast of Somalia. It has demonstrated the capabilities to conduct attacks outside of Somalia before, including on U.S. military facilities, and continues to control the funding and territory to ease its acquisition of new capabilities.

Al Shabaab operates an extensive fundraising enterprise. It taxes all aspects of the Somali economy, from private businesses and non-governmental organizations to arms trafficking rings and illegal fishing operations.[101] It also operates sham charities in order to collect donations, kidnaps valuable individuals for ransom, and operates a variety of other racketeering schemes.[102] Overall, al Shabaab raises $100–150 million each year from these activities.[103] This fundraising capability allows al Shabaab to act as a facilitator for terrorism outside of Somalia by contributing funds to other al Qaeda affiliates.[104] The variety and volume of its fundraising activities make al Shabaab a particularly resilient group.

Al Shabaab's resilience in the face of the most recent government offensive suggests that the next few years in Somalia will likely look much like the present, with the government applying battlefield pressure while al Shabaab continues to hold much of the territory it currently controls. Key unknowns include the ability of the government to maintain its current level of offensive activity, the ability of al Shabaab to free up resources for external operations while under military pressure, and the future attitude of Somalia's clans toward the government and al Shabaab. The group may rebuild its external capabilities if the government slackens its offensive or if the group adapts its tactics, techniques, and procedures to the new reality. The loyalties of Somalia's clans present a complicating factor for any forward-looking assessment, since the government's successes have been built on its improved management of clan politics. If the loyalties of Somalia's clans shift dramatically in favor of either al Shabaab or the government, the conflict would change rapidly. Even if the shift is in favor of the government, however, al Shabaab has strategic options that would allow it to remain a threat, such as expanding into Kenya to relieve pressure on the group within Somalia or giving up control over territory and adopting a covert structure across the country.

The Islamic State's Somali affiliate poses a far less direct threat than al Shabaab. Based in Puntaland in northern Somalia, the group is small, conducts few attacks, and controls little territory.[105] It espouses the same Salafi-jihadist ideology as other Islamic State groups but does not control sufficient territory for its desire to implement that ideology to be effectively assessed. Its importance is a product of its role in the wider Islamic State ecosystem, in which it serves as a financial and command hub. The group's al Karrar office is thought by the United Nations to be responsible for coordinating the activities of Islamic State affiliates in eastern, southern, and central Africa.[106] The group also raises funds and distributes them to other Islamic State groups, specifically the Islamic State Khorasan Province.[107] The United Nations also reports allegations that the group raises $100,000 per month from extorting the shipping industry but notes that its analysts have not seen definitive evidence to support specifics of this claim.[108]

Kenya

Most Kenyans face no day-to-day threat from terrorism. Most of Kenya's political violence is related to pastoralist conflict or the country's contentious elections.[109] Notable exceptions can be found in Kenya's capital and communities near its border with Somalia. Al Shabaab has conducted infrequent but high-impact attacks in Nairobi in the past and will likely attempt to do so again in the future if it deems such attacks to be in its strategic interest. The group also maintains a presence on the Kenya-Somalia border, where it conducts attacks at a low tempo against local communities, security forces, and infrastructure.

Al Shabaab has conducted several high-profile attacks in Kenya, most recently in 2019. These attacks, which targeted a hotel complex in Nairobi, a university in Garissa, and the Westgate Shopping Mall, were an al Shabaab response to Kenya's involvement in the campaign against al Shabaab in Somalia or part of a broad campaign of retaliation for the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.[110] The attack against U.S. forces at Camp Simba was also part of this campaign.[111] The risk of similar attacks will persist at least as long as Kenya continues to fight against al Shabaab. Each of the incidents was serious, but their collective impact has been low. A total of 237 people were killed across these three attacks—excluding the attackers—and 281 more were wounded, meaning that al Shabaab's high-profile attacks in Kenya have caused 518 casualties in 10 years. By comparison, more than five times as many people were murdered in Kenya in 2021 alone.[112]

Al Shabaab takes advantage of the porous border in Mandera County and the Boni Forest area to move personnel, weapons, and possibly timber and charcoal, which is used to finance the group.[113] Attacks appear to have increased in the past year, when al Shabaab claimed or was accused of at least 75 attacks in Kenya, compared with 45 in 2021 and 52 in 2020.[114] The apparent

rise in attacks predates the ongoing offensive against al Shabaab in Somalia, and it remains unclear whether the increase is part of an ongoing trend or is a short-lived spike with minimal long-term significance.

Ethiopia

Terrorism poses a minimal threat to Ethiopian civilians. Although Ethiopia has been involved in a civil conflict with several northern armed groups that it designates as terrorists, that conflict is in the early stages of resolution following the completion of negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front in 2022. Al Shabaab conducted an unusual offensive in southern Ethiopia in 2022 and may wish to conduct further attacks in the country, but it is unlikely to succeed as long as Somali clans in Ethiopia remain opposed to the group and the country's security forces remain undistracted by renewed civil war.

Although al Shabaab has never demonstrated significant capabilities in Ethiopia, it likely desires to conduct attacks there. In the wake of the July 2022 incursion by al Shabaab fighters, an unnamed former al Shabaab member and a Canadian political analyst both stated that al Shabaab intended to infiltrate the country to establish a new military front there.[115] Al Shabaab has allegedly attempted other attacks in Ethiopia in the past, released a propaganda pamphlet apparently aimed at an Ethiopian audience, and regularly attacks Ethiopian military forces operating in Somalia.[116] Attacks against Ethiopian interests would also be consistent with al Shabaab's pattern of attacking countries fighting against the group in Somalia. The group will likely conduct such attacks if it is able to build covert networks inside Ethiopia or establish a foothold in the country's border regions, although the relatively high capacity of Ethiopia's security forces and the opposition of the country's Somali clans will limit al Shabaab's ability to do so.[117] A major shift in Ethiopian politics could weaken the security forces or make local power brokers more likely to accept the group's presence, but the conditions that could lead to these shifts are absent barring a return to the full-scale civil war that characterized the period from 2020 to 2022.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

The main terrorist threat to civilians in the DRC and adjoining countries is the ADF, which is also known as

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Figure 2.11

Violent Incidents Involving the ADF by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

the Islamic State Democratic Republic of the Congo. The ADF is an Islamic State affiliate with a complicated history that stretches back to the 1990s.[118] During that history, the religious content of its ideology has waxed and waned, but current propaganda emphasizes the Salafi-jihadist nature of its campaign.[119] The ADF strictly controls information about its structure, but the United Nations reports that the group has fractured around ADF leader Seka Baluku's commitment to the Islamic State.[120] The group draws on extraction of natural resources, including timber, gold, and minerals, for financing, although based on the arrest of two Ugandans accused of laundering funds for the ADF via petroleum and real estate companies, the group likely raises funds through a variety of criminal fundraising activities.[121]

The ADF mostly targets civilians in the eastern DRC but has demonstrated the sporadic capability to conduct attacks in regional capitals in the past several years. The group is currently facing significant military pressure from a joint DRC-Ugandan offensive, but it is proving adaptable: over the past few years, the ADF has increased its attacks against civilians, grown its operational reach, and expanded its tactical repertoire

to include suicide bombings. The future of the ADF is exceptionally difficult to predict. The group displays indicators of increasing capabilities alongside reports of internal friction and other ambiguous signals. However, the group will remain a threat in the eastern DRC and could conduct attacks in the capital cities of the DRC or Uganda in the coming years.

The ADF has conducted attacks over a widening area in the eastern DRC since 2019. A recent UN report estimates that the group has nearly tripled its operational area in the past four months.[122] The claim is difficult to corroborate using open sources, but UN analysts estimate that the group currently conducts operations across an area of 8,200 square kilometers, an area about the size of Puerto Rico. The United Nations claims that this expansion is the result of military pressure, but the expansion appears to predate the military offensive.[123] Adding to the difficultly in interpreting trends of ADF activity are reports that the group has splintered due to disagreements over its relationship with the Islamic State.[124] While the offensive may indeed have forced ADF units to disperse into small mobile groups, it would be a mistake to draw conclusions regarding the group's long-

Figure 2.12

Violent Incidents Involving IS-M by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

term trajectory from such ambiguous data. What is clear is that the group threatens DRC civilians over a wider area than ever before and has not been defeated by the ongoing multinational offensive.

One indicator that the ADF has been growing more dangerous is the expansion of its tactical repertoire to include suicide bombings. The ADF conducted its first suicide bombings in 2021, with attacks in Uganda's capital city and in the eastern DRC cities of Goma and Beni.[125] These bombings suggest the injection of outside bombmaking expertise into the group.[126] Such expertise could be transmitted from other Islamic State affiliates or brought into the group by foreign fighters, who have been arrested with greater frequency by security forces in the past two years.[127] Of particular concern is the presence of Somali fighters in the ranks of the ADF; the intensity and longevity of the Salafi-jihadist insurgency in Somalia suggest that these fighters are particularly well positioned to bring new capabilities or greater proficiency to the group. Whatever the main driver of the suicide bombings turns out to be, they will remain a regular feature of life in the eastern DRC—at least until the bombmakers or trainers are arrested or killed.

Uganda

Terrorism poses a limited threat in Uganda, although 2021 saw a major escalation in the form of a set of ADF suicide bombings in Kampala. The attacks do not yet appear to be the beginning of a trend, but the ADF will almost certainly conduct further attacks when it becomes capable of doing so. The group has a long history of opposing the Ugandan government, and Uganda's participation in the ongoing offensive will only increase the ADF's desire to retaliate inside of the country, most likely via attacks on soft targets in the capital or areas abutting the border with the DRC.

Mozambique

Militants associated with IS-M, sometimes called Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaa and known locally as al Shabaab (although it lacks any affiliation with the Somali group of the same name) pose the greatest threat to civilians in Mozambique. The group has waged an insurgency in the Cabo Delgado province for more than five years. The group has existed since approximately 2013 but emerged as a terrorist insurgency in 2017 with a series of attacks against security forces in the northern city of Mocímboa da Praia.[128] Since then, the group has waged

an expanding and intensifying violent campaign against the Mozambican government. Today, it faces significant military pressure from Mozambique, Rwanda, and the SAMIM. Its ability to adapt to such pressure is still unproven, and the coming few years will either see it be defeated or increase its resilience through adaptations to the new military reality.

The group was founded by Abdul Carimo in 2013 or 2014, although it is part of a longer history of Islamic sects in northern Mozambique.[129] It has sought to establish a Sharia-based political system since at least 2017, when it conducted its first significant set of attacks.[130] It pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2018, was formally acknowledged as an affiliate in 2019, and was granted the status of a province in 2022.[131] It maintains links to other Islamic State affiliates, including the Islamic State core; has foreign terrorist fighters in its ranks; and is led by Abu Yasir Hassan, a Tanzanian national.[132] Open-source information on IS-M's financing is scarce, although many analysts speculate that it could take advantage of widespread illicit economies in northern Mozambique.[133] People who had lived under IS-M control did not mention that the group collected taxes in areas under its control but pointed instead to kidnappings for ransom, extraction of bribes, and other criminal activity as sources of funding.[134]

The group poses an acute threat to civilian communities in Cabo Delgado. In 2021 and 2022, IS-M targeted civilians at increasing rates despite claiming to be fighting only the government.[135] It has engaged in mass killings and appears to have intentionally depopulated large swathes of the province, with more than 1 million people having been internally displaced due to the conflict.[136] These attacks directly threaten the lives of civilians and drive risks of wider instability as the flow of displaced persons strains states' capacities to respond.

IS-M also plays a role in the international Salafi-jihadist ecosystem. The group has long-standing connections to Tanzanian militants—its founder appears to have developed his ideological leanings in Tanzania, and many of the group's higher-ranking members are Tanzanian.[137] Mozambican security officials have also alleged that IS-M has operational links to the ADF, and the group receives financial support from the Islamic State's wider African networks.[138] Its attacks are promoted by international Islamic State media, but regional states allege that there is no compelling evidence that the Islamic State core exerts any operational control over IS-M.[139]

For now, its role is as an importer of violence—it pulls resources and members from countries without active terrorist insurgencies—but that could change. A true battlefield defeat in Mozambique could reverse that trend permanently or temporarily, contributing to violence in neighboring countries, particularly Tanzania, as foreign and local fighters cross national borders in pursuit of safe haven or softer targets.

The international threat posed by the insurgency in Mozambique is indirect, a threat to energy and economic security rather than physical security. The group poses little direct threat to civilians outside of Cabo Delgado, having never conducted attacks outside of northern Mozambique and southern Tanzania. It is instead Cabo Delgado's proximity to large offshore natural gas deposits that gives IS-M activities their main international implications. Mozambique has the third-largest proven natural gas reserves in Africa, with most of the gas fields located off of Cabo Delgado.[140] Insecurity on land has impacted the ability of gas companies to exploit these reserves, with the attacks on Mocímba da Praia and Palma in 2020 and 2021 leading to significant disruptions due to companies' security concerns.[141] IS-M has also demonstrated a limited maritime capability, attacking islands and ships off the coast of Cabo Delgado.[142] The group's ability to capture port towns and threaten international workers means it is has presented a threat to the interests of countries outside of the region, although the ongoing offensive appears to have reduced those capabilities for now. The threat will increase if the group regains its former strength or improves its maritime capabilities, although it is currently unlikely to do so given the pressure it is now facing.

IS-M is at a turning point. Its response to an offensive by Mozambican, Rwandan, and SAMIM forces will determine whether it persists as a major threat to Mozambican civilians and security forces or if it faces the prospect of defeat. Prior to the intervention of international forces, IS-M demonstrated increasing military capability. The group succeeded in briefly taking control of a set of small cities in March and August 2020, showing that it was able to concentrate large numbers of fighters in operations requiring coordination and intelligence preparation.[143] It also conducted attacks across a growing geographical area, a trend that has continued despite the international intervention.[144] In fact, the United Nations observes that IS-M has exhibited "enhanced strategic and tactical coordination" in the face of a recent international offen-

sive.[145] The group is a long way away from threatening the government's survival, but its ability to defeat security forces and overrun smaller cities indicates a threat to the state in Cabo Delgado and at least a potential threat to government control in previously unaffected areas.

The long-term future of the insurgency is uncertain due to the novelty of the current intervention, which is the first counteroffensive the group has faced from a multinational force. IS-M has not yet been forced to demonstrate staying power in the face of a concerted counterterrorist offensive but has shown early signs of adaptation to the new level of military pressure. The group has accelerated the expansion of its geographic footprint, split into smaller and more mobile units, and initiated small-scale outreach to local civilians.[146] Underlying drivers of support for the insurgency have not yet been resolved, but new efforts to address regional inequality could begin to do so.[147] The ability of the military to control territory could also play a decisive role on its own. Pluralities of local respondents to a 2022 survey ranked the discovery of rubies and natural gas as the main driver of the insurgency and indicated that insecurity was their main concern.[148] Severing the insurgents from sources of wealth and increasing the perception that the government can protect local populations from terrorist violence therefore be a decisive factor in the conflict.

North Africa

Salafi-jihadist violence is at a low point in North Africa, although activity from cells in countries such as Algeria and Libya merit continued monitoring. For the purposes of this analysis, North Africa includes Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. Since the primary terrorist threat in Egypt is centered on the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt is assessed in Chapter 6, which covers terrorism in the Middle East.

The key trend in North Africa is of a declining Salafi-jihadist threat. No Salafi-jihadist group in North Africa has conducted attacks at anything approaching the rate of counterparts in other African regions. Salafi-jihadist groups control no major territory, command relatively few fighters, and have adopted decentralized structures under counterterrorism pressure. However, the groups continue to survive in North Africa's borderlands and could pose a greater threat if the opportunity arose for their resurgence through a political crisis in North Africa that weakens the region's governments.

The most important terrorist group in North Africa is AQIM. Algerian elements of the group reside in the Algeria-Mali border area: in 2020, French forces killed an AQIM emir in a part of Mali close to the border with Algeria.[149] Current AQIM emir Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi is a senior member of al Qaeda and has been considered a potential contender to succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri as the group's overall emir.[150] Al-Anabi told a French media outlet in early 2023 that AQIM's interests were limited to Africa, although he implied that the group desired to attack France due to its involvement in the continent.[151] This suggests a continued low-level threat to France and other countries that support West African governments against al Qaeda affiliates in Africa, although AQIM probably lacks the necessary capabilities to conduct attacks in Europe or the United States.

The threat posed by the Islamic State and al Qaeda affiliates in Libya is currently low. Neither group controls territory nor has shown the capacity to conduct regular attacks on security forces in recent years.[152] The Islamic State affiliate in Libya is operationally weak but continues to demonstrate resilience. It has adapted to counterterrorism pressure by dividing into cells and redeploying to cities and mountainous areas.[153] Al Qaeda also maintains a presence in southern Libya, where it appears to have settled fighters from Niger. The group also maintains significant links with al Qaeda affiliates in West Africa, especially Mali, where it draws on logistics capacity in northern cities.[154] The future outlook for the capabilities and intentions of both groups is unclear as Sahelian Salafi-jihadist groups draw ever greater attention and resources.

Conclusion

The terrorist landscape in Africa is dominated by Salafi-jihadist groups. These groups are faring differently in West Africa, Central and East Africa, and North Africa. Apparent differences in intent suggest that groups in West Africa pose the most potent local threat, while East Africa's al Shabaab poses the greatest international threat. Groups in North Africa have been in decline for several years but almost certainly aspire to attacks in their countries of origin if not further afield.

In West Africa, Salafi-jihadist groups are ascendent. The al Qaeda affiliates in JNIM have expanded their operational reach and have contributed to political instability in Mali and Burkina Faso. They are increasing their activities in northern Benin and Togo and pose a latent threat in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. ISSP is seeking to recover from a string of defeats and expand its territorial control out of the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region in the face of resistance from JNIM, national militaries, and local communities. Meanwhile, ISWAP has emerged from the power struggle with Boko Haram as the dominant terrorist group in the Lake Chad region and is beginning to show signs that it will expand its operational reach in the coming years. These conflicts will all continue to worsen and will constantly carry the threat that they will metastasize into ethnic conflict or trigger coups d'état that reshape the region's international political order. The groups have thus far demonstrated little appetite for attacks outside of the region, but if their strategic calculations change, they would likely be able to develop the capabilities to do so based on their international connections, control over territory, and access to financial resources.

In Central and East Africa, Salafi-jihadist groups are all facing government offensives enabled by international support. The groups all seem poised to survive the offensives, with al Shabaab being the most likely to do so without significant long-term changes to the organization. The ADF has been forced out of its traditional areas and modes of operation but is likely to survive as a highly mobile guerilla force that preys on civilians in the eastern DRC. IS-M faces the greatest challenges. The youngest of the region's Salafi-jihadist groups, it has been severely attenuated by international forces. It is beginning to adapt to the pressure, but its ability to successfully do so is untested. The long-term threat it poses is therefore uncertain, although it is highly unlikely to pose a meaningful international threat.

In North Africa, Salafi-jihadist groups have been reduced to shadows of their former selves. There is little reason to believe that they have abandoned their ambitions to conduct attacks, but a combination of counterterrorism pressure and international jihadist organizations' increasing focus on West Africa has reduced their ability to do so. Absent a sudden collapse of one or more North African states, these groups will remain eclipsed in the global terrorist landscape.

Chapter 3

The Americas

The threat of terrorism in North and South America varies significantly across regions. Terrorist attacks are increasingly frequent and highly concerning in the United States and Canada. Meanwhile, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America face the lowest threat of terrorism of any inhabited world region.

The United States and Canada face a severe and growing threat from groups and individuals adhering to a diverse range of terrorist ideologies, including those traditionally labeled as domestic extremists. The number of terrorist attacks in the United States reached its highest level in three decades in 2020, but the main threat is no longer international terrorist groups. In contrast to the 20 years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the terrorist networks that currently pose the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland are domestic. The number of Salafi-jihadist terrorist attacks in the United States has significantly decreased in recent years, while incidents orchestrated by violent far-right extremists—such as white supremacists, anti-gov-

ernment extremists, and violent misogynists—and violent far-left extremists—such as anti-fascist extremists, anarchists, and environmental extremists—are on the rise. Ethnonationalist terrorism is relatively rare in the United States, though events related to long-standing ethnonationalist conflicts abroad, such as the Israel-Hamas war, increase the risk of inspired attacks against U.S. targets. Although both violent far-right and far-left attacks have grown in frequency, violent far-right terrorism poses the most significant threat in terms of both the number of incidents and the lethality of attacks.

In contrast, terrorism is relatively infrequent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most terrorist events in these regions are related to local political grievances, the rights of Indigenous peoples, and violent environmentalism, including eco-anarchism. Although the region has historically been plagued by security threats from left-wing guerrilla insurgent groups—particularly in countries such as Colombia and Peru—the danger from these

groups has decreased significantly, though moderate- to low-level threats from splinter factions remain.

Based on the starkly divided nature and scope of the terrorist threat in different parts of the Americas, this chapter is divided into two halves. The first covers the United States and Canada, while the second addresses the Caribbean and Latin America.[1] Each section begins with a discussion of key themes before proceeding to brief studies of the terrorist threat in several regional countries.

The United States and Canada

The United States and Canada will likely continue to face a high threat of terrorism over the next year, primarily from domestic violent extremists. The majority of these individuals and networks are motivated by white supremacism and anti-government ideologies. This section provides brief analyses of recent trends in terrorist activity in the United States and Canada—including a discussion of key networks and ideologies—then provides short assessments of the terrorism threat in each country.

Key Trends

The key topics for policymakers to consider in approaching counterterrorism efforts across the United States and Canada, as well as in connection with partners in Europe and Oceania, include the prioritization of international collaboration in response to transnational trends, the proliferation of extremist content and communities on digital platforms, and the limitations of legal authorities across partner governments.

Salafi-jihadist threats are declining.

The threat of Salafi-jihadist terrorism in the United States and Canada has decreased in recent years, both in terms of the number of attacks and disrupted plots and in terms of what percentage of all terrorist violence such attacks represent. In the United States, for example, there were only 3 Salafi-jihadist attacks in 2021 and 6 in 2020, down from 19 in 2019.[2] Meanwhile, there were no Salafi-jihadist attacks in Canada in 2021.[3]

Since 9/11, foreign terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State have inspired Salafi-jihadist terrorist attacks in the United States and Canada but have not been involved in the planning or execution of most of these incidents. Instead, most attacks have been carried out by individuals or small groups inspired by the ideology and activities of foreign Salafi-jihadist groups. In May 2020, for example, Adam Aalim Alsahli intentionally crashed his vehicle into the gate of Naval Air Station Corpus Christi in Texas and then shot at a guard. Alsahli was motivated by the ideology of figures such as Ibrahim al-Rabaysh, who was a senior cleric of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) before his death in 2015.[4] Similarly, in Canada in February 2020, Saad Akhtar beat a woman to death with a hammer on a sidewalk in Scarborough, Ontario. Akhtar was inspired by Islamic State propaganda, and he declared his own allegiance to the Islamic State before setting out with the intention of killing multiple people at random to inspire fear and instability.[5] It is possible that recent developments within foreign terrorist groups, such as the Taliban's August 2021 takeover of Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province, will further motivate extremists in the West.[6]

In addition to planning and carrying out attacks in their home countries, radicalized individuals in North America have provided material support to overseas terrorist organizations, and some have traveled abroad to join groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Between 2018 and 2022, for example, the U.S. Department of Justice pursued 67 criminal cases against individuals or small groups accused of providing material support to overseas terrorist organizations (39 cases), planning to travel abroad to join such groups (20 cases), or both (8 cases). Of the 67 cases tracked by the CSIS research team, the majority (52 cases) involved support for the Islamic State.[7]

Though rarer, foreign terrorist groups have also planned or committed some terrorist attacks in the United States and Canada in the last two decades. The most recent of these, and the only foreign-orchestrated terrorist attack in the United States since September 11, 2001, was the December 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, who was studying at the base, shot and killed three U.S. Navy sailors and injured eight other individuals.[8] AQAP claimed responsibility for the Pensacola attack on February 2, 2020, in a recorded speech by Qasim al-Raymi, who led AQAP until his death four days before the video's release. In this speech, al-Raymi praised Alshamrani's actions and called upon other followers to carry out additional attacks through any means possible:

The minimum duty upon every Muslim is to meet the call of those virtuous sisters, by his blood and not by mere talk. Therefore, whoever has a truck . . . Whoever has a gun . . . whoever has explosives . . . whoever had knowledge in targeting U.S. banks and companies by cyber-attacks . . . whoever can target the capitalist class, managers of big U.S. companies . . . whoever can hit the heads of the politicians, senior security officers, senior military personnel, presidents and governors of the U.S., the current and the former ones. He can use it to heal the breasts of a believing people.[9]

The possibility remains that international Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups may orchestrate additional attacks targeting the United States or Canada. Some such plots have been thwarted in recent years. For example, in December 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed an indictment against a Kenyan national who was arrested in the Philippines for conspiring to hijack an airplane as part of a "9/11-style attack in the United States" under the direction of senior al Shabaab leaders.[10] However, evidence indicates that such threats are at a relatively low level in comparison to the past two decades.[11] Other chapters in this report assess the threat that terrorist groups based in other regions pose to the U.S. homeland as well as to U.S. partners and allies.

Traditionally "domestic" threats are growing and becoming more international.

The largest terrorist threats facing both the United States and Canada are domestic and motivated by far-right ideologies and conspiracy theories—and, to a lesser extent, far-left ideologies. Even so, the perpetrators are often connected to, or inspired by, broader international movements, including those active in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.[12]

White supremacist terrorism is a significant threat in both the United States and Canada, where violent extremists often target individuals or gathering places with the objective of harming people on the basis of their race, ethnicity, or religion. Of the formal white supremacist organizations operating in North America, such as the Base and Atomwaffen, most originated in the United States and have since spread their influence to other Western countries such as Canada. The most frequent targets of white supremacist attacks have frequently been individuals who are Black, Latino/Hispanic, Muslim, or Jewish; however, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic also sparked a sharp increase in the number of ter-

rorist attacks and other hate crimes committed against individuals of Asian descent.[13]

In the United States, anti-government militia groups, which broadly oppose government and law enforcement power and are dedicated to protecting Second Amendment rights, have also increased their activity, including by providing armed "security" at public demonstrations and campaign events for sympathetic political candidates. Militia groups have been emboldened by real or perceived validation from figures of authority, particularly during the Trump administration. As these groups increasingly became convinced that they had allies in positions of power—contradicting their traditional adversarial stance toward government authority—many militias instead began to directly oppose left-wing political movements.[14]

Conspiracy theories, particularly "big tent" theories such as QAnon that can encompass a wide range of false beliefs and disinformation, have facilitated various anti-government movements in recent years and took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to sow distrust and fear of government overreach.[15] QAnon is the latest successor to other racist, anti-globalist conspiracy theories, such as the New World Order or Zionist Occupied Government, that have long pervaded anti-government and white supremacist movements in the United States. Other conspiracy theories have grown over the past two years among many of the same followers, including the false claim that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was stolen.

Some anti-government movements have direct cross-border connections in addition to belonging to the same ideological communities online.[16] For example, Ottawa police reported that a significant number of U.S. individuals had been involved in the planning, funding, and execution of the anti-government "Freedom Convoy" that jammed streets in Ottawa in early 2021.[17] Soon after, similar convoys emerged in the United States, modeled after the one in Ottawa. Terrorist attacks did not occur during these convoy events, but the replication of the concept illustrates the cross-border influence at play.

As with their organizational structure, funding for anti-government and white supremacist networks in North America is mostly decentralized. Most individuals' activities are self-funded, though some groups such as local militias or more organized white supremacist groups may solicit member dues or raise funds by

hosting events or selling merchandise. Other activities and legal responses have been crowdfunded through online platforms.[18] This includes funding for the Freedom Convoy, as well as legal fees for individuals charged in relation to the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[19]

Violent misogynists also continue to pose a threat in both nations. This includes individuals who identify as involuntary celibates ("incels"), as well as individuals mobilized in the online "manosphere" or who are otherwise driven to violence based on hatred of or anger at women based on gender. Violent misogyny has become more frequent in Canada in recent years, and a 2020 Canadian attack has created a precedent for treating such crimes as terrorism.[20] Nonetheless, previous attackers whose ideas remain the most influential in the movement were largely U.S. nationals, such as Elliot Rodger.[21]

As is the case with violent far-right extremism in the region, most violent far-left actors in the United States are either radicalized individuals or members of small networks rather than actors within large, hierarchical organizations. Some far-left sub-ideologies, such as anti-fascists and anarchists, are overall loosely affiliated by their beliefs but may form local chapters to organize action. Like the militia groups discussed previously, not all of these groups are violent, but many view violence as a legitimate option in pursuit of extreme political goals. As violent far-right activity and the spread of far-right extremist ideologies have grown in recent years, especially in the United States, anti-fascist networks have increasingly participated in demonstrations and counterdemonstrations, often leading to clashes with the violent far-right individuals they oppose, as well as with law enforcement. Canada has not seen a large amount of violent far-left activity in recent years, though the growing anti-government movement in Canada has the potential to spark a far-left backlash, including violent counteraction, similar to what has occurred in the United States.

Anti-fascist networks frequently justify the use of violence as a means to protect communities against fascist violence, particularly when they perceive that law enforcement is unwilling or unable to do so. For example, Rose City Antifa—an anti-fascist network in Portland, Oregon, which claims to be the oldest anti-fascist coalition in the United States—argues that "the state upholds white supremacy at every level of government

and the police frequently work with far-right aggressors to brutalize people opposing state oppression and violence. We cannot count on state actors to push forward the cause of justice, equity, and community safety. It's up to us to keep us safe."[22] Similarly, the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club (PSJBGC)—an armed anti-fascist group located in the Puget Sound region of Washington State—describes its work as including "resisting fascists holding public events and maintaining a public presence" and advocating "for the right of all adults who would defend themselves and their communities against far-right violence . . . [including] the right to own, carry, and train with tactically useful rifles, pistols, and body armor."[23] Recent PSJBGC blog posts include a tribute praising Willem van Spronsen, a former member who was killed by police in July 2019 as he launched an attack against a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Tacoma, Washington.[24]

Violent environmental activists represent a smaller, yet still significant, portion of recent terrorist activity in both the United States and Canada. Like other forms of far-left terrorism, attacks driven by environmental concerns—including opposition to oil facilities, concerns about climate change, and opposition to deforestation and destruction of nature—rarely result in fatalities, but they often cause substantial property damage and impose high financial costs. For example, in June 2021, hundreds of demonstrators gathered near Two Inlets, Minnesota, to protest against the construction of the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline due to concerns over environmental impacts and the violation of Indigenous land rights. Some demonstrators resorted to violence, resulting in "slashed tires, cut hoses, rocks and dirt in engines, forced entry into offices, and destroyed electrical wiring in equipment," as well as attempts to trap workers on site.[25]

In some cases, anarchist activity resembles violent environmental advocacy, such as in attempts to prevent pipeline construction on Indigenous land. In November 2020, for example, Samantha Frances Brooks and Ellen Brennan Reiche were arrested and charged in Washington State for terrorist attacks and other violence against railroad carriers. Brooks and Reiche were connected to at least 41 incidents in which they sabotaged railroad tracks by placing shunts across the tracks, an act which can cause significant damage and danger, including risk of derailment. A claim of responsibility had been posted on an anarchist website stating that

the motive for the sabotage activity was to disrupt the construction and operation of an oil pipeline, in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.[26]

In other instances, anarchist violence in the United States has specifically targeted businesses—in opposition to capitalist power structures—or law enforcement, including in response to police brutality or the killing of civilians. For example, in April 2021, self-described anarchists demonstrated against policy brutality in black bloc in Portland, Oregon. In the course of this action, they intentionally damaged businesses and law enforcement buildings.[27]

Technology and online platforms enable terrorist activity.

Extremists operating in the United States and Canada increasingly rely on social media and other digital platforms to recruit, coordinate, share propaganda, and spread disinformation and conspiracy theories. Effective content moderation and the deplatforming of extremists and their propaganda remain challenging, yet technology companies—most of which are based in the United States—often have more leeway to limit online activity under their terms of service than does the U.S. government, given free speech protections. For mainstream platforms with a business interest in deterring extremist activity, there are opportunities to collaborate and share information with policymakers. Although some more obscure platforms are created for the purpose of subverting content moderation and will never be constrained in the same ways, content moderation efforts can at least limit the ability of extremists and conspiracists to reach and recruit mainstream users.

In addition to disinformation and propaganda, terrorists' ability to share detailed manifestos and livestreams of their crimes can directly inspire future terrorist attacks. For example, Nathaniel Veltman drew inspiration for his vehicular attack on a Muslim family from reading the manifesto written by Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a white supremacist who committed two mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019.[28]

Networks rather than groups form the central unit of threat.

It is worth noting the difference between terrorist groups and networks or movements. Terrorist attacks in the United States, including those conducted by violent far-right perpetrators, are most often carried out by an individual or a small network rather than by formal groups. In a May 2021 strategic intelligence assessment, for example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation concluded that "the greatest terrorism threat to the Homeland we face today is posed by lone offenders, often radicalized online, who look to attack soft targets with easily accessible weapons."[29] Even if acting alone, these individuals are often inspired by or identify with loose ideological movements or informal extremist networks. Many white supremacists, for example, act in accordance with strategies such as "leaderless resistance," which emphasizes the utility of decentralized networks or individual activity for a common cause, and which makes it more difficult for law enforcement to monitor or infiltrate extremist activities.[30] Moreover, the rarity of structured, hierarchical extremist groups makes policy solutions that target discrete organizations less likely to succeed or to be an efficient use of time and resources.

The United States

The United States faces a large and increasingly diverse set of domestic terrorist threats. In 2020, the country experienced the largest number of terrorist attacks in decades, and the level of terrorist activity has remained high. Although U.S. counterterrorism efforts over the past two decades have focused on Salafi-jihadist threats, the threat landscape has evolved, and such attacks have declined in frequency. Violent far-right perpetrators, such as white supremacists, anti-government extremists, and violent misogynists, have committed most U.S. terrorist attacks in recent years, but violent far-left perpetrators such as anti-fascist extremists, anarchists, and violent environmentalists have also orchestrated a growing percentage of terrorist attacks.

To understand recent trends in domestic terrorist activity in the United States, CSIS compiled and analyzed a data set of 831 terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2022.[31] The data set includes information such as the incident date, location, perpetrator ideology, target, weapons used, and fatalities.[32]

There has been an upward trend in terrorist activity in the United States since about 2014, with the total number of attacks reaching its highest level (89 attacks) in 2020—at least since the beginning of the CSIS. The United States saw 65 terrorist attacks in 2021 and 71 in 2022. Although

this marked a decline in the quantity of terrorist attacks since the 2020 peak, more attacks happened in each of these years than in any other year analyzed before 2020. Of the 71 terrorist attacks in 2022, 69 percent were perpetrated by those on the violent far right, 20 percent by the violent far left, 3 percent by Salafi-jihadists, and 8 percent by ethnonationalists.[33]

Violent far-right extremists have been responsible for 94 of the 108 terrorism fatalities (87 percent) in the United States in the past five years. This includes 2022, when 18 of 19 fatalities occurred during far-right terrorist attacks. Regardless of ideology, most fatal terrorist attacks in the United States involved firearms.[34]

CSIS analysis also found that while far-left and Salafi-jihadist attacks primarily targeted government or law enforcement targets in 2022, violent far-right and ethnonationalist extremists overwhelmingly targeted private individuals—usually selected based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, or religion.[35]
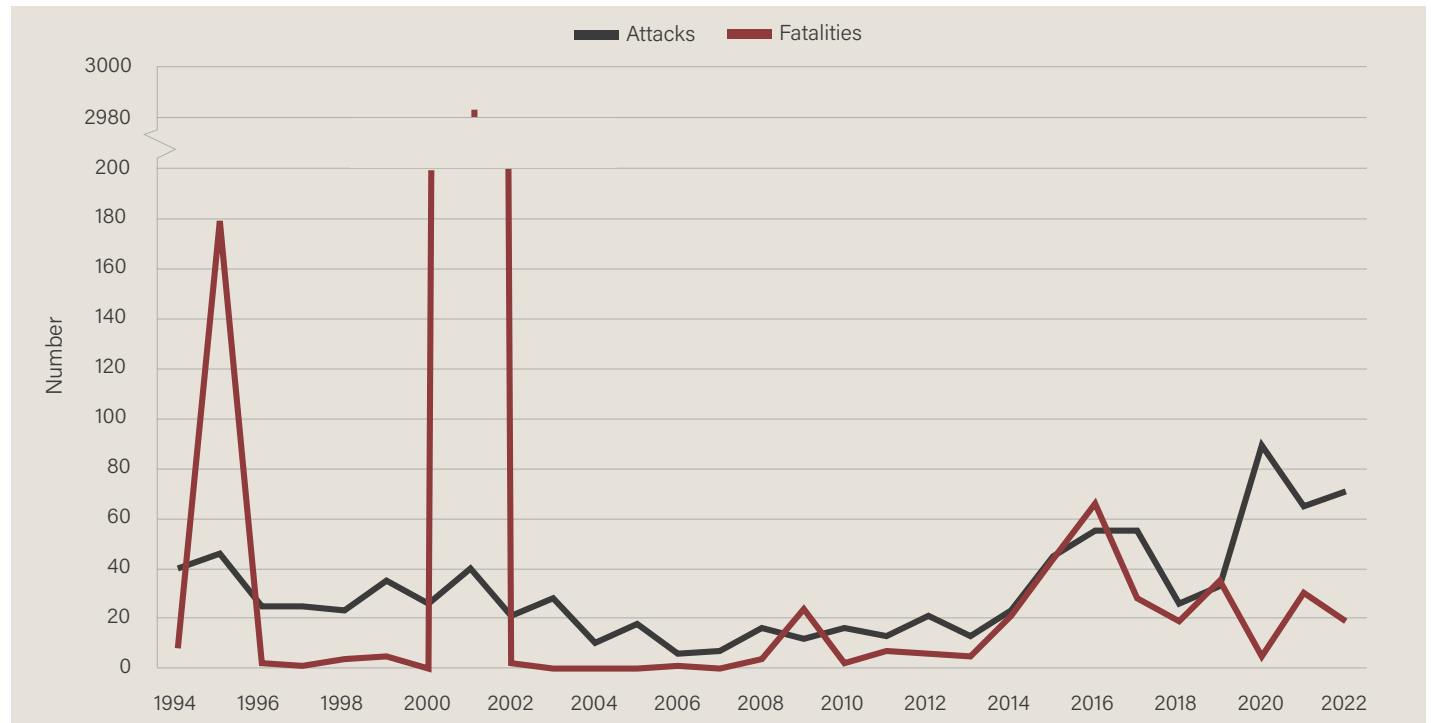
In 2020 and 2021, the portion of U.S. terrorist attacks related to public demonstrations reached historically high levels.[36] While only 3 percent of terrorist attacks in 2019 were related to demonstrations, this increased to

53 percent in 2020 and 63 percent in 2021. During protests, counterprotests, rallies, and other public demonstrations—usually in metropolitan areas—extremists of differing ideologies frequently confronted one another, as well as law enforcement, through violent means. This has created a cycle of reciprocal radicalization that functions similar to the "security dilemma" phenomenon, in which attempts by one side to increase its security are perceived as threatening the security of others, leading to further escalation. However, only 18 percent of terrorist attacks in 2022 related to demonstrations—while this is still significantly higher than the historical average, it indicates that this emphasis on demonstration-linked attack may have been a limited phenomenon.[37]

These findings are consistent with recent domestic terrorism threat assessments conducted by the U.S. federal government. For example, in a March 2021 report, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) detailed a heightened threat from domestic violent extremists (DVEs) in the United States and assessed that "racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and militia violent extremists (MVEs) present the most lethal DVE threats, with RMVEs most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians and
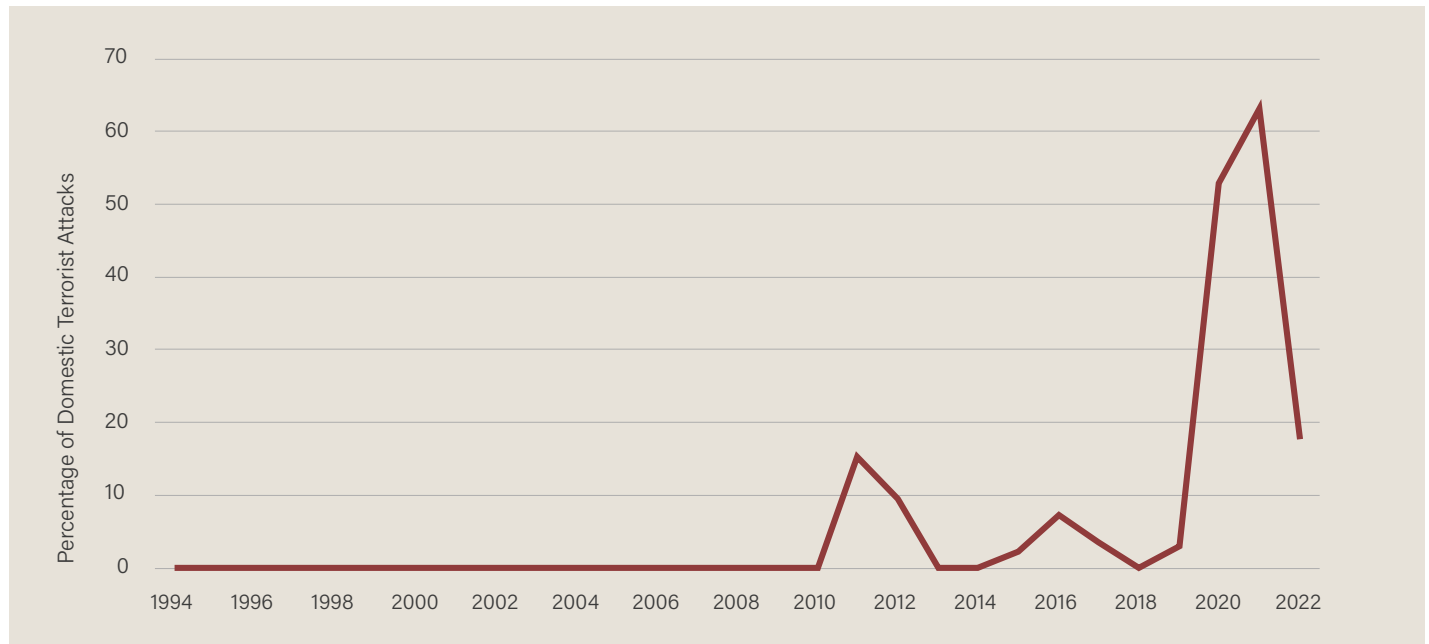
Figure 3.1

Number of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities, United States, 1994–2022

Source: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

Figure 3.2

Percentage of U.S. Terrorist Attacks Related to Demonstrations, 1994–2022

Source: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

MVEs typically targeting law enforcement and government personnel and facilities."[38]

Federal domestic counterterrorism efforts have grown in the United States under President Joseph R. Biden, largely in reaction to the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. After completing a 100-day review of information and policies related to domestic extremism, the Biden administration released the first-of-its-kind National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism in June 2021. The strategy outlined four broad categories of action that the government would pursue in relation to domestic terrorism: (1) understand and share information, (2) prevent terrorist recruitment and mobilization, (3) disrupt and deter violent activity, and (4) address long-term factors that contribute to domestic terrorism.[39] Several federal agencies also initiated internal reviews and task forces to assess domestic extremism within their organizations, including the U.S. Department of Defense.[40] The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives held various hearings related to concerns over domestic extremism in 2021 and 2022, though partisan divisions—including disagreements over definitions of extremism—limited substantive progress.[41]

Issues such as U.S. elections, particularly the 2024 presidential election; the conflict between Israel and Hamas;

developments in investigations and trials regarding the Trump administration's activities; gun control measures; immigration; abortion-related policies; prejudice against the LGBTQIA+ community; racial justice; police brutality; and future public health emergencies are likely flashpoints for future extremist violence in the United States. Real or perceived legitimization of extremist beliefs and methods by figures of authority may also increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks. These issues are likely to drive further extremist violence, as well as to motivate legal, peaceful demonstrations that could be selected by violent extremists as targets of or locations for future acts of terrorism.

Canada

Violent far-right extremism poses the most serious terrorist threat in Canada. In its 2021 annual public report, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service assessed that ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE)—defined to include "extreme racist, misogynistic, and anti-authority views combined with personal grievances [that] can result in an individual's willingness to incite, enable, or mobilize to violence"—led to more deaths than were caused by any other type of Canadian terrorism during this period.[42] The Canadian Security Intelligence

Service recorded seven IMVE attacks and three disrupted plots in Canada between 2014 and 2021 that resulted in 26 fatalities.[43] For example, in June 2021, Nathaniel Veltman deliberately struck a Muslim family with his truck in London, Ontario, killing four people and leaving one child seriously wounded. Law enforcement found that Veltman was motivated by anti-Islamic hatred, and there is some evidence that he had accessed neo-Nazi materials online and planned a vehicle ramming attack. Veltman received terrorism-related charges that included four counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder.[44]

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service tracked a sharp increase in anti-authority and anti-government rhetoric and conspiracy theories since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it assesses that "Canadian influencers and proselytizers have emerged" within these extremist movements and continue to "promote misinformation and action, including violence."[45] The most prominent of the conspiracies has been QAnon. While many of the central conceits of the QAnon conspiracy theory center on the U.S. political system, the Canadian version heavily stresses disinformation and false theories about the Covid-19 pandemic. Canadian QAnon adherents may believe that Covid-19 was a hoax and a tool used by the government to exert control over the population through measures such as lockdowns and vaccination requirements, while others may believe that Covid-19 is a real disease but that it was caused by 5G or nefarious government activities.[46] These beliefs drove some individuals to plan or carry out extremist violence, including threatening political leaders and burning cell towers in an attempt to disrupt 5G networks.[47]

Canada has also faced a growing threat from violent misogynists that has resulted in recent legal milestones for the prosecution of gender-based terrorism. In February 2020, for example, a 17-year-old youth who self-identified as an involuntary celibate ("incel") conducted a machete attack at a massage parlor in Toronto, killing one woman and injuring two other people. In addition to his charges of first-degree murder and attempted murder, federal and provincial attorneys general approved terrorism charges against him based on his incel-related motives.[48] This case marked the first time that Canadian authorities had prosecuted a terrorism case that was not linked to jihadist ideologies, and it appeared to be the first terrorism case in any country against an incel perpetrator, sparking debate over how prepared legal systems are for the evolution of terrorism-related legal proceedings beyond Islamic extremism.[49]

Like that of the United States, the Canadian domestic terrorist threat landscape is largely decentralized, and the most pressing challenge comes from lone actors and small groups of domestic extremists.[50] Many extremist networks transcend national borders, particularly through their use of online platforms, so the radicalization environment in Canada resembles that of the United States. In an internal threat assessment, Canada's Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC)—which coordinates closely with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service on counterterrorism efforts—assessed that while radicalized individuals or small groups have the will and capability to conduct attacks, the government is ill-equipped to detect these decentralized plans before they occur. ITAC also reported that violent extremists would most likely use "unsophisticated methods such as firearms, bladed weapons, vehicles, or homemade explosives."[51] These simple tactics enable individuals to carry out opportunistic attacks using items they may already have at home or can obtain at a relatively low cost, removing the obstacle of financing and resources.

Although the threat remains highest from individuals and small groups, in recent years Canadian law enforcement has emphasized concern about extremist organizations that are exhibiting greater organization. This may be driven by recent indictments against members of the Base and Atomwaffen—two violent white supremacist organizations—in Canada, as well as a high-profile incident in which Patrik Jordan Mathews, a former Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) reservist and a member of the Base, was part of a small group arrested in Maryland and convicted of plotting terror attacks in the United States.[52] The Canadian government has also renewed its focus on these white supremacist groups in light of multiple reports that extremism in the CAF is growing. ITAC assessed in November 2020 that extremist groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, as well as adherents of ideologies such as the Boogaloo movement and the Three Percenters, actively recruited CAF personnel.[53] An April 2022 report from the Minister's Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination to the CAF and the Department of National Defence found that membership in extremist groups among Canadian military personnel is growing and becoming more difficult to detect and monitor.[54]

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service also noted the continued threat of religiously motivated violent extremism—the category under which the Canadian government tracks Salafi-jihadist threats. Although no

religiously motivated violent extremism attacks occurred in Canada in 2021, jihadist propaganda efforts and terrorist financing by Canadian residents continued.[55]

As in the United States, factors such as policy interventions interpreted as government overreach, disinformation, and conspiracy theories will likely continue to motivate extremist activity in Canada. Given the strong cross-border influence, particularly of violent far-right movements, it is also likely that heightened tensions or levels of terrorism in the United States—in response to U.S. elections or policy changes, for example—could spill over into the Canadian extremist ecosystem as well.

The Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America

Overall, there is a relatively low threat of terrorist activity in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. As assessed by the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), the Caribbean and Latin America "is seen as the region with the lowest impact of terrorism," yet there has still been some growing concern in recent years.[56] Still, important considerations in the region for policymakers include the cross-regional impacts of extremist activity and the spread of ecoterrorism.

Most violence in the region is linked to other, non-political criminal activity, particularly related to gangs and narcotrafficking. There have been some calls in U.S. policy circles to designate drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations and even to pursue military action against them.[57] However, there are significant concerns around both the appropriateness and effectiveness of such action.[58] Per the definition of terrorism used throughout this report—which focuses on political motivations for violence and excludes profit-driven and other apolitical criminal activity—gang violence and drug-related activity is not classified as terrorism. Still, there is a pervasive risk of these types of non-political violence fueling terrorist activity through the crime-terror nexus.

Key Trends

There are low levels of terrorist violence.

Terrorist attacks are at a low level in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America, but countries in this region may still serve as important hubs for extremist influence and recruiting. The UNCCT assessed that "there may be no evidence of Islamist terrorist operational cells in the

region, [but] there are concerns that localized groups of ideological supporters may lend logistical and financial support to terrorist groups in other regions."[59] This includes individuals inspired by and seeking to assist foreign terrorist groups with resources or logistical aid; foreign fighters, who have traveled from the region to conflict theaters such as Syria and Iraq over the past decade and may pose a threat upon return; and foreign extremist presence and influence.

Multilateral organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS) operate in the region and have existing convening and counterterrorism capabilities that could be leveraged to address emerging low-level threats. The Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism—the OAS body tasked with a counterterrorism mission—provides member states with administrative and logistical support, technical assistance, and training related to counterterrorism, and it facilitates international, regional, and subregional dialogue and collaborations.[60]

Ecoterrorism represents a growing threat.

The growth in ecoterrorist activity in Latin America—as well as alleged ties to environmental extremists operating elsewhere—will be an important trend to monitor in the coming years, particularly as the effects of climate change become more pronounced and governments work to formulate policy responses to environmental issues. The U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC), for example, includes environmental change as one of the key pressures that will shape the global terrorism environment in the coming decades. In its 2021 global trends report, the NIC assessed that "during the next 20 years, regional and intrastate conflicts, demographic pressures, environmental degradation, and democratic retrenchment are likely to exacerbate the political, economic, and social grievances terrorists have long exploited to gain supporters as well as safe havens to organize, train, and plot."[61] While Latin America is unlikely to be a focus for counterterrorism efforts in the near term, emerging trends may be a harbinger of long-term challenges. Although it currently poses only a low-level threat, environmentally motivated terrorism has become more common across Latin America over the past decade and is likely to persist, particularly as concerns about climate change and deforestation intensify.

The Caribbean

There has been minimal terrorist activity in the Caribbean region in recent years. In their counterterrorism

capacities, regional actors are primarily focused on issues related to returning foreign fighters and terrorist financing.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM)—which includes 15 member states and 5 associate members—has identified the phenomenon of returning foreign fighters as an ongoing security concern.[62] Over 200 citizens of CARICOM member states traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2017. In its counterterrorism strategy, CARICOM identified the risks posed by foreign fighters as:

> . . . including their return and relocation to the Region, the increasing influence of extremist religious leaders and radicalised terrorist sympathisers in CARICOM States, violent extremists who could be inspired or directed to carry out an attack, the growing volume and accessibility of terrorists group propaganda on-line and via peer-to-peer networks, and the potential exploitation of the banking system to fund terror networks.[63]

Additionally, CARICOM noted that due to the large amount of Western interests within its member nations—including U.S., Canadian, and European economic investments and other strategic interests—targets in the region could be attacked in an attempt to indirectly target those Western allies.[64] To further its efforts to counter foreign fighter transit through its member states, CARICOM signed memoranda of agreement and understanding with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism to improve members' ability to monitor terrorist travel while upholding human rights through the United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme.[65] Most member states are also participants in other region-wide counterterrorism efforts, including those organized by the OAS.

Additionally, Caribbean nations must contend with significant anti-money laundering compliance challenges amid long-standing suspicion that substantial terrorist financing moves through the Caribbean banking sector. Based on assessments carried out by the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force, most countries in the region face significant challenges to effectiveness in their anti-money laundering systems and require major improvements.[66] Barbados, the Cayman Islands, Haiti, and Jamaica have been placed on the global Financial Action Task Force's "grey list," indicating that they are subject to increased monitoring and have committed to work with the organization to resolve significant problems in their financial regulation infrastructure.[67]

Most violence in the Caribbean is related to gangs and other criminal activity rather than terrorism. Occasionally, there is some overlap between gang violence and actions which could be classified as terrorism, especially in countries such as Haiti in which major gangs have historically maintained ties to political parties. Despite these links, however, Haitian gangs have typically agreed to carry out tasks related to politics in exchange for supplies, funding, and impunity; they typically do not have political motives themselves.[68] Therefore, gang violence still does not overlap with terrorism. More frequently, other forms of criminal violence in Caribbean nations are relevant to counterterrorism concerns in terms of the crime-terror nexus—the effect by which terrorism and other criminal activity can symbiotically create an environment in which both can thrive while eroding security along with social, political, and economic stability.[69]

Beyond incidents of terrorist violence, it is also important to consider the ways in which the United States has used counterterrorism policies as tools of statecraft in the region. For example, in January 2021, the Trump administration redesignated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.[70] The Biden administration has not taken action against this policy.

Mexico

There has been little terrorist activity in Mexico in recent years. Mexico maintains close counterterrorism collaboration with the United States, and it participates in regional efforts, such as the Latin America Anti-Money Laundering Group, that seek to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as working groups and initiatives within the United Nations and the OAS. The U.S. State Department has assessed that there is no clear evidence of terrorist basing in Mexico, nor has any individual who entered the United States from the Mexican border committed an act of terrorism.[71]

The occasional acts of terrorism that have occurred in Mexico in recent years have primarily been committed by anarchists and ecoterrorist networks, which often have substantial overlap in motive and ideology. Many ecoterrorists operate as small, decentralized cells or loose ideological movements, but some have claimed the ability to conduct violence across borders and allegedly even across continents. For example, Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (Individuals Tending to the Wild, or ITS) was a self-described eco-extremist and eco-anarchist group that formed in Mexico in 2011 that com-

mitted a series of relatively simplistic bombing attacks, primarily in civil centers.[72] ITS cited Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, among its inspirations for its rejection of modernity and the technology and industry that it brings, though it also rejected the notion that its members were "followers" of Kaczynski, insisting instead that its philosophy was its own.[73] In 2014, ITS merged with roughly a dozen other small groups to form Reacción Salvaje (Wild Reaction, or RS), claiming that the merger began "a new phase in this open war against the Technoindustrial System."[74] However, other incidents in the years since have still been claimed under the ITS name, including bombings in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, as well as even distant attacks in countries such as Scotland. Some authorities, however, are skeptical of these claims; there is little evidence to substantiate transnational activities beyond claims of responsibility by the group itself.[75]

Most violence in Mexico is related to criminal activity, which does not fall under the definition of terrorism used in this report. However, there has been some debate in recent years regarding whether some of the most powerful Mexican cartels, such as Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, should be understood as operating with political motives, since they do challenge the state directly, govern localities, and express some political opinions, such as a preference toward President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.[76] Yet, organized criminal groups in Mexico lack a political objective; rather, they are primarily motivated by a desire for power and financial gain. A group having political interests—as most do, to some extent—should not be confused for political motivations to carry out violence and achieve a broader psychological impact, which would be required for their actions to be classified as terrorism.

Central America

There has been minimal terrorist activity in Central America in the past year. As with other regions in Latin America, Central American countries routinely face challenges related to violent crime, but these are predominantly related to gang activity, narcotrafficking, and weak governance rather than to violent extremism. Various Central American countries routinely collaborate with the United States and other partner nations on counterterrorism efforts, including participation in organizations such as GAFILAT and working groups associated with the United Nations and the OAS.[77] Panama was the only Latin American country to join the Defeat-ISIS Coalition.[78]

South America

South America has also experienced a relatively low level of terrorism compared to other regions. Still, as in the rest of Latin America, many countries on the continent participate in regional efforts to counter terrorist activity and financing, including GAFILAT and working groups associated with the United Nations and the OAS.

Extremist activity in South America can be divided into four main categories: leftist guerrilla groups, eco-terrorism, conflicts between governments and Indigenous groups that may be prosecuted under terrorism statutes—though this practice has come under heavy criticism from international organizations and human rights advocates—and influence from Shia groups such as Hezbollah, which maintains close ties to Iran. These concerns are discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections. In recent years, far-right rhetoric has also increased in some South American countries, such as Brazil, leading to concerns that heightened rhetoric in polarized political climates could lead to violence against members of ideologically opposed factions.
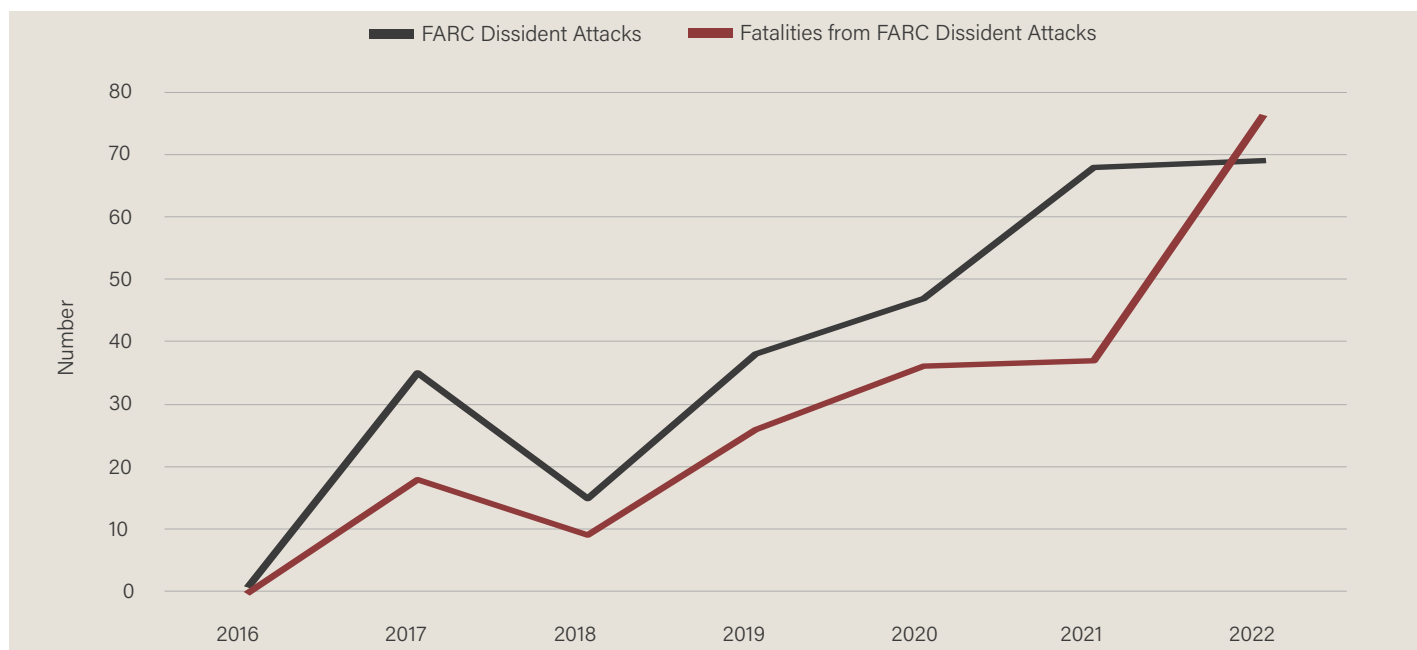
Key Trends

Far-left guerrilla groups pose a diminished local threat.

Historically, the most prominent extremist groups operating in Latin America have been leftist guerrilla groups in countries such as Colombia and Peru. In recent years, the governments in these countries have made strides toward peace and stability with historically resilient far-left guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Shining Path, and groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) have significantly decreased their violent activities. A localized threat from select factions and splinter groups persists in these countries—and likely will continue to do so—but at a far lower and more manageable level than in these groups' heyday. U.S. diplomatic and security assistance efforts in the region will likely continue to include an element of support for counterterrorism activities and good governance in the wake of peace agreements, but there is minimal threat to U.S. interests or broader regional security.

Indigenous conflicts pose a minimal terrorist threat.

Figure 3.3

Number of FARC Dissident Attacks and Resulting Fatalities, 2016–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.janes.com/military-threat-intelligence/terrorism-and-insurgency.

Ongoing conflicts between Indigenous activists and the state in countries such as Chile and Ecuador have occasionally involved the use of violent tactics by Indigenous groups, including arson, sabotage of forestry equipment, and ambushes against law enforcement or other state forces. While these actions meet the definition of terrorism used in this analysis, the United Nations and international human rights monitors have raised concerns that state counterterrorism policies have been used inappropriately and have violated the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Iranian involvement in Latin America should be monitored.

Hezbollah—one of Iran's terrorist proxies whose relationship with the regime is primarily managed through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF)—is active in several areas of Latin America, and activities by Hezbollah operatives in the region may lay the groundwork for future Iranian-linked terrorist attacks and bids for influence in the Americas. Hezbollah has long maintained presence in the tri-border region between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, where it carries out a range of illicit economic activities. More recently, however, Hezbollah has shifted the focus of its South

American operations to Venezuela, where it conducts additional illicit financial activities and supports the Maduro regime in close coordination with the Iranian government.[79] It has also begun to expand into Colombia to take advantage of the nation's large-scale production of cocaine.[80]

While there is likely a low level of risk in the near term from Hezbollah and other Iranian-linked actors in South America, they may pose a heightened threat in the medium to long term. For example, the U.S. NIC assessed in 2021 that "Iran's and Lebanese Hezbollah's efforts to solidify a Shia 'axis of resistance' also might increase the threat of asymmetric attacks on US, Israeli, Saudi, and others' interests in the Middle East" within the next 20 years.[81] Such a threat could spread to Latin America, given the presence of Iran-affiliated groups in South America.

Colombia

Colombia has long been a hub for terrorist activity in South America, most notably through the activities of its two most active guerrilla organizations—FARC and the ELN—but the threat has largely diminished. The Colombian government reached a peace deal with FARC in

2016, and as of 2023, it is pursuing a similar peace agreement with the ELN. FARC dissident groups continue to carry out some violence, and if the ELN peace deal holds, Colombia is likely to experience similar low-level, persistent threats from ELN dissident factions.

FARC formed in 1964 as a militant leftist organization claiming to represent the interests of rural populations in the wake of the Colombian civil war. After 52 years of violence, during which time FARC also became heavily involved in drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom, the group disbanded as part of a negotiated peace settlement and transitioned into a political party, thus ending the most severe terrorist threat in Colombia.[82] Following the 2016 Peace Accord and the formal dissolution of FARC, the primary guerrilla threat in Colombia ended, but FARC splinter groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army (FARC-EP) and Segunda Marquetalia pose an ongoing threat. Although the threat from these factions is lower than the threat previously posed by FARC, the number of both attacks and fatalities has steadily increased since the 2016 peace agreement, with the exception of a slight decrease in 2022, as shown in Figure 3.3.
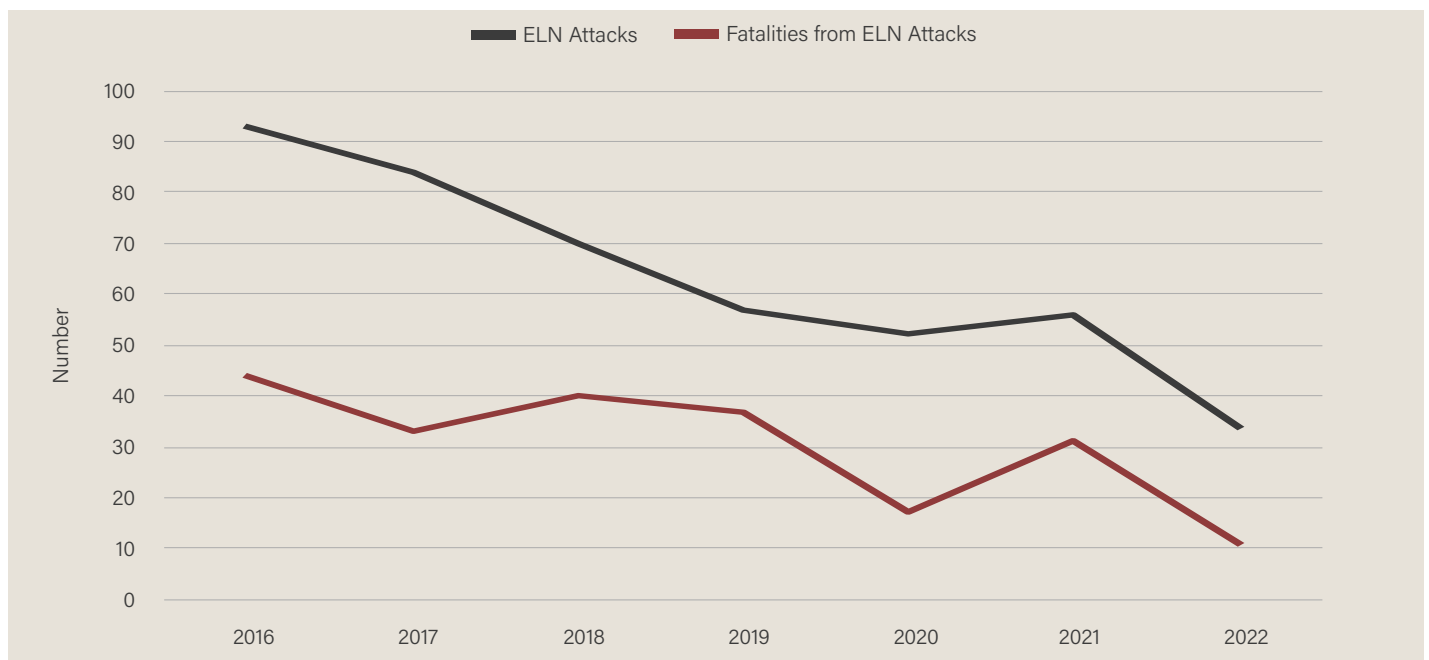
The U.S. government revoked its designations of FARC as a terrorist group in 2021 but simultaneously designated both FARC-EP and Segunda Marquetalia and their leaders.[83] Counterterrorism efforts against these factions will continue, including with international support, but the threat level is unlikely to rival that of the core FARC organization during its peak of operations.

Like FARC, the ELN—currently the largest guerrilla group in Colombia—formed in 1964 as a leftist militant organization dedicated to protecting the Colombian people from injustices of the state. In addition to conflict with the state, the ELN was heavily involved in drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom. The group reached its peak strength in 1999 with approximately 4,000 members but has since been in a state of decline amid multiple rounds of failed peace negotiations with the state.[84] Figure 3.4 documents the continued decline in the number of ELN attacks in recent years.

Since 2016, 60 percent of ELN attacks have been conducted against infrastructure targets. Nearly a quarter of these attacks have targeted oil companies and infrastructure. Most recently, in February 2022, ELN militants conducted an improvised explosive device (IED)
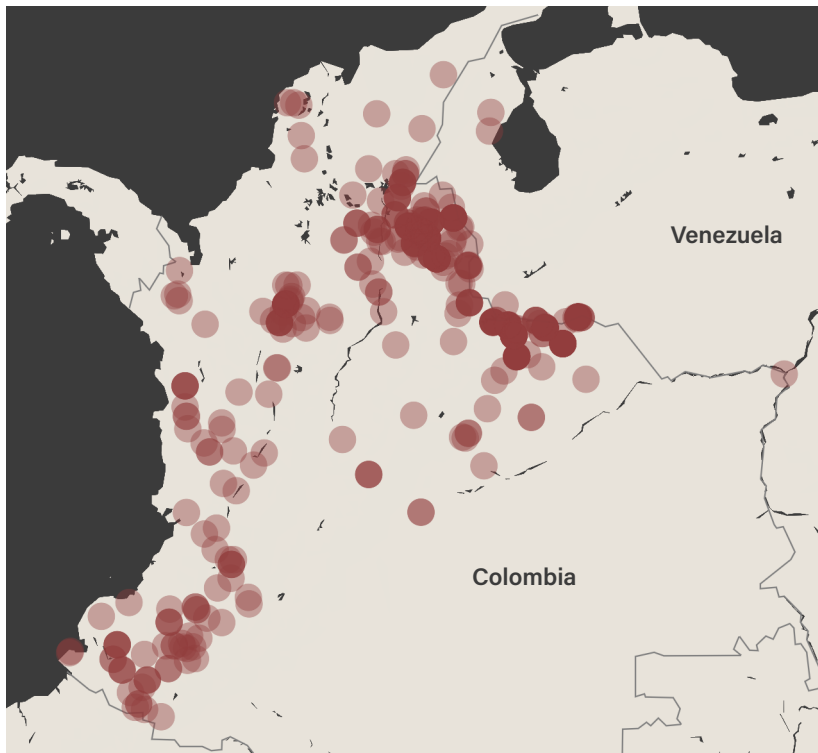
Figure 3.4

Number of ELN Attacks and Resulting Fatalities in Colombia, 2016–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

Figure 3.5

Map of ELN Attacks, 2016–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

attack against a state-run oil company's petrol station in Sabanagrande, a town south of Barranquilla in northern Colombia. The ELN also continues to attack police facilities and civilians, especially in more rural areas. However, such attacks have become more infrequent as the level of ELN violence decreases.[85] Most attacks occur in northern and western Colombia, as seen in Figure 3.5, though there is also some spillover into neighboring Venezuela.

In June 2023, Colombian president Gustavo Petro announced that a six-month ceasefire between the government and the ELN would begin on August 3.[86] This is the most substantial development in Petro's "total peace" plan—an effort to establish peace deals with the ELN and other militant groups modeled after the 2016 FARC peace deal. Petro previously announced five ceasefires linked to his "total peace" effort in late 2022, including with the ELN.[87] ELN leaders quickly clarified that they had agreed to no such deal, and two of the other agreements collapsed within the span of five months.[88] Peace efforts with the ELN are likely to experience starts and stops, but the June 2023 ceasefire

announcement is a positive indication that the group is willing to engage.
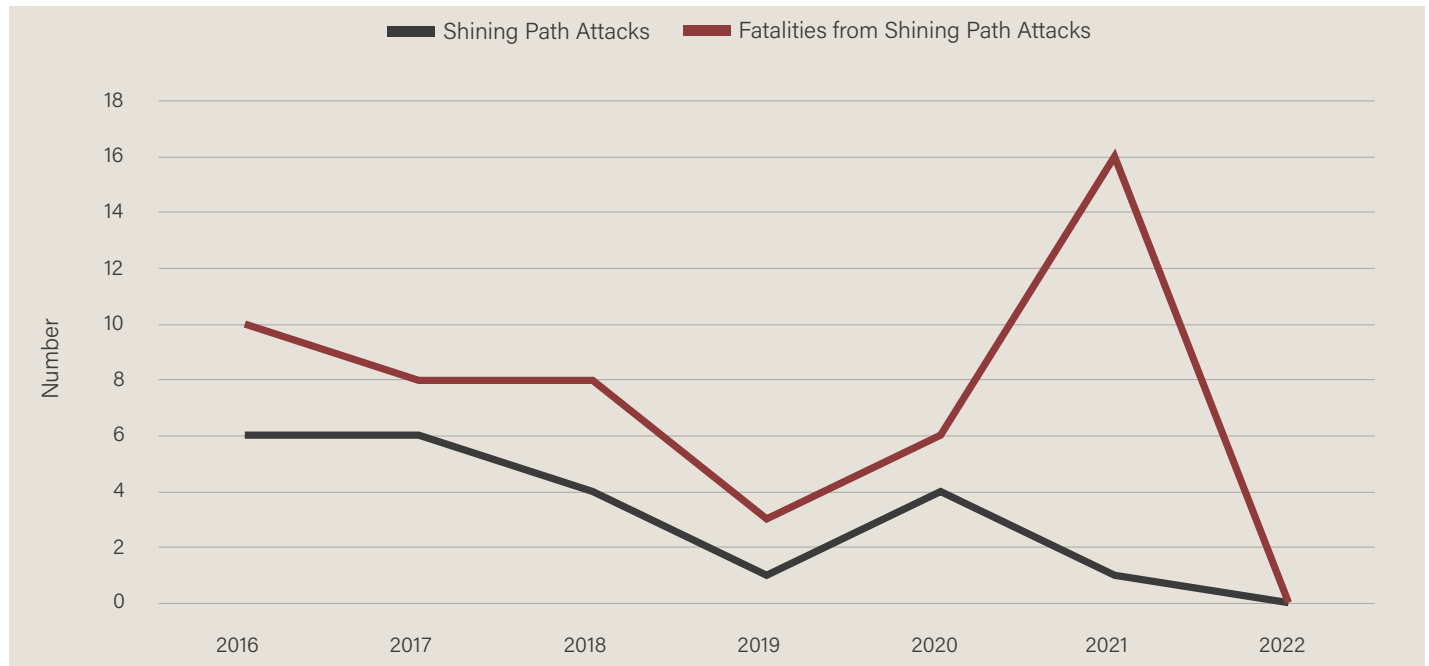
Chile

One of the most divisive examples of the conflation of terrorism and Indigenous resistance is the case of Mapuche communities in the Araucanía region of what is now Chile, as well as some nearby regions of Argentina. For over three decades, the Mapuche have campaigned for self-determination and land rights within the ancestral Wallmapu territory that they were promised by the Chilean government. While many Mapuche activists use only peaceful means, other subsets—such as the Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (CAM) faction and its militant wing, Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche (RAM)—have committed acts of violence and sabotage. In its original statement of purpose, in which it justified the use of violence, the RAM declared: "We will resist the oil and mining companies in the south with blood and fire, and it will be our objective to consolidate a force to expel, through concrete action, those already established, validating all forms of struggle, and the right to rebel as an oppressed people; negotiating is not fighting."[89]

These groups most frequently conduct arson attacks against the timber and mining industries or law enforcement patrols. In July 2022, for example, CAM militants set fire to industrial machinery and 18 vehicles in the town of Máfil in Chile's Los Ríos region. That same month, unidentified Indigenous militiamen ambushed a police patrol in Tricauco, attacking with firearms and Molotov cocktails.[90]

Chile regularly uses its anti-terrorism law against the Mapuche, and in June 2022, the Chilean Chamber of Deputies declared four Mapuche subgroups to be illegal terrorist organizations: CAM, Resistencia Mapuche Lavkenche, Resistencia Mapuche Malleco, and Weichan Auka Mapu.[91] Over the past decade, however, various experts and international organizations, including Amnesty International and groups within the United Nations, have called on the Chilean government not to use its anti-terrorism law against the Mapuche people, and the application was condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. These groups cited irregularities in legal processes, discrimination, and denial of

Figure 3.6

Number of Shining Path Attacks and Resulting Fatalities, 2016–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

human rights.[92]

Ultimately, cases such as this demonstrate the limitations of uniform counterterrorism approaches, particularly in countries in which the government is committing human rights violations and widespread abuses toward the non-state actors that have resorted to violence. While actions may qualify as terrorism under academic definitions, perpetrators should be treated to fair and equal legal processes; states should not use the "terrorism" label as a means to bypass judicial processes or violate human rights.

Brazil

Far-right extremist activity in Brazil has increased in recent years with encouragement by far-right political leaders such as former president Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro united several Brazilian right-wing political factions under one movement, through which he frequently praised past military dictatorships, spread disinformation on topics ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to policy issues, and encouraged police violence and mass intimidation tactics.[93]

Although terrorist attacks remain rare, the Federal Police of Brazil reported a significant increase in investigations

related to neo-Nazism since 2019. While Brazil saw two or fewer neo-Nazi-related investigations per year prior to 2019, the Federal Police reported 12 in 2019. In the first half of 2023 alone, it opened 21 cases linked to neo-Nazism.[94] In particular, the frequency of neo-Nazi demonstrations and other activities has increased in southern states such as Paraná and Santa Catarina—traditionally conservative regions with large German populations.[95]

After losing his bid for reelection, Bolsonaro doubled down on the false narrative of a stolen election and refused to admit defeat—a tactic very similar to the "Big Lie" spread by former U.S. president Donald Trump and his supporters after the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Also mirroring the U.S. experience of the storming of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021, Bolsonaro's supporters stormed the presidential palace and the buildings containing the Brazilian congress and supreme court on January 8, 2023, in an attempt to undermine democracy by encouraging a military coup against the newly instated president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.[96]

Peru

The Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) is a Maoist insurgent group that formed in Peru in 1980. Between 1980 and 1992, the Shining Path carried out heavy attacks

Figure 3.7

Map of Shining Path Attacks, 2016–2022

Peru

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

against government, military, and civilian targets using a mix of small arms, machine guns, mines, and IEDs. Following the arrest of the group's founder, Abimael Guzman, in 1992, the Shining Path reduced its operational capacity and ideological emphasis and instead shifted its focus to prioritize narcotrafficking and financial gain.[97]

As shown in Figure 3.6, the Shining Path now carries out only a small number of attacks per year, including 22 attacks total since 2016 and none in 2022. Despite its low level of activity, the Shining Path does on occasion orchestrate larger-scale attacks. In May 2021, for example, a group of Shining Path militants murdered 16 civilians in Vizcatan, in Peru's Santipo province.[98] Figure 3.7 depicts the location of the 22 Shining Path attacks since 2016.

A 2017 political scandal in Peru illustrated the connections between political corruption, criminal activity, and terrorist activity in the region. In July 2017, the Peruvian Counternarcotics Directorate, with assistance from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, arrested the

mayor of Tocache, David Bazán Arévalo, for his long-time participation in drug trafficking operations and provision of financial, weapons, and logistical support to a Shining Path faction.[99]

Iranian Presence

Iranian-linked terrorist attacks date back decades in Latin America and continue to cast a shadow over the modern security environment at times of increased tensions between Iran and the West. Groups linked to Iran carried out bombings in Buenos Aires at the Israeli embassy and the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association in 1992 and 1994, respectively, killing 106 people and injuring more than 500 across the two attacks.[100] Nearly three decades later, the Argentine defense ministry increased security at airports, borders, and the U.S. embassy in 2020 after a U.S. drone strike assassinated IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani, citing the two attacks as reason for particular concern.[101]

Although no attacks occurred in Argentina at that time, authorities have disrupted a series of Hezbollah terrorist plots in Latin America in recent years. These include a plot to assassinate U.S. and Israeli citizens in Colombia in 2021 and the seizure of a large quantity of explosives along with a vehicle-borne IED in Bolivia in 2017.[102] Argentina became the first Latin American country to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in July 2019, coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the 1994 bombing. Paraguay designated Hezbollah the next month, and Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras followed suit in 2020.[103] Brazil is now the major outlier in failing to designate Hezbollah.

The area surrounding the borders between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay—a semi-lawless region, often referred to as the tri-border area, that maintains the largest illicit economy in the Western Hemisphere—has a long history of Hezbollah presence, though the center of gravity of the group's activity in South America has moved away from the region in recent years. Most Hezbollah activity in the tri-border area focuses on illicit financial gain, which is primarily used to fund the group's activities in the Middle East.[104]

Hezbollah has most recently shifted its focus in Latin

America to Venezuela, where it maintains a crime-terror network of safe havens and the infrastructure for drug trafficking, money laundering, and smuggling.[105] Although Hezbollah's presence in and relationship with Venezuela is not new, its Venezuelan operations have gained particular importance as Iran has increased its support for Maduro in recent years. Both the large Lebanese and Syrian diaspora communities in Venezuela and Hezbollah's ties to high-ranking Venezuelan officials—such as Tareck El Aissami, the former minister of petroleum—have enabled the group to expand quickly and effectively.[106] Hezbollah has been able to simultaneously reinforce activities of the Venezuelan government, increase its own illicit profits, and further cement the crime-terror nexus in Venezuela—which is also a regular safe haven for terrorists and insurgents operating in neighboring states, including those affiliated with FARC dissident groups and the ELN.[107]

Conclusion

Terrorism in the Americas is in a stage of transition. The threat from Salafi-jihadist attacks has been eclipsed by homegrown violent extremism—a challenge that the nation's legal and law enforcement structures are less prepared to counter, particularly as the defense and security community shifts to prioritize strategic competition over counterterrorism and irregular activities. Furthermore, the emergence of the United States as an exporter of violent extremism will reshape the terrorist landscape, not only in North America but also farther abroad. The growth of the QAnon conspiracy theory in Canada demonstrates how the internet allows extremist ideas originating in the United States to spread to other countries, even when the initial content is specific to the U.S. political context. This threat is addressed further in Chapter 5, which explores the spread of such ideologies in Europe.

Terrorist activity currently poses little threat in the Caribbean and Latin America, but there are several factors that could escalate the threat. As demonstrated by the surge in far-right violence and election denial in Brazil, Latin American countries are vulnerable to extremist ideologies and messages exported from other areas, including the United States. Additionally, environmental extremism may continue to grow in the region and beyond, particularly as concerns about climate change and government inaction on environmental policy grow. Other traditional threats—including the endurance of

leftist guerrilla splinter groups and the return of foreign fighters—will also persist, though the threat level is likely to remain relatively manageable.

Chapter 4

Asia and Oceania

Across Asia, levels of militant violence associated with movements of all types remain well below historic highs. Long-standing insurgencies in Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir, mainland India, and the Philippines have continued to drive political violence, but attacks and fatalities are well below their peak levels, which were experienced in most cases more than a decade ago. Nevertheless, many areas in the region remain at risk of mass-casualty attacks with little visible warning, particularly in places where Islamic State ideology and propaganda resonate, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and India.

Afghanistan is the only Asian state where religious militants are responsible for most of the political violence. High levels of violence in Pakistan are associated with religious-motivated groups such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and various ethnonationalist Baloch militants. India, the Philippines, and Indonesia continue to experience attacks by militants inspired by Salafi- and Deobandi-jihadist ideology, but the highest levels of violence in each country are attributable to ethnonationalist (in the case of Indonesia) or far-left (in the cases of India and the Philippines) groups. Australia and New Zealand are adapting their counterterrorism strategies and domestic legal authorities to manage long-standing threats from extremists inspired by al Qaeda and the Islamic State, but are also simultaneously confronting a far-right violent extremist movement that has rapidly expanded in scope and volume and that is increasingly transnational.

This chapter covers the spectrum of terrorist threats in the Asia-Pacific region in three sections. The first section covers Central and South Asia, with a specific emphasis on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The second section focuses on Southeast Asia through the lens of the threat environments in Indonesia and the Philippines. The third section covers Oceania, with a focus on evolving threats to Australia and New Zealand. Each section begins with

a brief overview of key trends before continuing to country-level analyses of terrorist violence.

Central and South Asia

Geopolitics continue to cast a long shadow over the militant environment in Central and South Asia. Since establishing de facto rule over Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has prioritized efforts to establish international legitimacy, but the group's provision of safe haven to al Qaeda's senior leaders and a sizeable force of anti-Pakistan militants has intensified tensions with the United States and increased tensions in the historically close ties between the Taliban and the Pakistani security services. Meanwhile, India's ruling government has pursued an increasingly hard line against Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy since 2019, exacerbating tensions in a territory that has been the epicenter of Indo-Pakistani conflict since partition.

Key Trends

States continue to enable terrorist groups.

Pakistan and the Taliban—which controls the Afghan state despite a lack of international recognition—harbor terrorist groups within their territories. The result is heightened instability in a neighborhood that includes two nuclear-armed adversaries. Terrorist activities known or widely assumed to be supported by a state strain international relationships and can spur crises that might not be contained before significant escalation between state actors occurs. Early shifts in Pakistani activities suggest that it may be working to contain terrorist groups, but the long-term outlook remains unclear, particularly given the Taliban's uncertain commitment to the Doha Agreement, in which it stated its intent to prevent terrorist groups from using territory it controlled to attack the United States or its allies.

For Pakistan, support for terrorist groups is instrumental to its foreign policy. The government and its intelligence services have a long history of providing safe havens, training, and equipment to terrorist groups in order to compete with India below the level of conventional war and to shape events in Afghanistan. It long supported the Afghan Taliban as a way to preserve its influence in Afghanistan and continues to harbor groups that stage attacks in Jammu and Kashmir. The country appears to be taking steps to contain its terrorist proxies, but its ability and willingness to do so is not yet well established.

For the Taliban, the situation is more complex. Support for anti-Pakistan militants could be a tool of Taliban foreign policy; under such an interpretation, the group's rejection of the Durand Line represents a genuine foreign policy goal of reconquering the country's Pashtun areas. However, supporting the militants could also be the result of domestic politics. Attempting to shut down the TTP or al Qaeda activities could result in increased recruitment by the local Islamic State affiliate, splintering within the Taliban, or direct conflict between the TTP and the Taliban. As the movement already faces an ongoing terrorist insurgency, it would not wish to strengthen its adversary or create a new one. Finally, the support could be more organic—the result of individual- or family-level ties between the Taliban and TTP or al Qaeda members. Taliban governance is highly personalized, and interpersonal relationships could create a permissive environment at the local level even if higher-level officials wanted to slow or halt TTP or al Qaeda activity.

The overall result is the creation of significant escalation risk and regional instability. The activities of state-supported terrorist groups strain relationships between neighboring countries, and the deniability offered is imperfect. A state cannot merely decide that its activities are deniable and do not merit a response. Like deterrence, deniability is an interactive process that can unexpectedly collapse and erupt into direct conflict if one party fails to interpret signals or evaluate costs as expected. Given India and Pakistan's nuclear armaments and al Qaeda's historic ambition to overthrow governments both within the region and beyond it, the consequences of such escalation would be significant, even if its probability is low.

The outlook for terrorism is more uncertain than at any time since 2001.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, subsequent takeover by the Taliban, and killing of al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul have thrown the region's terrorism landscape into an uncharted new reality. The United States has been a major presence in the region for more than 20 years, and its counterterrorist activities were a key factor influencing the terrorist threat during that time. The long-term impact of the withdrawal is almost certain to be an increased terrorist threat: the reduction in U.S. kinetic and intelligence activities will ease pressure on the ability of terrorist groups to plot external attacks from Afghanistan, and the Taliban's commitment to preventing terrorists from staging attacks from the

country is uncertain at best.

The nature of that growing threat is far less clear. Not only have al Qaeda and the Taliban changed over the past 20 years, but the emergence of the Islamic State has introduced a new actor into the region's dynamic terrorist ecosystem. The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri has also triggered a leadership transition for al Qaeda, the group's second in its history. More than a year since al-Zawahiri's killing, the group has still not publicly named a new emir. The lack of a clear declaration of transition represents a shift in its historical behavior, and it is impossible to know how far any corresponding changes reach into the organization.[1]

The region remains important for terrorist propaganda.

Central and South Asia are a major focus for terrorist propaganda. The most obvious example is the international response to the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, but repeated mentions of India—both the issues of Jammu and Kashmir and apparent Islamophobia in the country—suggest that Salafi-jihadist groups derive propaganda value from the country's shifting attitude toward its Muslim population. The exact value for recruiting is uncertain, but terrorist groups continue to use events to incite attacks within India, as Salafi-jihadist propaganda calls on Indian Muslims to conduct attacks in the absence of an operational presence in the country.

Afghanistan

On July 31, 2022, a U.S. counterterrorism operation targeted and killed al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri. The event occurred during a crucial time of retrenchment for foreign terrorist organizations in Afghanistan—particularly al Qaeda, which benefitted from safe haven provided by the Taliban. Upon al-Zawahiri's death, al Qaeda reentered a period of uncertainty as the group underwent only the second leadership succession in its four-decade history. Beyond al Qaeda's leadership transition, the Taliban's de facto governance of Afghanistan following the United States' August 2021 withdrawal proved to be the most important dynamic shaping the international terrorist threat in the country. Uncertainty regarding Taliban governance and the future of al Qaeda's leadership leave the longer-term militant threat to U.S. and Western interests in a sustained period of transition.

Al Qaeda was founded by a group of Arab and Egyptian militants in the late 1980s in Peshawar, Pakistan, and its core consists of a small number of members located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is motivated by a Salafi-jihadist ideology developed in part during the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and seeks the replacement of the current international system of nation-states with an international caliphate. The group differs significantly from the Islamic State in that it sees its main adversary as the United States, believing that compelling Washington to withdraw its support for governments in Muslim-majority countries will allow it to overthrow those regimes.[2] It consists of a loose global organization of regional affiliates and a leadership group located in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran.[3] The leadership group currently exercises at most loose control over its regional affiliates, most frequently seeking to inspire terrorism against the United States rather than to direct specific attacks.[4] This organizational model represents an evolution of al Qaeda's initial approach of conducting high-profile operations against the United States, which culminated in the 9/11 attacks.

The Taliban, which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, is a terrorist group currently acting as the de facto government of Afghanistan. The group is Deobandi rather than Salafi-jihadist, and its ideology has been significantly influenced by Afghan Pashtun cultural traditions.[5] The group has imposed a severe interpretation of Sharia since taking power, closing government schools for girls and banning Afghan women from most jobs.[6] The group has also shown some signs of evolution since its first period of rule. Taliban leaders have sought to display solidarity with non-Sunni Afghans, although widespread reports of Taliban violence against the country's Hazara minority undermine those displays.[7]

The group has a wide variety of funding sources, especially now that it is operating as the country's de facto authorities. It has supplemented its long-time sources of income with increased access to tax revenue.[8] In addition, humanitarian aid and security payments that once would have gone to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan now frequently accrue to the Taliban.[9] The result is that the group is likely richer than it has ever been, despite the current state of the Afghan economy.[10]

Taliban efforts to secure international recognition, legitimacy, and access to frozen bank assets have motivated the government's repeated public statements that it "will not allow anyone to use [its] territory to threaten the security of other countries."[11] This commitment was a key element of the February 2020 Doha agreement,

and it was reiterated by Taliban supreme leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada during his July 2022 Eid al-Adha address. Moreover, the Taliban is locked in an ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against ISKP, which continues to conduct attacks against the Taliban government, Afghan civilians, and foreigners. Despite the Taliban's assurances that it will not allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for international terrorism, the discovery of Ayman al-Zawahiri—perhaps the world's most wanted man—at a safe house in an affluent Kabul neighborhood undercut any Taliban claims that it was not harboring al Qaeda senior leaders and fighters. This is consistent with a February 2022 UN finding that the Taliban has taken no recent steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters—and that "terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history."[12]

Increased freedom of action for Taliban-aligned terrorist groups is taking place in the absence of meaningful United States or NATO-based counterterrorism operations. As of publication of this report, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)'s Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism Task Force had not conducted a counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan since 10 civilians were killed in a U.S. Department of Defense drone strike on August 29, 2021.[13] In congressional testimony, CENTCOM commanding general Michael Kurilla highlighted the constraints on U.S. capacity to execute "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. Notably, geographical constraints require overflight through Pakistan to reach Afghanistan. Combined with the loss of on-the-ground human intelligence networks following the U.S. withdrawal, the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations necessary to find, fix, and achieve high-confidence targeting of foreign terrorists on a robust scale in Afghanistan is exceedingly difficult. As demonstrated by the operation led by the Central Intelligence Agency that killed al-Zawahiri in July 2022, the United States retains some capability to execute targeted counterterrorism operations against high-value targets; however, significant constraints are limiting the United States' capacity to conduct similar operations on a larger scale.

ISKP, the Islamic State's Central and South Asia branch, continues to represent the most acute threat within Afghanistan. ISKP emerged in 2014 with the defection of Tehrik-e-Taliban members and their subsequent pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State. The group is currently engaged in a terrorist insurgency against the Taliban in Afghanistan and is simultaneously conducting terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Like other Islamic State provinces, the group's goal is the formation of a caliphate in which it can enforce its hardline interpretation of Sharia. Its agenda is explicitly sectarian, leading it to target religious minorities in its areas of operation. A major feature of its propaganda is the idea that the Taliban serves U.S. interests in Afghanistan and is not a truly Islamic government.[14] The United States assesses that the group aspires to conduct external attacks, although its ability to do so is unclear. The group maintains a hierarchical organizational structure but controls little territory and has not demonstrated the capability to conduct attacks outside of Central Asia and Pakistan.

ISKP is probably led by Sanaullah Ghafari, also known as Shahab al-Mujahir, despite unconfirmed reports of his death. Ghafari was appointed emir by the Islamic State in June 2020, and he was designated alongside two other ISKP leaders and a facilitator as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in November 2021.[15] Despite Ghafari's alias—"al-Muhajir"—which suggests that he is a foreigner in Afghanistan, and despite prior assessments that he may be Iraqi, Ghafari is assessed by the U.S. government and the United Nations to be a 27-year-old Afghan national.[16] According to multiple sources, Ghafari is credited with leading operations in Kabul prior to his appointment, and he is referred to by the Islamic State as an "urban lion." According to one UN member state, he also previously served as a mid-level commander in the Haqqani Network before defecting to the Islamic State.[17]

ISKP attacks have been decreasing, but the group has conducted several cross-border rocket attacks into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as high-casualty attacks in Pakistan. Since the collapse of the Afghan National Government, ISKP has conducted an insurgency against the ruling Taliban government and continued attacks against religious minorities in Afghanistan, including Shia Hazaras and as Sikhs in Kabul. ISKP has also attacked Afghan critical infrastructure, including the electricity grid. These operations are linked with ISKP's broader contention that the Taliban government is an ineffective, corrupt, Western-aligned body that is responsible for poverty and insecurity in Afghanistan. The Taliban's focus on gaining international legitimacy and recognition continues to fuel ISKP propaganda. According to one English-language Islamic State-affiliated message from May 2022, "Today, the Taliban seeks to be part of the global Crusader system that America controls financially, militarily, and politically."[18]

ISKP's ranks likely increased after the collapse of the Islamic Republic government in August 2021, largely due to large-scale prisoner releases by the Taliban rather than to dramatic increases in recruitment. As of February 2022, the United Nations assessed that ISKP's ranks had nearly doubled—from 2,200 fighters to 4,000 fighters—since August 2021.[19] That said, in March 2022, then CENTCOM commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie stated that Taliban prisoner releases at Bagram, Parwan, and Pul-e Charkhi prisons in August 2021 had only increased ISKP's strength by approximately 1,000 fighters, and as of March 2022, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed ISKP's strength to be 2,000 fighters, a significantly lower estimate than the United Nations.[20] Whatever the exact number of fighters, the group remains a persistent threat in Afghanistan and aspires to expand its activities further afield.

During the first half of 2022, al Qaeda's remaining Afghan-based leadership focused on reestablishing a physical safe haven and rebuilding leadership ranks that were devastated by two decades of counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, al-Zawahiri's death will exert renewed pressure on the group to retain its claim to leadership of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. Despite its leadership transition, al Qaeda has proven to be a remarkably resilient organization since 9/11. As director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center Christine Abizaid noted in September 2021, "The organization has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to evolve, adapt, and capitalize on changing security environments and geopolitical realities to expand its reach."[21] Nevertheless, al Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban is likely constraining its near-term external operational ambitions. The Taliban's priority remains achieving international legitimacy, an effort that would be irreversibly disrupted if Afghanistan were the root of a large-scale external terrorist operation. This has led to a period that the chief of the UN sanctions monitoring team recently characterized as one of "strategic restraint" for al Qaeda.[22] Despite al Qaeda's kinship with the Taliban and increased freedom of movement and action, the group likely has minimal capacity to plan, organize, and execute any near-term external operations.[23]

The remaining elements of al Qaeda's global leadership cadre likely remain in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iran. Al Qaeda's Afghanistan-based footprint is small but important; the DIA recently characterized its strength as "far fewer" than 200 fighters, while the latest UN estimate was slightly higher, at 200 to 500 fighters across 11 Afghan provinces.[24] Despite this, the group has successfully retained leadership over its global affiliate network, and there are no indications to date that al-Zawahiri's death is jeopardizing its primacy over global affiliates. Al Qaeda likely still views the current conditions in Afghanistan as favorable for rebuilding its leadership ranks, raising funds, and developing and disseminating its messaging and propaganda, even if the death of its emir in July 2022 demonstrates that the United States retains the capacity to target its senior leaders in the country.

Overall, al Qaeda's fortunes are inextricably tied to the Taliban's ability to remain in power, and the group's operational ambitions will remain constrained as the Taliban pursues global legitimacy. It is too early to judge with confidence how Taliban constraints on al Qaeda's operational capabilities will affect the group in the longer term, or if al Qaeda's ties to the Taliban will prove a liability for the group and serve as an effective means for the Islamic State to recruit militants disaffected by the realities of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance.

Afghanistan also remains host to various regional militant groups, as it has done for decades. This includes al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), multiple Uzbek and Tajik militant groups (such as Jamaat Ansarullah), and several Pakistani militant groups, most significantly the anti-Pakistan TTP.

The TTP was founded as an umbrella organization for a variety of groups opposed to the Pakistani government in northwest Pakistan but has since grown increasingly hierarchical and centralized.[25] It splintered significantly between 2013 and 2018, during which defectors founded ISKP, but underwent a resurgence beginning with the elevation of Noor Wali Mehsud to the position of emir.[26] The organization continues to incorporate new groups and has been bolstered by its relationship with the Afghan Taliban. The TTP officially espouses regional and local goals, having ceased its calls for wider jihad in 2020.[27] The group has focused most of its rhetorical efforts on Pakistan, calling for the enforcement of its interpretation of Sharia, the end of Pakistan's counterterrorism cooperation with the United States, and the "liberation of [its] independent tribal lands" in northwestern Pakistan.[28] In negotiations with the Pakistani government, its main demand has reportedly been reversing the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Khyber Pakhtunwa province, which the Pakistani government has rejected.[29] The TTP has repeatedly leveraged

its Afghan safe haven to intensify cross-border attacks into Pakistan, an issue that has harmed the historically strong relationship between the Pakistani security services and the Afghan Taliban.

The TTP maintains the largest and most capable force within Afghanistan other than the Taliban itself. Its membership is estimated to include 3,000 to 4,000 fighters, primarily in Khost and Kunar provinces.[30] The ability of TTP militants to maintain safe haven in Afghanistan so it can undertake attacks in Pakistan remains the Taliban's most clear violation of the 2020 Doha Agreement. Pakistani airstrikes against TTP targets in Afghanistan in April 2022 killed at least 45 people, including 20 children, leading to strong rebukes from Taliban officials and further aggravating regional tensions.[31]

From a financing perspective, both al Qaeda and ISKP have likely been net receivers of funds in recent years. Al Qaeda's affiliates have traditionally exploited weak governance in their respective territories to generate substantial revenue from various illicit and quasi-licit means. ISKP derives its funding from local donations, taxation, and extortion as well as support from other Islamic State franchises.[32] ISKP also draws its finances from various international sources, including from the Islamic State's global leadership, which controls between $25 million and $50 million in Iraq-based financial reserves; the delivery of financial assistance to its affiliates remains an important factor in the Islamic State's ability to retain authority and control over its global network.[33] Both al Qaeda and ISKP rely on cash couriers and a network of Afghanistan-based hawaladars to facilitate overseas transfers, often via Turkey.[34]

Pakistan

Pakistan remains host to arguably the most complex militant dynamics of any country. It is beset by increasing levels of terrorist attacks against civilians and against the Pakistani government and military. The overall level of attacks attributable to various militant groups—including religiously motivated groups such as the TTP and ISKP as well as ethnonationalist Baloch separatist groups—has increased dramatically since 2019. Fatal attacks in Pakistan more than doubled between 2020 and 2021 and continue to rise, posing a threat to Pakistani civilians and regional stability.

The government and its intelligence services also continue to support various militant groups and proxies that carry out key elements of the nation's foreign policy,

most notably in Jammu and Kashmir. Ultimately, it was likely Pakistan's permissive attitude toward regional militants—specifically the Afghan Taliban—that most directly contributed to the TTP's capacity to intensify attacks in Pakistan. Although the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani state both benefited from their decades-long partnership, the TTP has leveraged its safe haven in Afghanistan—supplied by Islamabad's longtime partner and ally the Taliban—to intensify violence until the May 2022 ceasefire agreement, which broke down amid what the TTP claimed were violations by the Pakistani military.[35]

Although civilian deaths due to terrorism in Pakistan remain far below the peaks experienced before Pakistan's 2014 military offensive into its northwestern provinces, March 2022 witnessed the deadliest single attack in Pakistan in four years, when an Islamic State suicide bomber killed more than 60 civilians at a Shia mosque in Peshawar.[36] Pakistan also remains beset by sustained levels of targeted and political violence, and it can be difficult to disaggregate grievance-based assassinations from those motivated by religious or ethnonationalist ideology. A substantial amount of violence in Pakistan goes unclaimed by organized militant groups, and targets are diverse. In 2022, 71 fatal attacks against military, police, political figures, medical personnel, and ethnic and gender minorities went unclaimed.[37]

After decades of international efforts to compel Pakistan to cease its longstanding support for regional militant groups, several key developments in 2021 and 2022 suggest that Pakistan's distressed economy is motivating Islamabad to take steps to constrain longtime proxies. Pakistan's access to global financial markets remains restricted due to the country's "gray list" designation by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). As recently as 2019, an FATF Asia-Pacific Group report found that militant groups in Pakistan "raise funds through a variety of means including direct support, public fundraising, abuse of NGOs, and through criminal activities."[38] Desperate for global capital to address deep-rooted economic challenges that have only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and global inflation, Pakistan is seeking to address the poor FATF ratings on anti-money laundering and countering terrorist finances, which constrain Islamabad's access to global financial markets.

Arrests and prison sentences throughout 2021 and 2022 for three of Lashkar-e Taiba's most senior leaders—including, reportedly, the mastermind of the 2008

Mumbai attacks—were likely tied to these efforts to normalize Pakistan's global financial status.[39] This is consistent with a pattern of behavior over the past decade, when, amid substantial external pressure from the United States or other international organizations, Islamabad has throttled the domestic activities of the militant groups to which the state has retained close ties.

Components of the Pakistani state—specifically elements of Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's external intelligence service—have historically developed close relationships with external-facing militant groups. These groups—which include, among others, Lashkar-e Taiba, Jaish-e Mohammed, and the Afghan Taliban—are a tool for advancing Islamabad's broader foreign policy objectives in Kashmir, mainland India, and Afghanistan in exchange for funding, training, and safe haven. Recent crackdowns on these same groups reflect how Pakistan
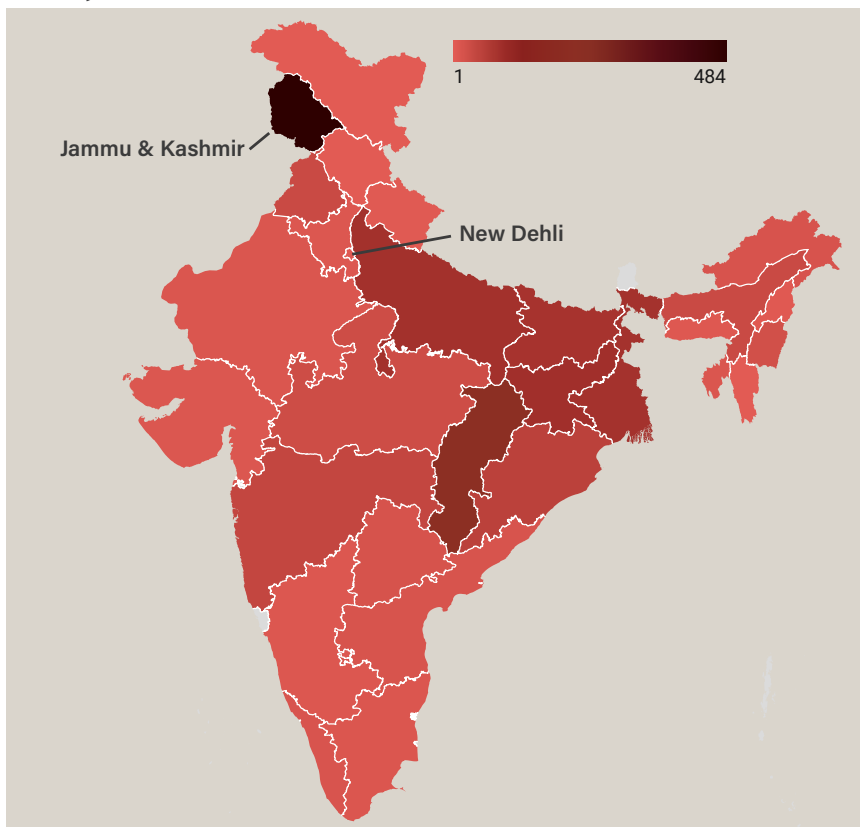
can exploit ties to its militant proxies both for offensive operations and for bolstering its counterterrorism credentials. The strategy met with early success. In October 2022, the FATF announced that Pakistan would be removed from the gray list, an event that then prime minister Nawaz Sharif and other senior Pakistani officials hoped would improve the country's foreign direct investment picture.[40]

India

India continues to experience persistent levels of militant violence, largely concentrated in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir and the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh. Levels of militant-initiated attacks and fatalities increased from 2020 to 2021, and rates of attacks remained high through the first half of 2022.[41] The main terrorist threat in India is likely to remain concentrated in Jammu and Kashmir at least in the short term.

Since stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special status under the Indian constitution in August 2019, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has continued to harden its position on Kashmir. The government's revocation of Articles 370 and 35A—which granted Jammu and Kashmir a substantial degree of self-governance and autonomy—triggered immediate social unrest, but overall levels of violence in the three years since remain far below their peaks in the 1990s and 2000s. Concurrent with the constitutional changes to Jammu and Kashmir's status, Indian security services have expanded their presence in the region. For instance, counterinsurgency forces, specifically the Rastriya Rifles, have increased their use of cordon and search operations in Jammu and Kashmir.

Insurgent-related violence in Jammu and Kashmir declined throughout the latter half of 2022. Overall militant-initiated civilian deaths in Jammu and Kashmir are low.[42] Individual attacks against both civilians and the security forces remain largely small-scale, with few incidents incurring more than two deaths. The last mass-casualty event (an event that involves more than 10 deaths) in Jammu and Kashmir

Figure 4.1

Fatal Incidents Involving Non-state Armed Groups in India, 2020–2022
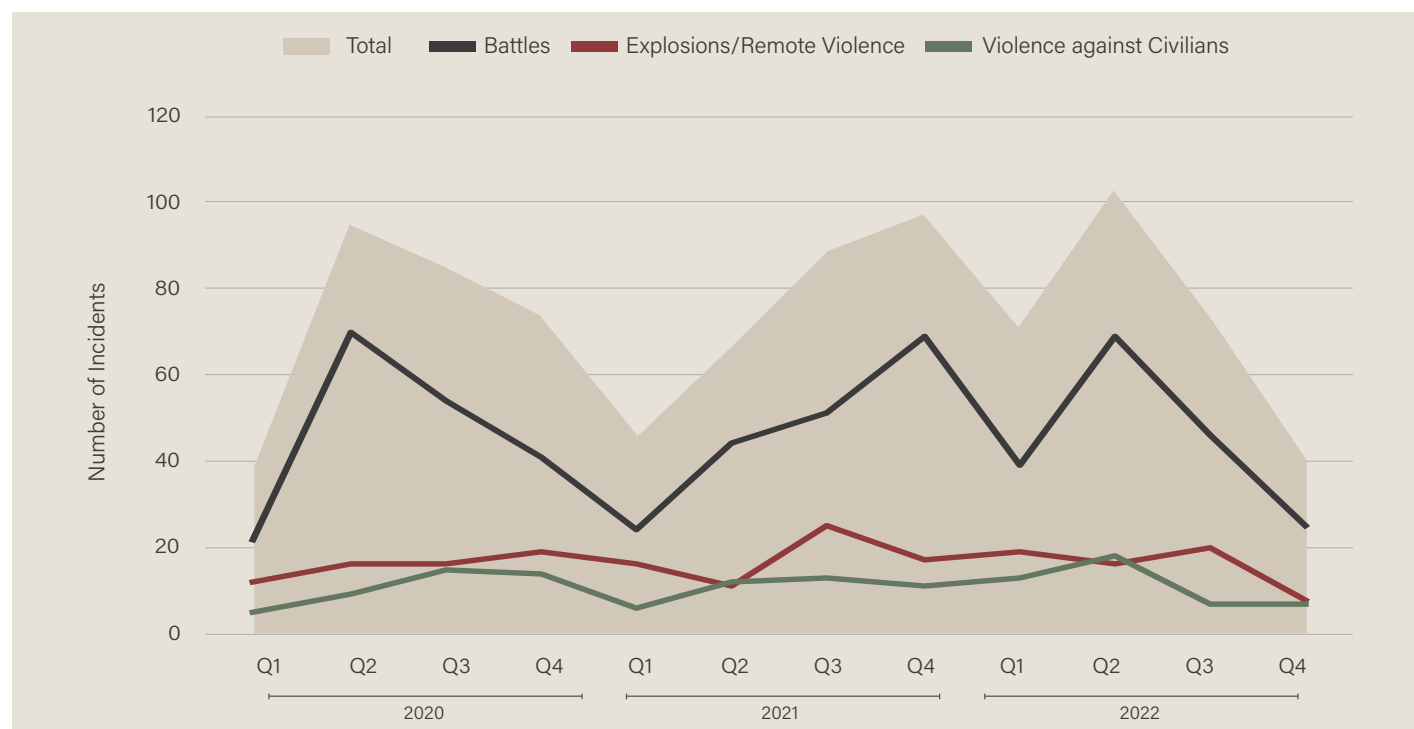

Note: Map borders are provided by an external source and do not imply a CSIS position on international borders.
Source: Clionadh Raleigh et al., "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 651–60, doi:10.1177/0022343310378914.

Figure 4.2

Violent Incidents Involving Non-state Actors in Jammu and Kashmir, 2020–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

was in February 2019, when 40 Indian soldiers were killed. However, rates of violence in Jammu and Kashmir have declined before only to bounce back dramatically.

Global militant groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda have historically been limited in their ability to direct, inspire, or carry out large-scale attacks in mainland India. The largest-scale terrorist attacks in India's recent history, including the 2006 Mumbai train bombings and the 2008 Mumbai siege, were carried out by well-organized and highly capable militant groups closely aligned with the Pakistani state, many of which—most notably Lashkar-e Taiba—espouse a unique ideology distinct from those adopted by al Qaeda and the Islamic State.[43]

Nevertheless, the Islamic State has recognized the existence and operations of a "Hind Province" since 2019, and the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for several small-scale attacks in Jammu and Kashmir since 2020.[44] One of the Islamic State's official global media hubs (Amaq News Agency) has also released videos of Islamic State militants carrying out attacks against security forces in Jammu and Kashmir.[45] Despite these

groups' limited success in cultivating large and capable networks within India thus far, Indian Muslims remain a key propaganda target for both the Islamic State and al Qaeda, especially AQIS.

Both groups regularly seize on domestic sectarian tensions to promote narratives intended to radicalize Indian Muslims. In one recent example in May 2022, a spokesperson for India's ruling BJP delivered remarks that were perceived as disparaging the Prophet Mohammed. Both AQIS and Islamic State capitalized on these remarks in propaganda and messaging, attempting to exploit escalating sectarian tensions between the BJP government and India's 200 million Muslims.[46] At least one retaliatory act of terrorism—the June 2022 murder of a tailor in Udaipur who supported the BJP spokeswoman's comments on social media—was connected to the controversy.[47]

Currently, most direct threats to Indian civilians from religiously motivated militant groups remain aspirational, with inspiring individuals or small independent cells primarily carrying out small-scale attacks. This has been one of the key lines of messaging in The Voice of

Hind, an India-focused, English-language Islamic State magazine that has been published since 2020. The Voice of Hind has repeatedly called Indian Muslims to conduct small-scale attacks, and it included in its November 2021 edition a checklist on surveillance, countersurveillance, and other tactics and techniques to apply when conducting a small-arms attack. The magazine also champions a distributed "leaderless resistance" model and recognizes how the group can benefit from even rhetorical support from sympathizers. Al Qaeda has similarly focused recent messaging specifically on India and Kashmir, a topic that al Qaeda's then emir Ayman al-Zawahiri spoke about repeatedly in the months directly preceding his death. In May 2022, al Qaeda released a 47-minute video entitled "Kashmir and Palestine: A Recurring Tragedy." The video included commentary from Ayman al-Zawahiri directly criticizing the Indian government's revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status, and then went on to state: "O our people in Kashmir! Your battle is the battle of the entire Muslim Ummah! Your theatre is not just Kashmir, but the entire Indian Subcontinent! So prepare yourselves for bleeding your enemies to death in the entire Subcontinent."[48]

This video was preceded in April 2022 by the release of an eight-minute al-Zawahiri speech directed at Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, in which he praised an Indian Muslim woman who had confronted a group that was heckling students wearing hijabs to class at a university in Karnataka state.[49] Alongside content by al Qaeda senior leadership, AQIS also releases its own messaging focused on events in India. In both cases, media operations are designed to inspire and incite independent or small-cell action, and as such are intended to serve as a force multiplier for al Qaeda's isolated and exceptionally small fighting ranks in Central and South Asia. Both al Qaeda senior leadership and AQIS are largely confined to Afghanistan, with a combined strength of, at most, 500 fighters, and neither retains the current capability to plan and execute large-scale external operations.[50]

Southeast Asia

Salafi-jihadist militants pose a decreasing threat in the Philippines and Indonesia. In both countries, extremists benefit from tying their local grievances and interests to the Islamic State and other global movements, despite limited material connections. Sustained counterterrorism operations have degraded the ability of militant groups and individual extremists to operate in both

countries. Nonetheless, fatal attacks do still occur. Several high-profile Islamic State-inspired suicide bombings have occurred in the past several years, targeting both state forces and civilians. In the Philippines, the future of a 2014 peace agreement to demobilize a decades-long insurgency will depend on the government's ability to address widespread poverty and social marginalization in majority-Muslim provinces that experience higher levels of terrorist violence. In Indonesia, the escalation of the Papua conflict since the killing of an Indonesian brigadier general in April 2021 overshadows the Salafi-jihadist threat and, for now, is the main security challenge for Indonesian authorities.

Key Trends
The Salafi-jihadist threat is declining.

Although the region has seen high levels of Salafi-jihadist activity in the past, both the number and intensity of their attacks have declined. As of July 2022, the United Nations estimated that approximately 200 Islamic State-affiliated and -inspired fighters were active in the southern Philippines, which reflects a significant decline since approximately 1,000 militants were killed in the five-month siege of Marawi in 2017.[51] The groups associated with the Islamic State in the Philippines have recently perpetrated far fewer attacks than in previous years, although their use of suicide attacks may be increasing. Islamic State groups continue to conduct attacks in Indonesia, but their ability to challenge government forces is limited. The local al Qaeda affiliate, in contrast, has not conducted an attack in the country since 2009. Although Salafi-jihadist groups remain active in both countries, their recent attacks suggest that they do not have the operational capabilities to challenge the control of the state, favoring attacks against soft civilian targets instead.

Secessionist movements are significant drivers of terrorism.

The region's colonial past and archipelagic geography have contributed to the existence of several separatist movements that have historically been significant drivers of violence. Divergences in terrorism trends in the Philippines and Indonesia are partly explained by the differing states of their separatist insurgencies. The decrease in Salafi-jihadist violence in the Philippines can be attributed in part to the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

(BARMM), which aided in ending a decades-long insurgency, although the peace remains fragile. Meanwhile, the primary source of political violence in Indonesia remains the separatist insurgency in Indonesian Papua, a conflict that has intensified over the past two years. The ability of governments to weaken insurgencies and move toward political resolution is a key determinant of terrorist violence and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Even an apparent success such as the creation of BARMM is fragile given the slow rate of disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former insurgents, along with the difficulty of resolving generations-old economic and political inequalities.
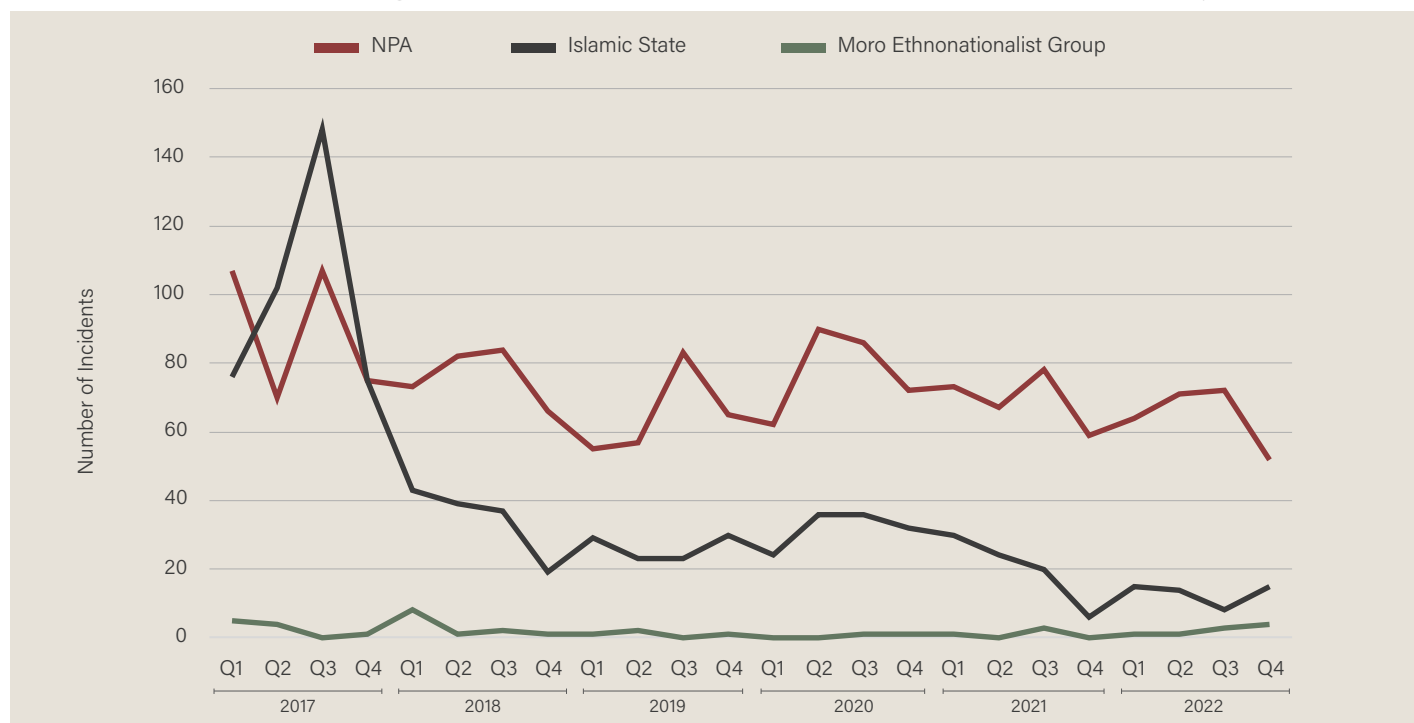
The Philippines

Terrorist groups in the Philippines are decreasingly capable of violence and pose a limited threat to civilians as a result. The New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, is the most active opposition armed group in the country but mostly engages in small-scale violence typical of insurgencies rather than the mass-casualty attacks that characterize terrorist groups. The country's Muslim separatist

insurgents have also posed a minimal threat since the signing of a peace agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government in 2014. The country is also home to a variety of Islamic State factions, although the common Wilayah East Asia branding obscures the fact that there is little operational coordination between the groups and that the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State East Asia is less than the sum of its parts.

The NPA remains the most dangerous non-state armed group in the Philippines, but it does not represent a meaningful terrorist threat. Designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization, the NPA is a Marxist-Maoist insurgency that seeks the overthrow of the government of the Philippines and what it sees as a U.S.-led colonial order in the region.[52] The NPA was involved in several times as many violent incidents between 2020 and 2022 as Filipino Salafi-jihadist or Moro ethnonationalist groups. Most of this violence consists of battles with government forces rather than terrorism. It has engaged in a large amount of violence against civilians, but very few incidents are the type of indiscriminate, high-profile attacks that are a hallmark of

Figure 4.3

Violent Incidents Involving Selected Non-state Armed Groups in the Philippines, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

terrorist groups.[53] Most of the violence consists of small-scale physical attacks, including assassinations and executions following "sham trials."[54] This type of violence is extremely common in internal wars and insurgencies and does not indicate a significant terrorist threat from the group despite the danger it continues to pose to civilians and security forces in its areas of operation.

The threat from the Philippines' Moro ethnonationalist insurgencies has declined dramatically since the signing of the peace agreement between the government and the MILF in 2014. Implementation of the agreement continues, with demobilized veterans of a decades-long insurgency in the southern Philippines developing an autonomous government in BARMM, which was officially established in 2019.
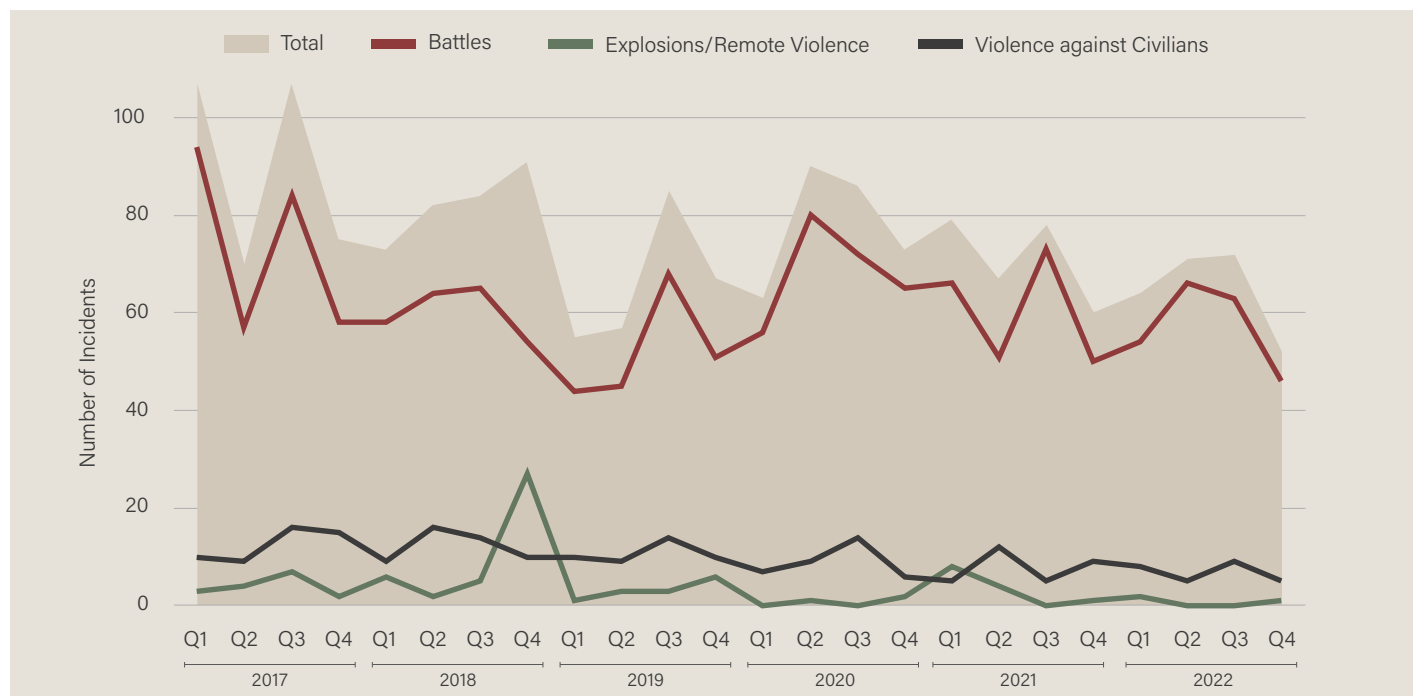
Over the long term, the peace agreement will be an essential mechanism for keeping the terrorism risk in the Philippines' majority-Muslim provinces low. Securing a lasting peace will require addressing widespread poverty—which in BARMM is up to 25 percent higher than in the rest of the Philippines—and social and economic marginalization.[55] Reflecting the challenge in sustaining

gains is the scale of disarmament and demobilization that will be required to eradicate militant groups that are involved in the peace process.[56] Of the 40,000 MILF members requiring demobilization, fewer than half had been decommissioned as of June 2022, according to the Filipino government.[57] The task facing the government of the Philippines, the Moro ethnonationalists who committed to a negotiated solution, and others committed to long-term peace in the Philippines is significant, but decreases in the terrorist threat in the country have already been substantial.

The peace agreement did not include the Philippines' Salafi-jihadist groups, and a variety of Islamic State affiliates continue to conduct attacks in the Philippines. Various militant groups in the Philippines began swearing allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014, and the Islamic State reciprocated and has recognized a formal outpost in the Philippines since at least 2016.[58] Islamic State media characterizes the various Filipino factions that have sworn allegiance to the group as part of a single Islamic State province in East Asia. In theory, these Filipino groups recognize the authority of a single

Figure 4.4

Violent Incidents Involving the NPA in the Philippines by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

Philippines-based emir—who has been identified by the government of the Philippines and United Nations as Abu Zacharia, a member of the Islamic State Maute Group that led the 2017 siege of the city of Marawi.[59] In practice, the various factions aligned with the Islamic State in the Philippines often maintain only loose ties with each other and with Islamic State leadership in the Middle East.[60]

Unlike the MILF, these Islamic State-associated groups have not laid down arms in exchange for political concessions. Rather, they are experiencing significant disruption by security forces. Filipino security forces have continued to degrade the leadership ranks of various Islamic State factions. In 2020, three senior leaders of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) were killed, one of whom was the mastermind of the 2019 suicide attack targeting the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo. In March 2021, Filipino forces rescued a group of hostages who had been held by the ASG for a year, killing an ASG leader in the process.[61] In October 2021, Filipino forces killed Salahuddin Hassan, the leader of an Islamic State-aligned faction in Maguindanao Province, and less than two months later killed his successor. More recently, in March 2022, security forces killed another senior ASG leader, followed in June 2022 by the killing of the purported spokesman for the Islamic State in East Asia.

These operations have had a clear impact. The overall volume of attacks and fatalities attributable to the Philippines' Islamic State factions—including the ASG, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Front, and other "Daulah Islamiyah" affiliates—declined between 2020 and 2022. The security forces have also degraded the ability of Islamic State affiliates to conduct high-profile attacks. Between 2018 and 2020, the ASG perpetrated three suicide bombings, a method of attack that was extremely rare during decades of insurgency and militant activity in the area of Mindanao.[62] These attacks have not developed into a trend due to the ability of the security forces to disrupt similar plots. For example, in February 2021, Philippines security forces also arrested nine women who they accused of preparing suicide attacks against military targets.[63]
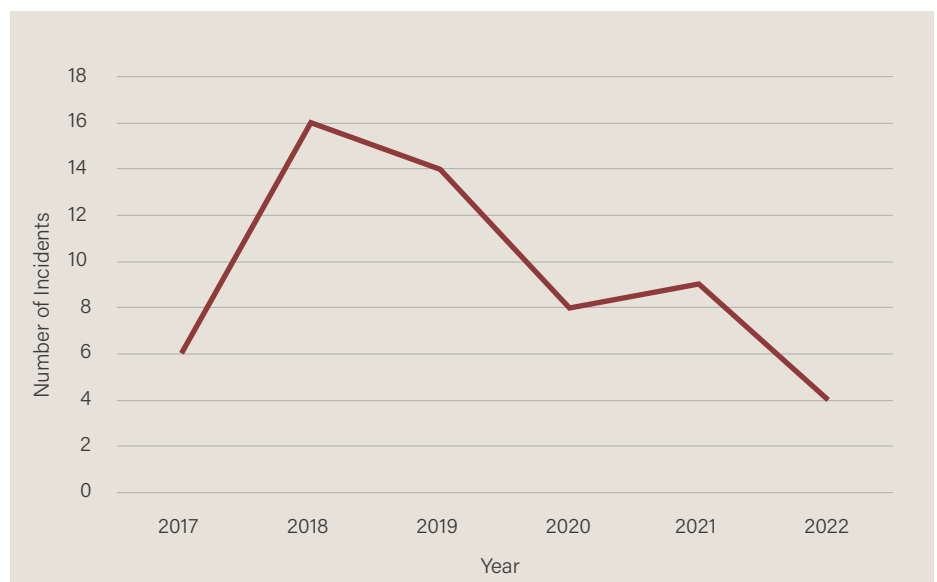
Indonesia

Indonesia has served as a critical node in the global Salafi-jihadist movement for decades. However, acts of violence attributable to various Indonesian groups aligned with al Qaeda and the Islamic State have declined in recent years. The primary source of political violence in Indonesia remains the separatist insurgency in Indonesian Papua, a conflict that has intensified since the killing of a senior Indonesian military officer in April 2021 but that lacks links to international terrorist movements and is a traditional ethnonationalist insurgency.[64]

Islamic State-aligned and -inspired groups—including Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and the Mujahideen Indonesian Timur (MIT)—have been involved in a consistently low level of violence in the past few years. While the majority of MIT attacks have focused on Indonesian security forces, the group has periodically killed civilians.[65] Although recent counterterrorism operations have targeted the JAD and MIT leaderships, lone actors or individuals inspired by Islamic State ideology will continue to pose a threat to Indonesian security forces and civilians for the foreseeable future.[66] A March 2021 suicide bomb attack against a Catholic church in Makassar, for example, reflects a persistent threat of violence from Indonesian Islamic State sympathizers.[67]

Figure 4.5

Violent Incidents Involving Groups Affiliated with the Islamic State in Indonesia, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED.

Despite significant progress in degrading the operational capabilities of various Islamic State-aligned groups in Indonesia, the country remains a substantial focus of Islamic State media and propaganda. This includes the country being a subject of official Islamic State media, but there are also several domestic groups who specialize in translating global Islamic State messaging into local languages. This most prominently includes the Southeast Asia-focused Islamic State-aligned media group An-Najiyah Media Center, which has established several distribution hubs for Islamic State media in Indonesia—including a Telegram channel called Jihadflix. Despite impressions of a large and devoted online audience in Indonesia, recent analysis suggests that pro-Islamic State forums in Indonesia are shrinking. One monitor of Indonesian Islamic State Telegram channels observed their membership declining from 8,000 members in 2015 to 1,000 in 2017 to only 200 or 300 in 2022.[68]

Jamaah Islamiya (JI) remains al Qaeda's primary ally in Southeast Asia. Although the group has never been recognized as an official al Qaeda affiliate, JI retains long-standing ties with Afghan militants, including the Taliban and al Qaeda, and has its roots in Indonesia's 1950s-era Darul Islam insurgency. The group seeks to create a regional caliphate spanning multiple countries, including Indonesia.[69] JI has previously conducted several mass-casualty attacks in Indonesia, including the 2002 Bali bombings. The group has not been responsible for any attacks in Indonesia since 2009 but appears to have remained active. Indonesian authorities claimed to have disrupted a planned JI attack in August 2021, seized weapons and ammunition, and dismantled a training facility.[70] The group represents a minimal threat, however, lacking any demonstrated capability to plot and conduct attacks even within Indonesia.

Oceania

Australia and New Zealand both boast robust counterterrorism strategies and capabilities that have successfully limited terrorist activity in the past several years. There has been one confirmed terrorist attack in Australia in the last four years. New Zealand has experienced one terrorist attack since 2021, though the Christchurch attack that occurred in March 2019 continue to cast a long shadow over the far-right threat in the country and globally. In the future, Australia and New Zealand will continue to face a threat landscape characterized by the persistent risk of lone-actor attacks from Salafi-jihadist-inspired and far-right extremists. The strong counterterrorism apparatuses in both countries are also subject to ongoing scrutiny and reforms to protect civil rights and prevent potential government overreach.

Key Trends

This section outlines two key trends in violent extremist activity in Australia and New Zealand, including the growth of far-right extremism and the expanding role of the internet in radicalization. Notably, both of these trends are present in other countries and regions globally, including North America and Europe.

Online radicalization poses a threat to younger audiences.

Online platforms for communication and content sharing provide a fertile ground for radicalizing and coordinating extremists. In Australia and New Zealand, social media and messaging apps have become the primary environment for spreading extremist propaganda, planning attacks, and inciting violence. In addition to traditional extremist propaganda, the online circulation of manifestos, detailed plans and tactics, or even videos and live streams of terrorist attacks can directly inspire future perpetrators. For example, the March 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand continue to inspire copycats worldwide, aided by the persistent accessibility of content produced by the attacker. The increasing popularity of encrypted messaging and file-sharing applications also enables threatening actors to communicate online more securely.

Security officials in both Australia and New Zealand have voiced concerns about the increased radicalization of youth online. As Mike Burgess, director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), put it in his 2022 Annual Threat Assessment speech, "The number of minors being radicalised is getting higher and the age of the minors being radicalised is getting lower."[71] In New Zealand, security officials have asked for the public's help looking for warning signs of violence amid a "sea of hate speech" online.[72] Lax content moderation, increased time spent online, and increased youth digital literacy all contribute to the growing risk of radicalization among young populations. According to Australian intelligence officials, in some cases minors are not only spreading extremist ideas but increasingly serving in leadership positions of extremist groups and directing adults.[73]

Ill-defined ideologies and conspiratorial worldviews are driving radicalization.

Domestic threats remain a priority for security officials in Australia and New Zealand. In both countries, violent extremists are increasingly motivated by a blurry mix of conspiracy theories and ill-defined ideologies. In New Zealand, conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic and grievances from the ensuing vaccine rollout have stimulated a new wave of anti-government beliefs, according to the country's director-general of security Rebecca Kitteridge.[74] Overall, both New Zealand and Australian officials are tracking an increasingly sprawling array of extremist ideologies that cannot be placed neatly on the political spectrum. In his 2023 Annual Threat Assessment speech, ASIO director-general Burgess characterized the situation as "a cohort of individuals motivated by a toxic cocktail of conspiracies, grievances and anti-authority beliefs. It is neither helpful nor accurate to reflexively assign these individuals to a place on the political spectrum."[75] Like the threat in North America and Europe, the threat from domestic extremists in Australia and New Zealand rarely emerges from cohesive political movements or organized terrorist cells, but rather springs from a loose network of movements inspired by conspiratorial worldviews and often connected globally online.

Australia

In December 2022, two police officers and a neighbor were murdered by three adult family members in a planned attack in the rural town of Wieambilla.[76] All three perpetrators were killed by responding authorities. Subsequent investigations revealed that the attackers subscribed to a Christian fundamentalist belief system known as premillennialism and were active conspiracy theorists.[77] The perpetrators of the Wieambilla attack were not associated with any domestic terror cell, however, they were participants in online groups that shared many of their conspiratorial and extremist beliefs.[78] After the attack and before authorities arrived, the perpetrators posted a YouTube video addressed to a man living in the United States with whom they had developed an online friendship.[79] The attack in Wieambilla reflects a broader transnational trend wherein domestic threats of extremism are centered not around cohesive political or extremist groups but loose networks spreading ideas and influence online to global audiences.

Threats to Australia continue to evolve, led by the

increasing threat posed by far-right extremism. The percentage of the ASIO's counterterrorism caseload focused on far-right extremism more than doubled between 2016 and 2020.[80] Although Australia has not experienced a mass-casualty far-right extremist attack, it has witnessed growth in and sustained support for anti-government protests that have periodically escalated into violence, with protesters throwing projectiles and destroying property.[81] There have separately been Covid-19-related acts of violence, including arson and, in one instance, a public act of self-immolation. Smaller-scale Covid-19 protests carried into late 2022, despite the fact that many health restrictions and mandates had been lifted.[82]

Several notable terrorist plot disruptions and arrests have occurred over the past three years in Australia.[83] In July 2019, police arrested three men over an alleged Islamic State-inspired plot to attack several Sydney targets, including police and defense buildings, courts, churches, and diplomatic missions. It was the sixteenth major attack to have been thwarted in Australia since 2014.[84] In March 2021, three men suspected of planning Salafi-jihadist-inspired attacks were arrested, but additional details on the nature of the plot have not been disclosed.[85] That same month, two men were arrested and charged for their involvement in facilitating the travel of Australian foreign fighters to Syria between 2012 and 2014.[86] Australian intelligence officials are wary of the influence of Salafi-jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, in the Indo-Pacific region. Overall, however, the risk of religiously motivated violent extremism in Australia remains low.[87]

According to the ASIO director-general, one of the most significant shifts in the domestic terrorism environment is the increasing percentage of counterterrorism investigation subjects who are minors. At the end of 2021, minors represented more than half of the ASIO's priority counterterrorism investigations. In that year, 15 percent of new ASIO counterterrorism investigations involved minors, a substantial increase from the approximately 3 percent seen in years prior.[88] The disproportionate radicalization of youth is likely in part the result of increased time spent online. Youth are particularly vulnerable to finding and being influenced by extremist propaganda on the internet, a trend that was further exacerbated by increased time spent online during lockdowns as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both the 2022 counterterrorism strategy and ASIO director-general's 2022 Annual Threat Assessment Speech highlighted that the

internet remains a fertile ground for the radicalization and recruitment of potential terrorists.

According to Australia's 2022 counterterrorism strategy, the most likely form of terrorism in the country remains an attack by a lone actor or small group of individuals using rudimentary weapons to strike in crowded places.[89] Officials are also wary of the high risk of repeat terrorist offenders—the 2022 strategy notes that at least 19 convicted terrorists are due for release in Australia between 2022 and 2027.[90] This cohort poses a disproportionate risk of committing repeat offenses, and a number of released terrorist offenders within Australia have been subsequently charged with breaching their control orders.

In response to these threats, the Australian government maintains a robust domestic counterterrorism apparatus, and in March 2022, it released its first counterterrorism strategy in seven years. The new strategy, Safeguarding Our Community Together, confronts a threat environment that has shifted substantially since Australia's last report was released during a wave of Islamic State-inspired plots and attacks in 2015.[91] Most notably, the 2022 strategy acknowledges the emerging and increasingly transnational nature of what the government now refers to as ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE), a term that is roughly equivalent to the U.S. government's broader label of "domestic terrorism." While the threat to Australia from the Islamic State and al Qaeda persists, the new strategy raises concern for the global increase of mass-casualty terrorist attacks since 2019 that have been motivated by racist, nationalist, or isolationist ideology.

New Zealand

New Zealand faces an evolving array of threats from both Salafi-jihadist-inspired extremists and far-right extremism. In particular, the March 2019 Christchurch shootings continue to cast a long shadow over the far-right threat in New Zealand and globally. According to New Zealand's 2021 counterterrorism strategy, the attack is still discussed among white identity extremists in New Zealand, and the terrorist's live stream video and manifesto continue to circulate online. The Christchurch attack continues to inspire copycats worldwide, including the perpetrators of attacks in El Paso, Texas; Halle, Germany; and Buffalo, New York. While Christchurch has motivated significant global public-private collective action to eradicate terrorist content online through the Christchurch Call to Action, dozens of recordings of the attack remain online, and the manifesto has been translated into at least 15 languages.[92]

Like the Christchurch attack, officials assess that the most likely form of future attacks in New Zealand will be by a lone actor or small group of individuals using rudimentary weapons to strike in crowded places or symbolic locations. Indeed, the most recent terrorist attack in the country occurred on September 3, 2021, when an Islamic State-inspired perpetrator stabbed five victims in a grocery store. Authorities had unsuccessfully tried in 2020 to charge the culprit for planning a terrorist attack, however, a judge rejected the argument because there was no such offence in the law at the time. In the wake of the 2021 attack, the New Zealand government expedited the passage of a bill that, among many protective measures, criminalized the planning of a terrorist attack. Notably, New Zealand's 2021 strategy assesses that Islamic State-inspired activity has declined as the group's presence in Iraq and Syria has been degraded.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, New Zealand has also experienced sustained demonstrations and counter-demonstrations to address government restrictions and mandates, some of which became violent. Demonstrations persisted into late 2022, with August 2022 protests in Wellington attracting thousands of attendees. Protests evolved to focus on political grievances broader than Covid-19, including an August 2022 mock trial outside of the parliament where former prime minister Jacinda Arden's government was convicted of "crimes against humanity."[93] According to New Zealand government statistics, threats of violence against Prime Minister Arden more than doubled between 2019 and 2021.[94]

Conclusion

The terrorist landscape in Asia and Oceania remains dominated by Afghanistan and Pakistan. These two countries account for the vast majority of terrorist activity and have emerged as a major focus of international attention, particularly after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021. This event remade both the terrorist and geopolitical landscape in Central and South Asia, increasing the terrorist threat to Pakistan and granting al Qaeda a haven where it can operate with minimal fear of counterterrorist operations for the first time since 9/11. Despite the Taliban victory, the outlook for terrorism is uncertain. There is little doubt that the threat will increase, but what that means in practice is unpredict-

able. Whether the threat will be local, regional, or global depends on whether the Taliban restrains al Qaeda and how well de facto security forces can maintain their pressure on ISKP. Likewise, whether violence flares into a broader regional conflagration depends both on terrorist activities at the local level and on the decisions made by Indian and Pakistani political and military leaders.

Throughout the rest of Asia and Oceania, the Salafi-jihadist threat has declined. This is the case in the Philippines, where counterterrorist pressure and political negotiations have reduced the threat from the country's Muslim separatist groups, and in Indonesia, where counterterrorist pressure has reduced the Salafi-jihadist threat but has not resolved its separatist insurgency. In Australia and New Zealand, the risk associated with Salafi-jihadist terrorism is being eclipsed by that of political violence. In both cases, the most likely perpetrators are lone actors inspired and supported by online communities.

Chapter 5
Europe

European countries face ongoing threats of terrorism from both domestic and international actors. Overall, the threat landscape in Europe closely resembles global trends. The Salafi-jihadist threat—once the most pressing terrorism concern—is significantly lower than in the past several decades, and the most severe threats increasingly come from traditionally "domestic" ideologies, including violent far-right and far-left individuals.

Still, the type and scope of these threats vary across the continent and even within regions and countries. While the consequences of returning foreign fighters that had supported the Islamic State in Syria remain relevant to various EU countries, they are most acutely felt in the Western Balkans, which also continue to face a variety of Salafi-jihadist, far-right, and ethnonationalist threats closely tied to the region's volatile political history. Countries such as France, Germany,

and the United Kingdom face a mix of violent far-right attacks—largely racially or ethnically motivated—as well as an enduring Salafi-jihadist threat. Greece and Italy also face ongoing far-right threats, although these risks primarily relate to government and political parties, and Greece must simultaneously contend with the continent's most severe threat of far-left terrorism. Ethnonationalist terrorism endures on a local and regional level, most heavily threatening law enforcement in Northern Ireland.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section covers the terrorism threat landscape in the European Union, as well as Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The second section assesses terrorism in the Balkans. Finally, the third section addresses terrorism in Ukraine and Russia, including the connections between extremist networks and Russia's war in Ukraine.

The European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom

The European Union and other Western European countries such as Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom face the most varied terrorist threat on the continent. This includes Salafi-jihadist terrorism and risks associated with foreign fighters imprisoned in the Middle East, violent far-right networks, violent far-left networks, long-standing ethnonationalist violence, and infrequent instances of state-sponsored terrorism from countries such as Iran and Russia.

Because terrorist trends in much of Europe transcend national borders and EU institutions facilitate counterterrorism initiatives that seek to comprehensively address threat patterns across the continent, this section largely focuses on patterns in terrorist activity based on perpetrator ideology rather than by individual affected country.[1] The section is divided into six parts. The first part assesses key trends and the counterterrorism security outlook in the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The remaining five parts more

deeply examine Salafi-jihadist, violent far-right, violent far-left, ethnonationalist, and state-linked terrorist threats, respectively.

Key Trends

This section outlines several of the key trends in violent extremist activity in the European Union and Western Europe, including transregional terrorist influences, the role of conspiracy theories, and concerns over extremism in the military and politics.
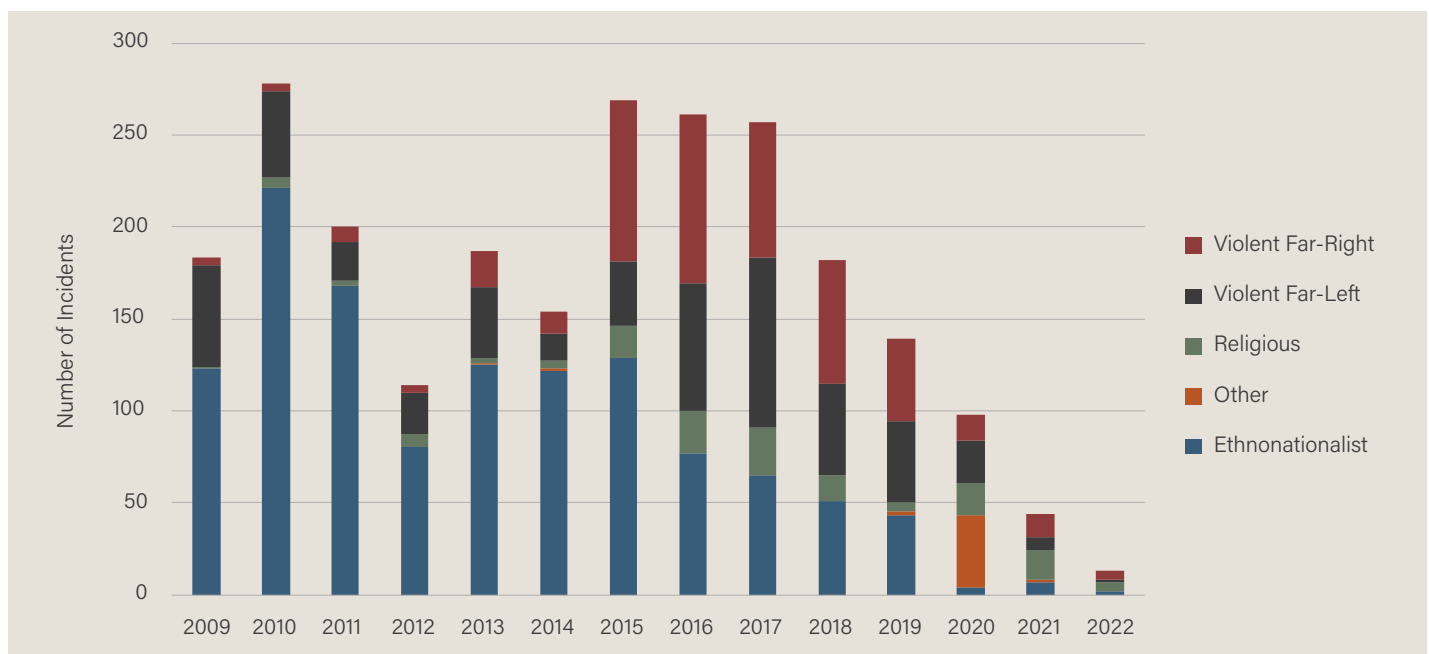
Europe has seen a decrease in terrorist attacks.

Overall, European terrorism trends tell a positive story. The total number of terrorist attacks in the European Union and Western Europe has declined significantly since 2018—particularly between 2020 and 2022—driven by decreases in violence across all ideological categories, as shown in Figure 5.1.

The reduced number of terrorist attacks in 2020 was likely tied to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and of the 98 attacks that did occur in 2020, 40 percent were

Figure 5.1

Number of Terrorist Attacks in the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom by Perpetrator Ideology, 2013–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.janes.com/military-threat-intelligence/terrorism-and-insurgency.

linked to conspiracy theories linking Covid-19 to 5G networks and were not tied to any specific, traditional extremist ideology. Notably, despite rising populism and partisan divides across the continent, widespread demonstrations motivated by extreme political views and conspiracy theories, and the disruption of terrorist plots and networks, the number of realized terrorist attacks in the region remained at a historic low, with only 13 attacks recorded during 2022—a 95 percent decrease from the level of terrorist activity in 2017.

Transregional trends are closely tied to online radicalization.

Most trends in Europe have not developed in isolation; instead, they are highly responsive to the evolution of extremist groups and political events outside of Europe, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and, increasingly, the United States and other Western nations. While EU policymakers are largely well equipped to monitor and counter the influences of Salafi-jihadist groups in the Middle East and Africa, far less infrastructure and experience exists related to the online flow of extremist information and influence to and from other Western nations, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

While it is true that most acts of terrorism in Europe— particularly from violent far-right actors—are carried out by individuals rather than organized hierarchical groups, the terms "lone actor" or "lone wolf" are misnomers. Most individuals and small groups are influenced by large, loose ideological networks, which often exist on digital platforms and span borders and even continents. This is evident in the rapid international spread of country-specific conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, as well as the direct inspiration terrorists have drawn from manifestos and video recordings of previous attacks.

Conspiracy theories are driving terrorist attacks.

In addition to the diverse set of ideologies driving extremist violence in Europe, there has been an increase in attacks based on conspiracy theories— which often focus on one political issue or blend multiple belief systems—as opposed to traditional extremist ideologies. This phenomenon was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, which generated a wealth of disinformation and conspiracy theories. For example, in 2020, there was a spate of arson and other sabotage attacks against 5G infrastructure in at least nine

countries—Belgium, Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—driven by the unfounded belief that 5G networks were causing Covid-19.[2] As they spread, however, these newer conspiracy theories often blend into the milieu of older conspiracy theories and become increasingly violent and often anti-Semitic.

There is growing concern over extremism within government, military, and law enforcement organizations.

Across Europe, there is rising concern over extremist sympathies among military, law enforcement, and political candidates and parties. Historically, extremist networks—particularly those that follow a violent far-right ideology—have routinely targeted individuals with military and law enforcement backgrounds for recruitment, as they believe these individuals to have specialized skills and knowledge that can advance their political causes. In recent years, several EU countries have detected widespread extremist sentiment within their armed forces. The German Defense Ministry, for example, disbanded the 2nd company of the Special Commando Forces in July 2020 for rampant extremist behavior after a German Military Counterintelligence Service investigation of more than 500 soldiers across the German armed forces.[3]

The rise of extreme-leaning political parties and candidates across the continent has also increased ideological tensions and, in some cases, led to violence. In France, for example, a December 5, 2021, election rally for far-right candidate Eric Zemmour devolved into violence after members of the violent far-right groups Reconquête and Zouaves Paris attacked nonviolent activists from the anti-racist organization SOS Racisme.[4] Similar challenges related to political parties or candidates that support or enable extremist ideologies in mainstream politics have emerged in cases such as the Sweden Democrats in Sweden and the election of a far-right administration under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Italy.
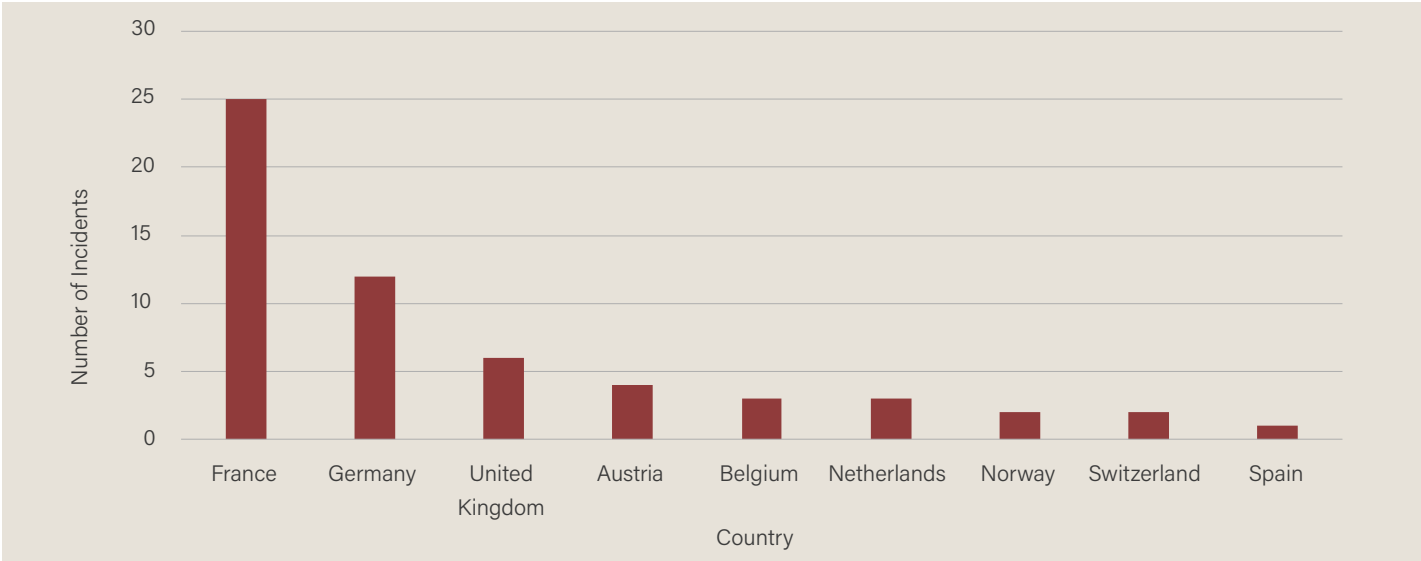
Salafi-Jihadism

Salafi-jihadist violence accounts for most religion-inspired violence in the European Union, where all but one of the 58 religious terrorist attacks recorded between 2018 and 2022 were conducted by individuals motivated by a Salafi-jihadist ideology. The majority of these incidents occurred in France and Germany and were

Figure 5.2

Number of Salafi-Jihadist Terrorist Attacks by Country, 2018–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

committed by individuals inspired—but not directed—by international terrorist groups such as al Qaeda or the Islamic State.[5]

Salafi-jihadist groups continue to spread a range of propaganda and instructional materials that encourage followers to conduct attacks. Many of these materials emphasize the utility of carrying out terrorist attacks in one's home country, often using accessible items such as knives, homemade explosives, or vehicle attacks. For example, on January 9, 2022, in Valenciennes, France, an assailant shouting threats such as "Allah is there, you are going to die!" conducted a vehicular attack against police officers, wounding three.[6] That said, propaganda efforts have weakened in recent years following the Islamic State's loss of territory in Syria and its reduction in strength. While the Islamic State continues to generate and circulate propaganda, it does so on a smaller scale than a decade ago and often relies on translations of Arabic-language materials rather than tailoring content in French, English, or other languages spoken in target external countries.[7]
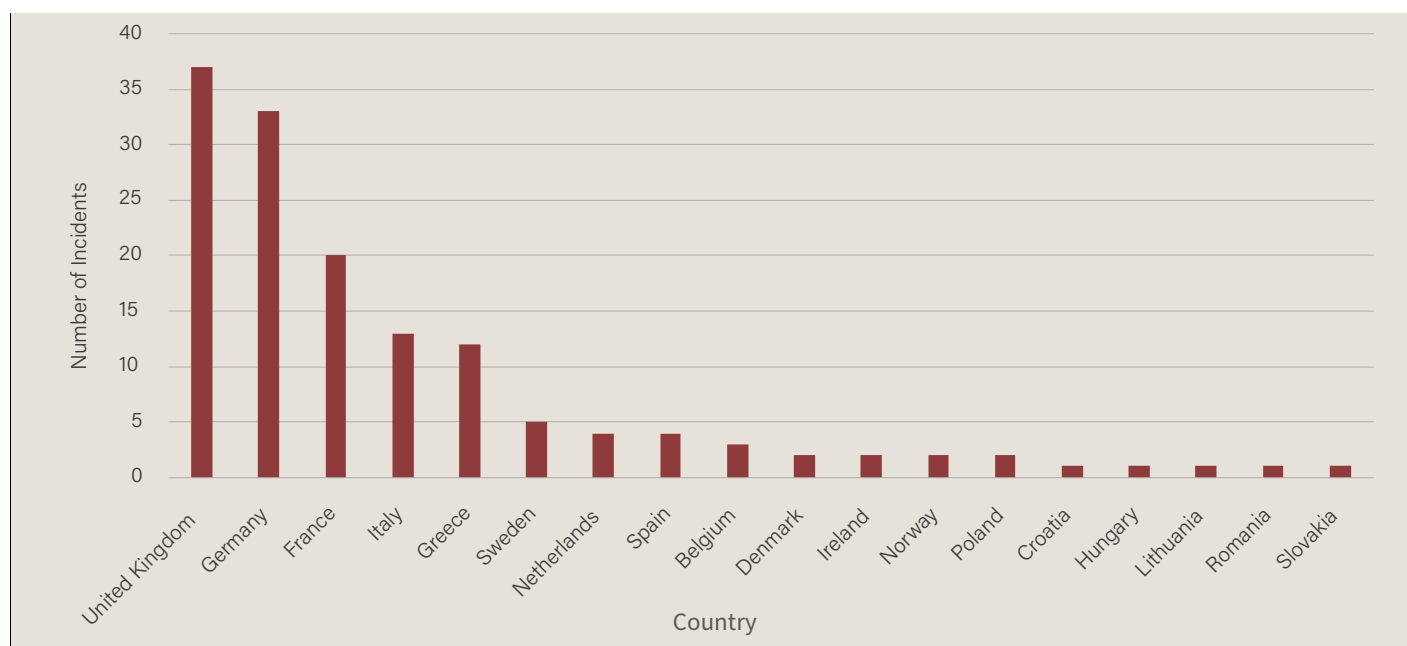
Other Salafi-jihadist attacks were conducted by foreign nationals, though there is no clear evidence of central planning within foreign groups. On November 6, 2021, for example, a Syrian national conducted a knife attack on a train traveling between Regensburg and Nuremberg, Germany, wounding three passengers.[8]

In addition to the overall strength and out-of-area capabilities of Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups, the European threat landscape is likely to be affected in the coming years by issues related to the repatriation of foreign fighters who had traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the Islamic State. Roughly 64,000 foreign fighters and their family members—including women and children, many of whom were victims of Islamic State violence—remain imprisoned across the Middle East.[9] Four European nations rank among the 10 countries with the most affiliated foreign fighters: Turkey (7,476 to 9,476 individuals), Russia (4,000 to 5,000 individuals), France (1,910 individuals), and Germany (1,268 individuals).[10] Few of the fighters who traveled to the region have been successfully repatriated, and many countries of origin have wavered in their commitments to do so because of both security risks and political unpopularity. While there are security concerns around returning and attempting to deradicalize foreign fighters, the poor conditions and anti-Western narratives in prison camps greatly increase the risk of further radicalization—including of the next generation—if these individuals are not repatriated and given due process by their home countries.[11]

Violent Far-Right Extremism

Violent far-right extremists have been responsible both for conducting attacks in the largest number of European countries in the past five years and for conducting the

Figure 5.3

Number of Violent Far-Right Terrorist Attacks by Country, 2018–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

largest number of attacks overall. As shown in Figure 5.3, between 2018 and 2022, violent far-right terrorists conducted 144 attacks in the European Union and Western Europe and were most active in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, and Greece (in descending order of attack frequency).

As in North America, most violent far-right attacks in Europe are perpetrated by individuals or loose networks rather than formal, centralized groups.[12] However, target selection and sub-ideology of violent far-right extremists vary significantly across different parts of the continent. For example, a large portion of far-right attacks in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are inspired by transnational white supremacist ideologies and target racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Meanwhile, in southern European countries such as Greece and Italy, a larger share of far-right attacks targets the government and political figures with opposing ideologies.[13]
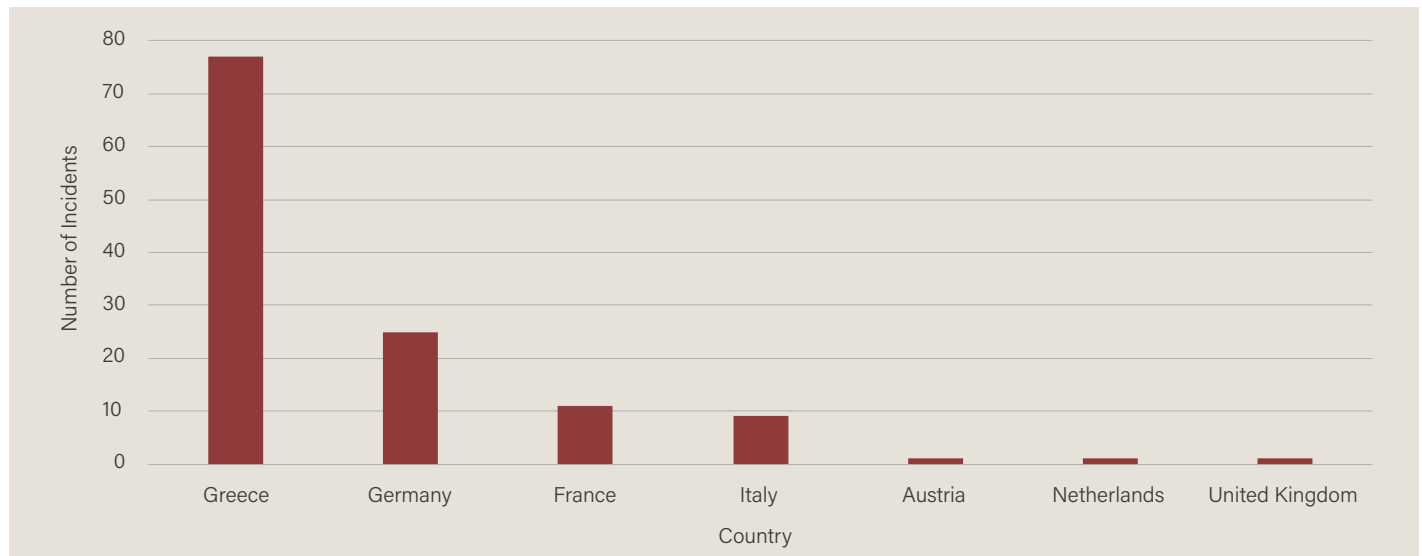
Germany, for example, faces severe ongoing threats from extremists motivated by white nationalism and anti-government and revisionist sentiments. Germany is also one of the countries outside of the United States most heavily impacted by the spread of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which has subsequently been adapted to the German political context and integrated into the philosophy of

German anti-government organizations. This is most apparent in the December 2022 arrests of 25 members of the Reichsbürger (Citizens of the Reich) movement who had plotted to attack the Reichstag and topple the government.[14] The Reichsbürger movement, which does not recognize the modern German state and draws inspiration from neo-Nazi ideology, benefited from both Covid-19-related conspiracy theories and far-right conspiracies related to the U.S. government.[15] Following the Covid-19 lockdowns, the movement ballooned from 2,000 adherents to over 20,000, and it heavily incorporated QAnon and other violent and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[16]

In Greece, far-right terrorists have primarily targeted opposing political entities, and unlike in other nations, this violence frequently has been part of a distinct political strategy led by political actors.[17] For example, despite having been banned in 2020, the far-right Golden Dawn party has continued its ties to violent activities, including those targeting public political demonstrations and left-wing opponents.[18] Greek far-right terrorists have also carried out attacks based on race or immigration status against migrant workers and refugees. These attacks have primarily targeted Pakistani migrant workers in rural areas, in contrast to other types of far-right violence in Greece, which have been concentrated in urban centers.[19]

Figure 5.4

Number of Violent Far-Left Terrorist Attacks by Country, 2018–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

Across the European Union and Western Europe, factors that will likely shape the violent far-right terrorist threat in the coming years include immigration policies and inflows; the rise of populist far-right parties; international crises, including war and public health developments; and the transnational spread of conspiracy theories and hateful ideologies, including via online platforms.

Violent Far-Left Extremism

Violent far-left ideologies have been the second most common motivation for terrorist attacks in the European Union and Western Europe since 2018. Of the 125 far-left terrorist attacks between 2018 and 2022, nearly 62 percent occurred in Greece. As shown in Figure 5.4, Germany, France, and Italy also experienced a moderate number of far-left attacks.

The most frequent motives of violent far-left extremists in Europe include opposition to centralized government, including by anarchists; concern over the environment and climate change; and opposition to far-right populist political parties. All of these issues will likely continue to motivate far-left terrorist violence in the coming years.

The prevalence of far-left terrorist activity in Greece can be traced back to the violent leftist and anarchist movements that emerged under the Greek military dictatorship, which lasted until 1974.[20] Today, the majority of far-left terrorist attacks in Greece are conducted by

anarchists, primarily using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or other forms of arson to target vehicles, locations, and other property associated with the government and law enforcement, as well as right-wing political figures and media outlets. For example, Nucleus—an anarchist group—claimed responsibility for an IED attack against vehicles at the Italian embassy in Athens on December 8, 2022.[21]
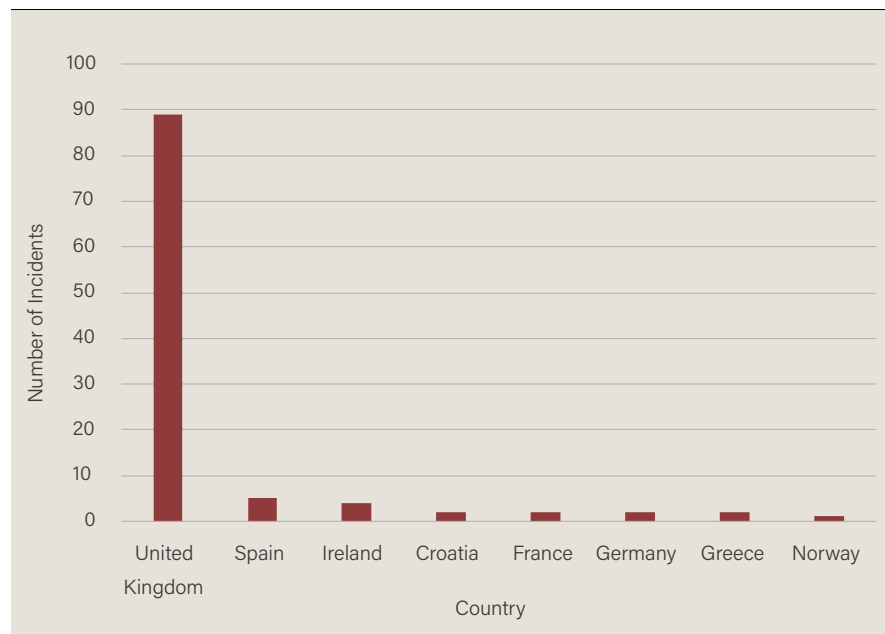
Ethnonationalism

Many traditional ethnonationalist conflicts between state and non-state actors also persist across Europe, but they typically pose a moderate- to low-level threat that is far more localized than other forms of terrorism. As a result, most of these separatist groups are a domestic concern for affected countries, but they do not pose a widespread threat across the continent. Figure 5.5 highlights the countries in which ethnonationalist terrorist violence has occurred over the past five years.

By far the most significant ethnonationalist threat in the European Union and Western Europe comes from dissident republican groups in Northern Ireland, who have carried out 89 attacks between 2018 and 2022. These groups are mostly splinters of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) that reject the Good Friday agreement ending that group's insurgency in 1998.[22] The terrorism threat level in Northern Ireland—set by

Figure 5.5

Number of Ethnonationalist Terrorist Attacks by Country, 2018–2022

Source: "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes.

the secretary of state for Northern Ireland based on MI5 intelligence assessments—is "severe" at the time of writing. This is the second-highest threat label, which indicates a high likelihood of attack.[23] The threat level has been "severe" since 2010 with the exception of a one-year period from March 2022 to March 2023, when it was lowered one level to "substantial."[24] At the time, the 2022 threat level reduction was widely regarded as a symbolic indication of decreasing trends in violence.[25] The return to the severe level came after a series of high-profile attacks against law enforcement, including the bombing of a police vehicle in November 2022 and the shooting of a senior police officer at a youth soccer practice in February 2023. Authorities suspected that the New IRA orchestrated the former, and the New IRA later claimed responsibility for the latter.[26] Based on patterns of recent violence in Northern Ireland, dissident republican groups are most likely to target law enforcement, and indiscriminate attacks against civilians are rare.

While dissident republicans in Northern Ireland comprise the most severe ethnonationalist threat in the region, other nations such as France continue to be home to ethnonationalist movements that resort to occasional political violence, typically in response to an

inciting incident. In March 2022, for example, ethnonationalist attacks and violent protests broke out in Corsica after Yvan Colonna, a Corsican nationalist hero, was beaten to death in prison. In an unprecedented level of concession, French interior minister Gérald Darmanin indicated that the French government was open to negotiations that could include an offer of Corsican autonomy.[27] The nationalist movement in Corsica is likely to continue to pose a low-level violent threat, including a risk of violent demonstrations. Such activity will most likely be reactive, mobilized in response to events such as Colonna's murder. However, more proactive, coordinated resistance remains possible, particularly in the wake of signals that the French government may be willing to negotiate for arrangements that permit more Corsican autonomy.

Although most of these ethnonationalist conflicts are likely to persist in the medium to long term, resolution is possible. For example, the Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty, or ETA) disbanded in 2018 after a 2011 ceasefire and the surrender of weapons in 2017.[28] This marked the end of a violent struggle for independence that had lasted for half a century.

State-Linked Terrorism

Iran poses a persistent but infrequent threat.

In addition to the ideologically motivated non-state actors described throughout the preceding sections, adversarial nations such as Iran and Russia maintain the will and capability to support terrorist activity in Europe to advance their own political goals or to retaliate against their opponents.

Throughout recent decades, Iran has periodically used irregular capabilities, primarily through its network of proxies—supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF)—to conduct assassinations, bombings, and other acts of political violence in Europe. These attacks often target political dissidents or targets that are symbolic of Iran's adversaries, such as

civilians or embassies. For example, in 2015 and 2017, Iran orchestrated the assassinations of two Dutch nationals in the Netherlands who were political dissidents of Iranian descent.[29] Iran has also used groups such as Hezbollah as proxies to carry out terrorist attacks against citizens of adversary nations—particularly Israel—or adversary embassies abroad in Europe. For example, in 2012, Hezbollah conducted a suicide bombing against a bus of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, which was carried out as retaliation for Israel's assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.[30] Iran and associated groups have also launched cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns against Western countries, including efforts to exacerbate tensions between the United States and its European allies.[31]

Iranian-linked terrorist plots and attacks remain relatively infrequent in Europe but are unlikely to stop any time soon. Factors such as Iran's conflict with Israel, domestic protest and upheaval in Iran—including real or perceived Western involvement—and negotiations and monitoring of the Iranian nuclear program may spark new series of attacks in Europe in the near to medium term.

Russia harbors terrorist elements.

In November 2022, the European Parliament recognized Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism for its war crimes and brutal tactics against civilians in Ukraine following its 2022 invasion.[32] These activities, however, fall outside of the definition of terrorism used throughout this report.

Separately, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a militant white supremacist organization dedicated to advancing ethnic Russian nationalism, has worked to build relationships with far-right extremist networks in Europe and the United States since roughly 2015. For example, RIM has provided paramilitary training to members of neo-Nazi groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement in Sweden and the National Democratic Party and the Third Path in Germany.[33] Members of the Nordic Resistance Movement conducted a series of attacks in Sweden between November 2016 and January 2017 after having received training from RIM in St. Petersburg the preceding summer.[34] Although U.S. and European officials suspect that RIM has connections to Russian intelligence and security agencies, it is not officially linked to the Russian government and does not act as Moscow's proxy.[35] Nonetheless, Russia has declined to label RIM as a terrorist organization, and some analysts have speculated that Moscow could directly or tacitly support the group when its objectives align with Russian foreign policy goals.[36]

<div style="color:#8B2020">The Western Balkans</div>

The terrorism threat in the Western Balkan states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia is closely entangled with the region's volatile political history and proximity to ongoing conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Although there is a relatively low-level threat of attacks within the region, these threats are tightly tied into the broader political and criminal landscape, thus requiring counterterrorism to be considered within a range of law enforcement and good-governance initiatives. In 2018, the European Union launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network in the Western Balkans, a set of projects focused on implementing the priorities of the October 2018 Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans, which focus heavily on managing the return and reintegration of foreign fighters and countering violent far-right extremism.

Over the past decade, the terrorism threat in the Western Balkans has been largely defined by the wave of foreign fighters that travelled from the region to fight in the Syrian civil war and the subsequent repatriation crisis. Approximately 1,070 fighters traveled to Syria from the Western Balkans between 2012 and 2019, with the peak in activity in 2013–2014, and over 150 children have been born to foreign fighters.[37] Regional governments must now manage the risks and challenges of repatriating these foreign fighters and their families, as well as persistent low-level Salafi-jihadist-inspired domestic activities. Ongoing training and programming in the region focuses not only on repatriation, but also on management of foreign fighters and violent extremists' experiences in prison systems in the region—including encouraging healthy prison conditions and effective cooperation with prison officials—and developing support for post-release reintegration into society.[38]

Although returning foreign fighters constitute the primary religious terrorism focus in the Western Balkans, other Salafi-jihadist influences and risks endure in the region as well. In April 2022, for example, the Montenegrin government warned in its Threat Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime that there had been as increase in Salafi-jihadist recruitment and activity in the country. The report noted recruitment tailored toward Montenegro's youth and Roma populations, as well as evidence that extremists from EU and neighboring

countries planned to host "summer camps" for extremist activities in Montenegro.[39] Other countries have faced isolated Salafi-jihadist threats. For example, Igor Despotovic, a Serbian citizen, was arrested in February 2022 and charged with inciting terrorism after sharing pro-Islamic State material on social media, including a guide to conducting sarin gas attacks.[40]

In addition to Salafi-jihadist terrorist threats, Western Balkan countries face ongoing far-right and ethnonationalist threats that are tightly tied into the region's history and political parties. Ethnonationalist and religious divisions are common throughout the region, in part linked to a failure to reconcile post-war memory and issues of identity in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, and various ethnic factions often include currents of fascist, neo-fascist, and neo-Nazi philosophy. As such, racial, ethnic, and religious biases are rampant and normalized in mainstream culture throughout the Western Balkans, and these narratives easily lend themselves to violent solutions. Therefore, one major challenge facing counterterrorism efforts in the region is the task of clarifying the definitions of far-right or ethnonationalist extremist views and working to shift societal views toward acceptance of diversity.[41]

Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine and Russia face different terrorist threat landscapes, but both are significantly influenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. As such, the general outlook is highly uncertain. Far-right groups in both countries have been mobilized by the conflict, and many members of these groups will now have greater access to combat experience. Both sides are also using asymmetric tactics, which often resemble terrorism, against the other. Neither country faces a significant Salafi-jihadist threat, but jihadist groups could reemerge as a threat in the country given the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)'s focus on Russian speakers and the history of jihadist violence in Russia.[42]

Ukraine

Russia's multiple invasions of Ukraine and subsequent wars have heavily shaped the terrorism threat environment in Ukraine. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and subsequently began backing violent separatist movements in Ukraine's Donbas region. Since then, the number of terrorist attacks in Ukraine has increased.[43] However, collecting and analyzing data on terrorism

in Ukraine remains difficult. The ongoing war makes it challenging in certain cases to distinguish between acts of terrorism and asymmetric warfare, as do the complex relationships between violent non-state actors and their sponsors. This is particularly relevant in the context of the use of paramilitary and volunteer forces on both sides of the conflict. For these reasons, varying definitions of terrorism and the associated data sets they inform produce different statistics on the level of terrorist activity in Ukraine.[44] Still, some key qualitative themes emerge.

Both previous and the ongoing fighting in Ukraine has presented opportunities for foreign fighters to gain experience in weapons use and combat operations. Large numbers of foreign fighters have traveled to Ukraine for a variety of reasons, such as support of far-left and far-right ideologies.[45] Between 2015 and 2021, an estimated 17,000 foreign fighters from 50 countries flocked to Ukraine to fight on either side of the conflict.[46] Both Russia and Ukraine have integrated foreign fighters into their military operations, but neither side is recruiting foreign fighters with the intention of providing terrorist training. However, the risk remains that ideologically radicalized individuals will return to their countries of origin with combat experience and a transnational network of like-minded fighters, increasing the risk of future terrorist activities.

Although Ukraine has faced a significant challenge from domestic far-right extremism in recent years, this threat has been overtaken by the enormity of the war. Far-right groups increased their activity in Ukraine between the 2014 Maidan Revolution and the 2022 Russian invasion, including threats of violence and attacks on women's rights activists, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and environmental activists.[47] The 2022 invasion initially led many analysts to worry that the war would raise the domestic and international profiles of extremist organizations such as the Azov Battalion—a military unit that originated as a volunteer paramilitary force with links to far-right neo-Nazi ideology.[48] Instead, although some extremists remain in its ranks, the Azov Battalion has toned down its far-right elements under pressure from authorities wary of jeopardizing international support and feeding Russian propaganda.[49] A similar trend has emerged across Ukrainian society and politics writ large, where preexisting political beliefs have largely been put aside to present a unified front. As the war rages on, the risk of Ukrainian domestic terrorism has been subdued by the social and political unification of Ukrainian society against Russia.

Russia

Terrorist trends in Russia are broadly similar to those in other European countries. The overall rate of terrorist attacks is low, but the threat of Islamic State terrorism persists and the threat of right-wing violence is rising—both of which have historically posed security challenges in Russia. Asymmetric violence associated with the war in Ukraine has also affected Russia on several occasions, but it is impossible to cleanly delineate state and non-state action in the current situation, and distinguishing the terrorist threat from the broader asymmetric warfare threat is beyond the scope of this report.

Russia has historically faced periodic Salafi-jihadist terrorist activity in the North Caucasus and other regions—largely in response to its military campaigns in Chechnya and Syria—and in recent years Russian security agencies have closely monitored for threats from the growing Muslim populations in areas such as Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan.[50] Nonetheless, rates of attacks have been steadily decreasing since at least 2018, and no Salafi-jihadist violence was recorded in 2022.[51]

Despite this decrease in attacks, a Salafi-jihadist threat to Russia persists. ISKP has demonstrated a willingness to attack Russian interests where it has access, as it did in Kabul in September 2022.[52] ISKP propaganda has also specifically targeted Russian speakers; it has been translated into Russian and urges attacks against targets with Russia.[53] The group's ability to transform these incitements into actual violence is not yet proven, but ISKP will almost certainly attempt attacks in Russia if it is able to develop networks of violent extremists in the country.

Russians also experience non-state violence associated with far-right ideologies. Attacks against ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ groups, and women are reported at a low but consistent tempo.[54] Russia also experienced a school shooting possibly linked to a far-right ideology in 2022, when a man wearing Nazi symbols killed 15 people.[55] The exact role of neo-Nazism in the attack is unclear, as people who fantasize about mass-casualty events are often interested in Nazi Germany even if they do not hold anti-Semitic beliefs themselves.[56] Although this attack may not be part of a broader trend of political violence, mass shootings have been on the rise in Russia in recent years, and attacks by politically motivated actors may increase alongside this trend.[57] The ongoing war in Ukraine may have an impact on far-right violence in the country; various Russian nationalist groups have mobilized around the war, and the number of Russians with combat experience will grow substantially as the war continues.

Terrorism in Russia is also difficult to distinguish from activities connected to the war in Ukraine. Russia identifies drone attacks it attributes to Ukrainian forces as terrorism.[58] Individuals or groups inside of Russia appear to be using bombs—a tactic associated with terrorists—to target right-wing and pro-military figures in Russia.[59] Some of these attacks appear to be the work of non-state actors, but others—such as the drone attacks—are potentially the work of the Ukrainian military or intelligence services.

Unlike other European countries, Russia has also been credibly accused of using terrorist proxies as part of its foreign policy. It maintains a relationship with Hezbollah, with which it is aligned in its support of the Lebanese government.[60] Russia's use of terrorist proxies does not appear nearly as developed as that of Iran, but Russia may seek to continue or expand its support for terrorist activity in the West in retaliation for governments' support for Ukraine or to redirect security focus away from the war.

Conclusion

Europe faces a wide variety of terrorist threats, which range from loose networks of violent extremists to violent ethnonationalist groups to returning Salafi-jihadist fighters. In Western Europe and the European Union, the threat mainly derives from loose online networks motivated by a variety of ideologies, including both Salafi-jihadism and conspiracy theories originating in the United States. Small ethnonationalist organizations also pose a threat to security forces in their areas of concern, although attacks against civilians are far less frequent. The Western Balkans also face threats from far-right extremists and Salafi-jihadists.

At the same time, the continent is currently gripped by a major interstate land war. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated a shift away from counterterrorism concerns and toward the return of great power competition and more traditional geopolitics. This trend was already underway before the invasion and is unlikely to reverse itself, especially given the low rates of terrorist violence in Europe.

Chapter 6
Middle East

Hamas's attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, threaten to upend the considerable progress made against terrorism across the Middle East. Until the attacks, terrorist violence had been declining as the Syrian civil war stabilized, the Islamic State and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were degraded, and Hamas appeared to have adopted a policy of restraint, although its apparent restraint was clearly an illusion. The territorial defeat of the Islamic State and sustained pressure on AQAP reduced those groups to conducting attacks against local targets rather than plotting high impact attacks in the United States or Europe. Hamas's attacks demonstrate that attacks within the Middle East can still have major political impacts outside of the region and threaten to drag the Middle East into a wider conflict, a situation in which terrorist groups have historically thrived.

The attacks have prompted a massive Israeli response, which threatens to radicalize a new generation and could pull Iran into more direct conflict with Israel and the United States. Iran's network of non-state proxies includes not only Hamas but Hezbollah—a Lebanese group that holds much of northern Israel at risk from a sizable arsenal of indirect fire platforms—and a variety of groups in Iraq and Syria that have been involved in attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities. Meanwhile, the war in Yemen grinds on, and the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran that marked an opportunity to reduce the terrorist threat emanating from the country is now in doubt following Hamas's attacks, which have upended a long process of diplomatic realignments in the region. The result is a volatile political landscape that can provide terrorists with opportunities to reestablish their capabilities.

The first section discusses terrorism in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon. The second section assesses the terrorism threat in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The third addresses terrorism in the Persian Gulf region, incorporating analysis of Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and Iran. Each section begins with a brief overview of key trends

and proceeds to lower-level analyses of the terrorism threat in each country.

Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon

No one predicted the October 2023 Hamas attacks, but several trends were increasing the risk of terrorist violence in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza—and will contribute to the fallout. Violence associated with Palestinian groups or lone actors sympathetic to their cause has been steadily increasing for the past several years, and violence in the area also exhibits a strong tendency to escalate. Small-scale conflicts over the past few years repeatedly escalated quickly as the Israeli government and Palestinian groups conducted preemptive or retaliatory attacks. These escalatory dynamics are already visible in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Israel has unleashed an unprecedented campaign of airstrikes against Gaza, Israeli settlers have seized an opportunity to scale up violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, and the possibility of a wider war looms over the region.

The region is home to a variety of terrorist groups who are already involved in the conflict or stand to benefit. These groups fall into three categories. Palestinian ethnonationalist groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); Islamic State affiliates; and Lebanese Hezbollah, a group closely aligned with Iran and deeply rooted in Lebanese politics and society. Israel is also home to Jewish ethnonationalist groups that regularly engage in violence against Palestinian civilians, which contributes to a cycle of violence that continues to increase the threat to Israelis and Palestinians alike and destabilizes the wider region.

Escalation on Israel's northern border with Lebanon carries particularly significant risk. Israel and Hezbollah refrained from high-intensity military conflict since the end of their 2006 war, but Hezbollah and Israel have clashed and exchanged indirect fire since October 7, 2023. Neither side has demonstrated an appetite to escalate the conflict for many years, but the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas threatens to escalate into a wider war. The most dangerous scenarios are an Israeli incursion into Hezbollah-controlled territory or a massive Hezbollah indirect fire attack against Israel. Such such escalation between Israel and Hezbollah could lead to direct conflict between Israel and Iran, potentially drawing the United States into the conflict.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections which assess the region's current terrorism threat landscape as well as the threats in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank and in Lebanon.

Key Trends

Hamas has upended the region.

After years of relative quiescence, Hamas unleashed a massive assault against southern Israel on October 7, 2023. The attacks marked the deadliest day in Israeli history and the third-deadliest terrorist attack in modern history.[1] Israel's response has been similarly massive. Political leaders called for destroying Hamas, unleashed an unprecedented campaign of airstrikes, and mounted a major ground operation into Gaza.[2] The attacks and Israel's response threaten to reverse several trends that have contributed to the decline of terrorism in the region. First, imagery from the attacks and Israel's response are likely to radicalize some people who would otherwise have not turned to violence. Protests have already swept across the region, and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation warned of an elevated threat to U.S. citizens abroad.[3] The extent to which such a radicalization occurs and how it to translates into violence remains highly unpredictable, but it would be a mistake to count out the mobilizing impacts of the attacks and Israeli response.

Second, the violence increases the risk of escalation in other areas on Israel's borders. The West Bank has seethed with civil unrest among the Palestinian population alongside pogroms by Israeli settlers.[4] Israel has clashed with Hezbollah on its northern border.[5] Israel and the United States have both struck targets in Syria as Iranian proxy groups have attacked U.S. military forces in the country.[6] These trends risk a rapid spread of fighting, potentially one that could draw in both the United States and Iran. A wider regional war would create the type of chaos that terrorist groups feed on: mobilization of armed young men to recruit, power vacuums to fill, and relief of counterterrorist pressure as states turn their attention to one another.

Political crises will outlast the current conflict.

The October 2023 attacks took place against a backdrop of instability in both Israeli and Palestinian politics. Five

Figure 6.1

Incidents of Violence against Civilians Involving Palestinian Armed Groups in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project," ACLED, accessed February 2, 2023, https://acleddata.com/.

Knesset snap elections were held between 2019 and 2022—a period of political turmoil that has most recently resulted in the return of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister. His coalition differs from recent ruling coalitions in that it contains three Jewish ethnonationalist parties and two ultra-Orthodox parties, which have led to its championing of the formal annexation of the West Bank.[7] The coalition is more stable than any Israeli government in the past few years, but Netanyahu has been the object of criticism over his handling of Hamas and his government's failure to stop the October attacks.[8] No matter how Netanyahu or Israeli voters respond to the attacks, the rightward shift in Israeli politics has been a long-term trend and will probably not be reversed, although a long conflict in Gaza could increase polarization within Israeli society.
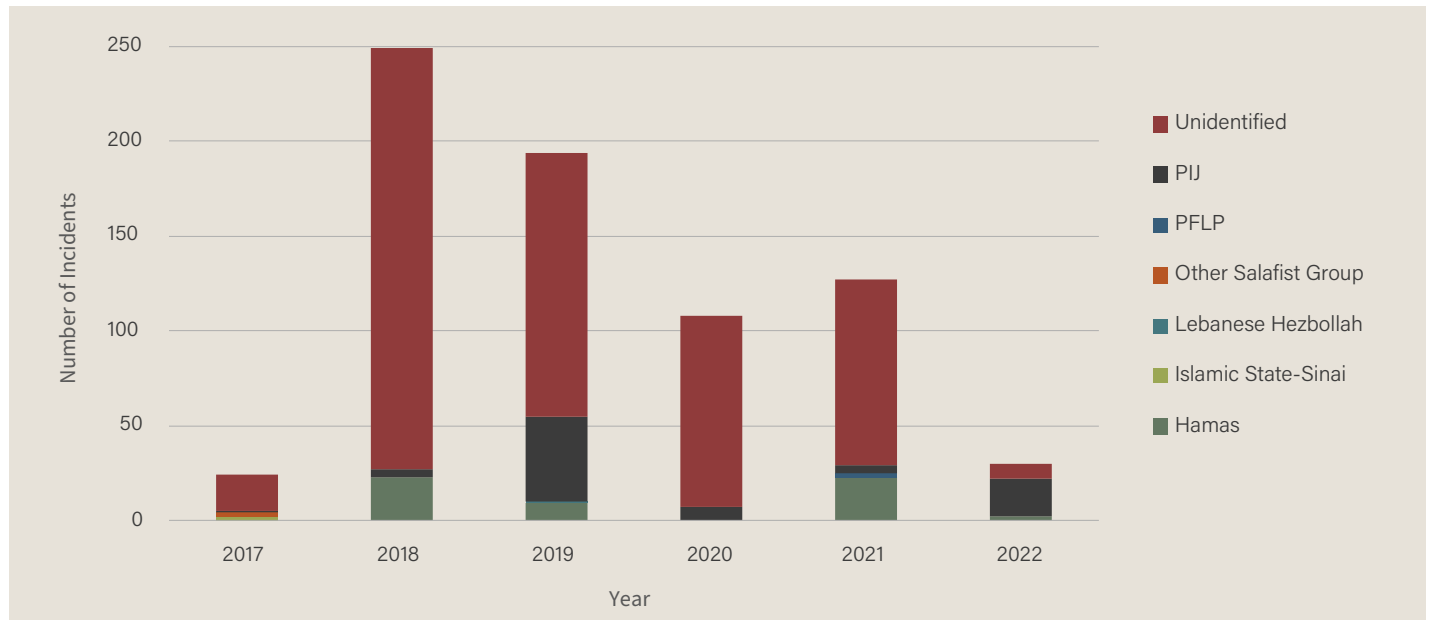
Palestinian politics are also highly likely to experience several crises in the coming years. Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas, but no realistic replacement exists for its de facto government in Gaza. If Israel succeeds in defeating Hamas as an organization capable of governing but withdraws from the territory, a power struggle will ensue with few foreseeable consequences other than increased violence. If Israel defeats Hamas but

remains in Gaza, it will be the greatest reversal in Palestine's internal governance since Israel withdrew from the strip in 2005. The result will probably be an internal struggle to lead the armed resistance to Israel rather than a peaceful transition of power within Gaza. Finally, if Hamas weathers Israel's assault, it will claim victory and its most extreme members will assert their primacy within Hamas and Palestinian politics as a whole.

In the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas, the current head of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Fatah, is aging and lacks a clear successor. The institutions that exist for replacing Abbas exist but are largely untested. His succession will face legal and political obstacles, particularly given the splits that have occurred within the broader Palestinian movement since the Oslo Accords were signed in the 1990s and the uncertainties created by the violence in Gaza.[9] The lack of a clear succession plan with domestic and international legitimacy means that the end of his tenure could unleash intra-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank, where Abbas's Fatah party currently rules. Given the clear susceptibility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict system to rapid escalation, any crisis within Fatah could spread to other areas and parties.

Figure 6.2

Incidents of Rocket Fire Targeting Israel, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank

The most pressing threat to Israeli and Palestinian civilians alike is the eruption of a wider war in the Middle East. Such a war would have been triggered by a terrorist act and involve non-state actors, but would probably resemble a conventional non-state war even if it did not draw in states like Iran.[10] The greatest terrorist threat is the violence that would be associated with a Third Intifada. Such a mass uprising in Palestine, particularly sustained violence the West Bank, would almost certainly trigger an Israeli military response and involve a major increase in terrorist attacks in Israel itself. Absent a wider war or a Third Intifada, terrorist activity associated with Palestinian armed groups or sympathizers will continue to be the greatest threat to most Israeli civilians.
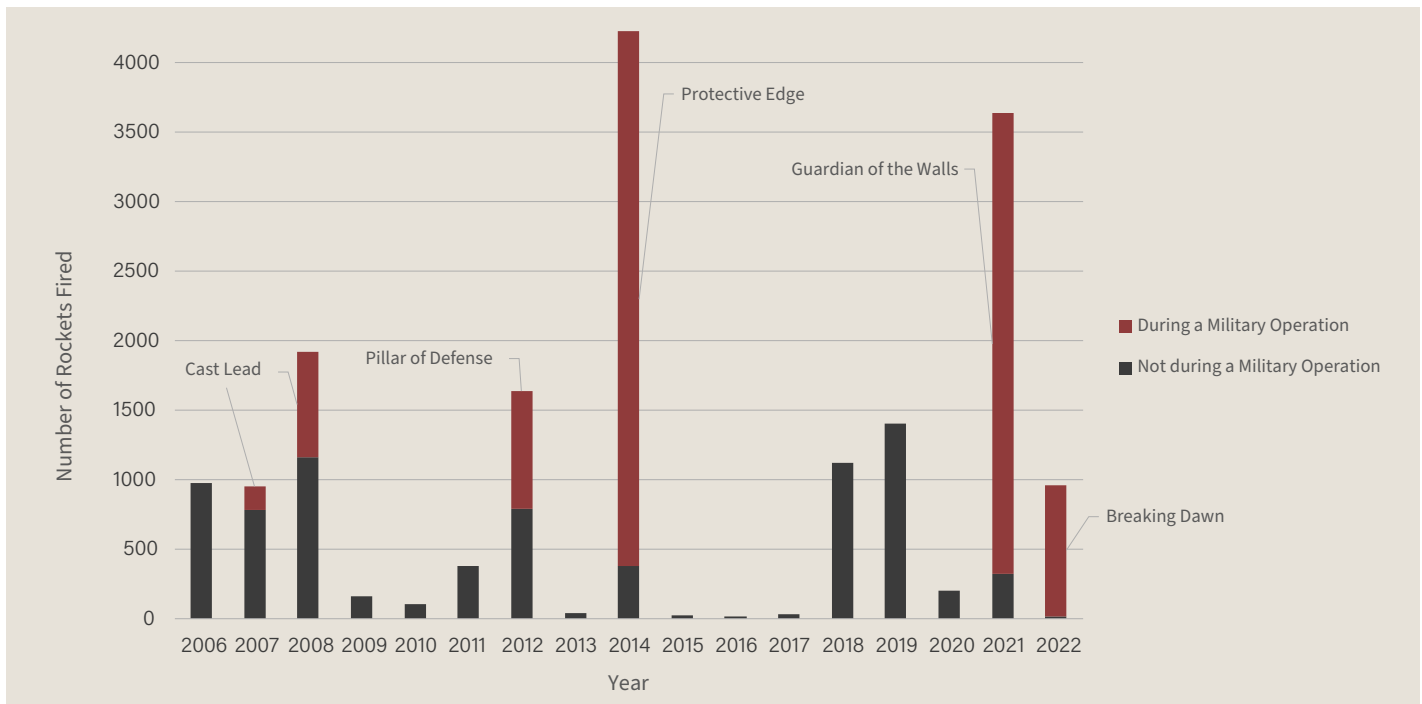
Before Hamas's October attacks, the activities of these groups took essentially three forms: small-scale insurgent violence targeting Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) personnel with small arms fire, IEDs, and vehicle ramming attacks; low-level violence with knives or small arms perpetrated by Palestinians who cannot be identified as members of an existing terrorist group; and indirect fire attacks perpetrated by PIJ or Hamas. Islamic State groups have also conducted attacks inside Israel, but the attacks are extremely infrequent. Hezbollah also has the capacity to conduct indirect fire attacks from southern Lebanon and has demonstrated the willingness to do so, although the extent to which they are willing to escalate violence is unknown.

Relatively small-scale violence in Israel and Palestine has also exhibited the potential to escalate quickly. Despite significant differences in definition and methodology, both ACLED and the Israeli government recorded notable surges in violence in mid-2021 and late 2022.[11] Both spikes were the results of political crises. In May 2021, an anticipated eviction of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem triggered a wave of attacks by Hamas and the IDF that killed approximately 270 people over a 12-day period, most of whom were Palestinians.[12] The second occurred after a series of Israeli operations targeting PIJ leaders in August 2022.[13] Both incidents demonstrate the high potential for escalation in Israel and Palestine, where political crises can quickly develop into large-scale violence, especially when they garner particular media attention or increase the threat to leaders of Palestinian armed groups.

In addition to experiencing irregular spikes, the level of violence in Israel and Palestine has been increasing for more than a year and a half. Increases in violence appear to be driven by some combination of the emergence of new decentralized militant networks in the West Bank, rising

Figure 6.3

Annual Distribution of Rockets Launched from the Gaza Strip, 2006–2022

Note: The number of rocket launches during Operation Cast Lead were assumed to be distributed uniformly across the operation's 22 days.
Source: "Palestinian Terrorism against, Israel, 2022: Methods, Trends and Description," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center, Israeli Intelligence and Commemoration Center, January 29, 2023, 7, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2023/01/Ef_202_22.pdf.

friction between Palestinians and Israeli settlers, and more amorphous political conflict between Israel and the Palestinian groups operating in Gaza and the West Bank.

Israeli analysts noted several novel trends in 2022. The first is the emergence of small independent Palestinian networks in the West Bank that do not take orders from established Palestinian armed groups or governing authorities.[14] These groups appear to have incorporated former "lone wolf" attackers into loose networks that issue claims, although the degree of operational coordination is unknown.[15] These developments accompanied indicators of increased terrorist capacity—an apparent shift from stabbing attacks to small arms attacks and an increase in the number of attacks.[16]

The co-occurrence of these trends may indicate that the formation of new networks is increasing terrorist capacity in the West Bank through greater access to firearms and the means to infiltrate Israel, or it could be mere coincidence.[17] Open sources lack sufficient information to draw firm conclusions, but if the trends are related, they will almost certainly continue to intensify.

Before October 2023, groups located in the Gaza Strip also employed rockets in attacks against Israel. These attacks tended to be concentrated around Israeli military operations due to tit-for-tat escalation dynamics.[18] Despite the high number of rockets fired, the number of these attacks had declined for several years.[19] At least some within the Israeli government assessed that the decline in rocket attacks was related to Hamas's desire to reduce violence in Gaza, but in the wake of Hamas's unprecedented barrage in October 2023, the decline looks much more like an attempt to stockpile rockets or maintain operational security in preparation for a major attack.[20]

The effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome air-defense system means that the destructive impact of the pre-October 2023 rocket attacks does not match the number of a rockets launched. Israeli security personnel claim that 90 percent of rockets were intercepted during the 2021 crisis and that 97 percent were intercepted during the 2022 crisis.[21] Figures from the October 2023 attack are not yet publicly available, but the number of rockets represented an unprecedented test of Iron Dome's capacity.

Figure 6.4

Incidents of Violence against Civilians Attributed to Israeli Settler Groups, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

Rockets that will fall into empty areas are ignored by the Iron Dome defenses, meaning that the effect of the attacks is generally lower than suggested by the rate of interception.[22] The rockets launched from Gaza therefore posed a limited threat to Israeli civilians as long as they were kept within a certain limit, which the October 2023 attack may have surpassed—the 1,175 rockets fired during three days in 2022 caused 70 injuries from shrapnel, most of which were not serious, and no deaths.[23] The rocket attacks have high destructive potential, but the IDF has learned to manage the issue, reducing it to a limited day-to-day threat, although Hamas demonstrated in October that they can be a dangerous tool for a strategic operation.

Until October 2023, Hamas and PIJ used rockets primarily not to impose casualties on Israel but to signal their displeasure with particular Israeli actions, improve their domestic political positions, and to impact international politics. The fact that these attacks inflicted minimal casualties was therefore not a major drawback for the leaders of Hamas and PIJ. These groups have access to other tools—such as raids, bombings, and suicide attacks—that are much more lethal in practice, although Hamas may have demonstrated a new paradigm for Palestinian rocket use on October 7.

Israel is also home to a variety of actors known collectively as "settlers" that are involved in nationalist violence against Palestinians. The data on trends in settler violence are ambiguous. ACLED data does not exemplify an upward trend, but an Israeli government analysis noted an increase in nationalist violence by Jewish settlers against Palestinians in 2022.[24] These incidents exhibit a wide variety of sophistication, ranging from raids by armed groups to car collisions, at least some of which may not be attacks. The trend since the Hamas attacks has been clear. Settler violence has increased in the West Bank without any real response from the Israeli security forces.[25] The Israeli government could reduce the risk to Palestinian civilians by directly targeting these settlers with law enforcement at higher rates, but such an initiative is unlikely under the current Netanyahu government, which draws its support from right-wing parties, especially after the attacks on October 7.

The future of terrorism in Israel is as uncertain as it has been in more than a decade, and there are few reasons for optimism. The October 7 Hamas attacks have led to an Israeli ground operation in Gaza with no clear end goal, violence in the West Bank threatens to explode into a Third Intifada, and the possibility of war with Iran looms over the region. Even if the situation were to return to the status quo, there is little reason to hope for a long-term

improvement. Trends were already bad before Hamas unleashed its onslaught. There is no reason to believe that its attacks or the Israeli response will make the region more peaceful and stable.

Lebanon

Hezbollah poses a significant threat to Israel and to U.S. interests in the Middle East. The most direct threat is its ability to conduct indirect fire or uncrewed aerial system (UAS) attacks against Israeli or U.S. personnel and facilities in the wider region. Violence involving the group has been declining for the past six years, but these decreases reflect changes in the broader conflict system rather than decreases in Hezbollah's capabilities, and Hamas's October attacks have swung the relationship once again toward a higher likelihood of open conflict. Most of the decline in Hezbollah violence resulted from a more general decrease in violence in Syria, where Hezbollah fights in support of the Assad government.[26] Hezbollah has not faced any significant military or political defeats in the past six years that would explain the decreases, but the demand for Hezbollah to conduct military activities has declined as the Assad government has become increas-
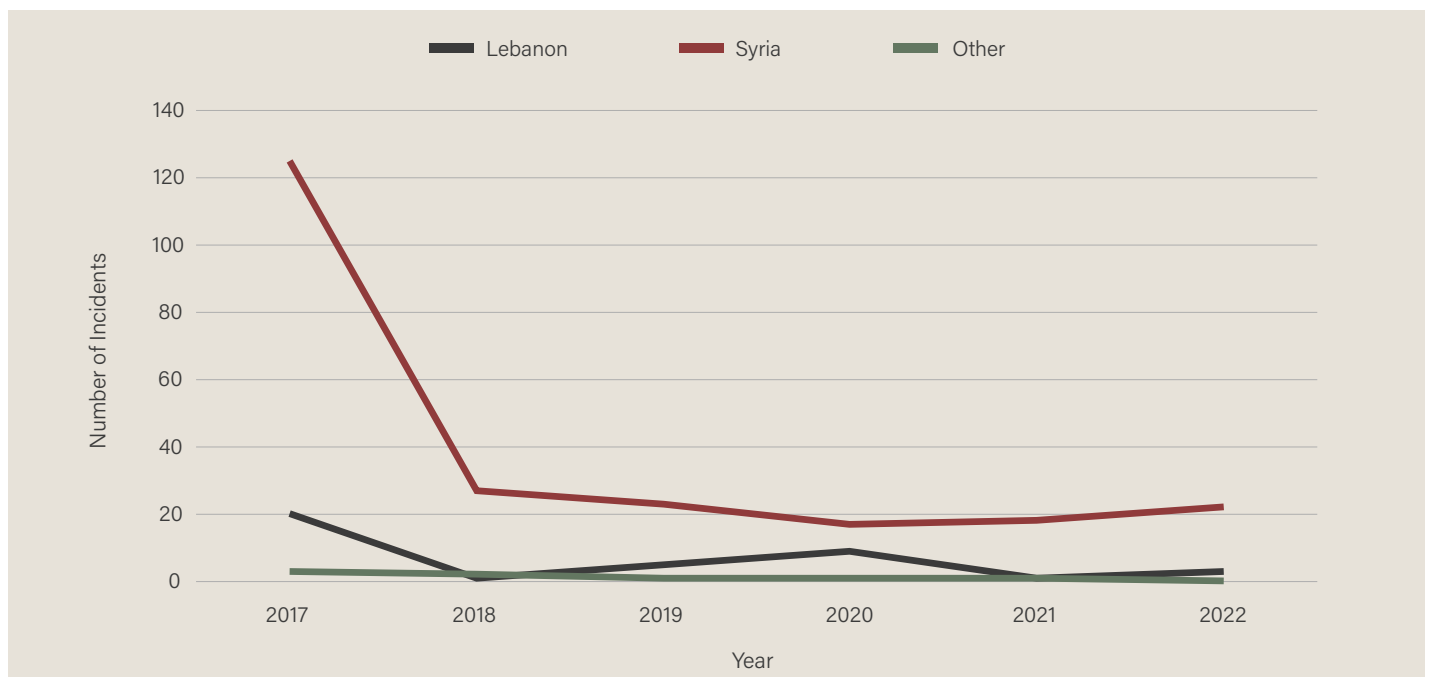
ingly secure.

Hezbollah retains a capacity for violence that holds Israeli and U.S. targets at risk. It has a stockpile of 70,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles (if not more) capable of reaching Israeli population centers.[27] It has also developed a small UAS fleet, which it uses to demonstrate the threat it poses to Israeli citizens and Israel's interests in the Mediterranean.[28] These capabilities mean that Lebanon endangers a key U.S. ally and threatens maritime security in the eastern Mediterranean. The result is a constant risk of violence and escalation.

The relative infrequency of fighting between Hezbollah and Israel in recent years suggests that the logic of conventional deterrence operates across the Israel-Lebanon border. The area experiences occasional crises, but both sides have repeatedly stepped back from the brink of war. Hezbollah argues that its missile and rocket capabilities deter Israel from invading, while its understanding that Israel remains militarily superior deters it from activities that would trigger a massive Israeli response.[29] The greatest risk created by Hezbollah's activities is probably one of miscalculation. Israel or Lebanon may take actions that they believe are below the other's threshold for a

Violent Incidents Involving Lebanese Hezbollah by Country, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

major response but that trigger a significant crisis or war, which could potentially draw in the United States or Iran. Escalation could also result from external pressures on Hezbollah or Israel. Domestic political instability could push Israeli leaders toward behavior more likely to cause a crisis; Hezbollah may calculate that it can gain politically from direct conflict with Israel; or Iran may press Hezbollah to engage in more aggressive behavior as part of its regional strategy.

All of these dynamics were in play in the wake of the October 7 attacks. The malfunction of an Israeli warning system created a widespread belief that Hezbollah was undertaking major attacks against Israel.[30] High-ranking Hezbollah members have also made statements in support of Hamas, potentially tying their personal credibility to the conflict in Gaza.[31] Iran also threatened to open a "new front," which most likely refers to the involvement of Hezbollah.[32] Although deterrence may still hold, the situation is far less certain than it has been in recent years.

The direct threat to the United States is lower but merits continued vigilance. Hezbollah has previously conducted direct attacks against U.S. facilities and individuals, and it likely armed and trained Iraqi militias that fought against the United States during Operation Iraqi Freedom.[33] The group has demonstrated a degree of external operations capability, having been accused of bombing a bus in Bulgaria in 2012, although it has denied its participation in the attack.[34] Hezbollah was still plotting attacks in the United States in the early 2000s, but more recent signs of planning were not available in open sources.[35] There is little doubt that the group's capabilities have grown as it has received greater support from Iran and become more entrenched in Lebanon. A lack of attacks against the United States is therefore likely the result of increasingly competent U.S. preventive measures or a shift in Hezbollah's focus to more local activity.

Lebanon is also home to an Islamic State presence, although attacks are rare. The group appears to use Lebanese territory for recruiting, although it may desire to conduct attacks as well. Multiple young men from northern Lebanon disappeared in 2021 before being killed in Iraq fighting for the Islamic State, which suggests the presence of a recruiting pipeline.[36] The U.S. Treasury Department has also sanctioned the Saksouk Company for Exchange and Money Transfer for handing transfers on behalf of Syria-based Islamic State members using a combination of its Syrian, Lebanese, and Turkish offices.[37]

The lack of recent Islamic State attacks in Lebanon is probably the result of counterterrorism activities and military pressure on the group in Iraq and Syria rather than a lack of offensive intent. The Islamic State conducted several attacks in Lebanon between 2014 and 2017, and several people were arrested on charges of plotting attacks in Lebanon, although their cases remain pending at the time of writing.[38] While the Islamic State may use Lebanon for transfers of money or people, the country is hardly unique in that respect. The Islamic State does not appear to have significant operational capability in Lebanon, and it therefore does not merit special attention from measures to counter the Islamic State, although the threat should continue to receive attention as part of a more general monitoring effort.

Iraq, Syria, and Turkey

The terrorist threats in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey are linked by geography and politics. Iraq and Syria are a common theater for the activities of both the Islamic State and several Iranian-backed non-state armed groups. The government of Turkey has also been an increasingly important actor in the region for the past several years as it has pursued Kurdish groups beyond its borders into Syria and Iraq, contributing to increased violence and instability in these areas.
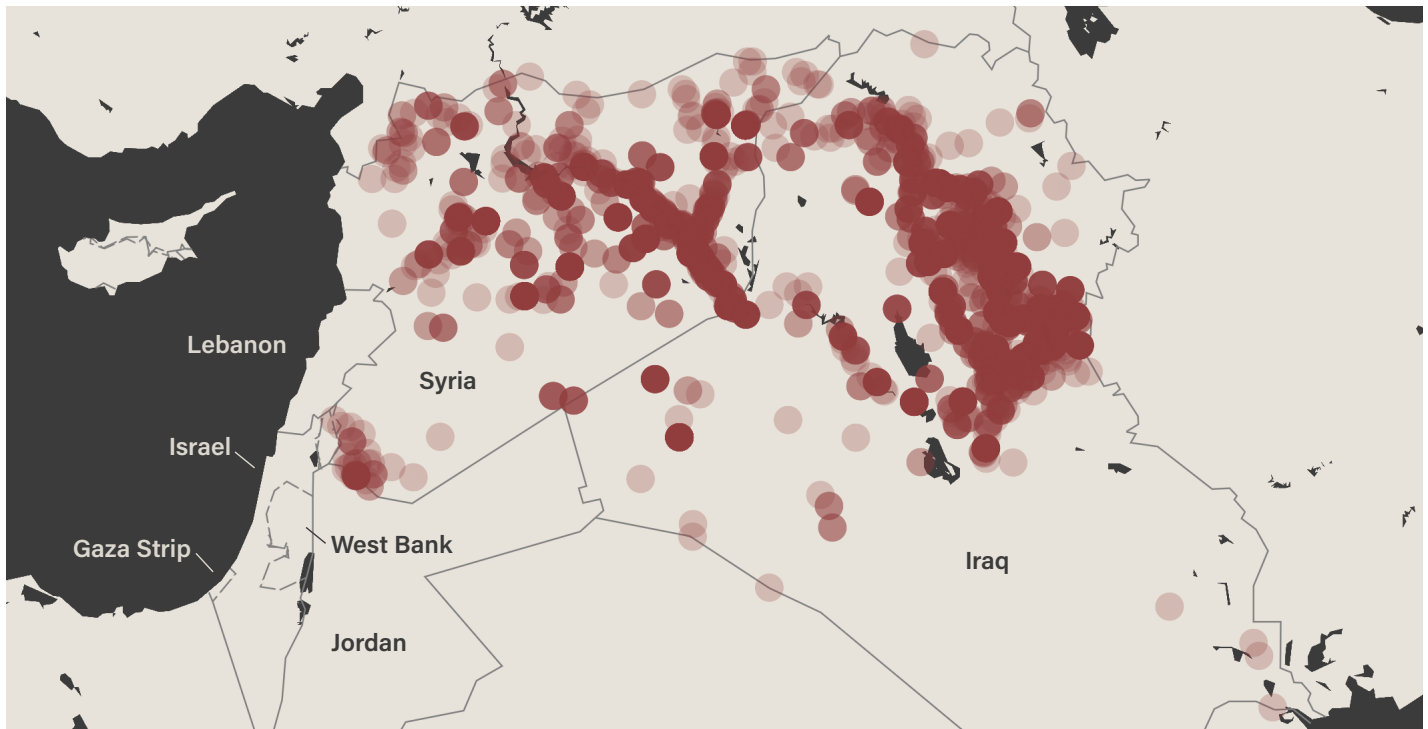
Key Trends

The Islamic State threat has the potential to resurge.

The threat from the Islamic State has been decreasing for several years, but the group has not been defeated and remains the most important terrorist threat in the region. The group continues to operate across wide swaths of Syria and Iraq despite its battlefield defeat in May 2019, having transformed into a highly mobile insurgent force. It poses a local threat to both civilians and security forces, including the various militias that have become part of the broader counter-ISIS coalition. The group also aspires to conduct attacks outside of Iraq and Syria but lacks the capacity to do so, although it still attempts to incite small-scale attacks in Western countries through its propaganda. The group continues to raise funds from across the world and operates a global financial facilitation network that enables Islamic State activities across multiple regions. The group's persistence and ambition mean that it will remain a threat for the foreseeable future. The threat against targets outside of

Figure 6.6

Violent Incidents Involving the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, 2020–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

Iraq and Syria will remain low, however, as long as the counter-ISIS coalition maintains counter-insurgent and counterterrorist pressure, thereby preventing the group from holding territory or adopting a more centralized operational model that would permit it to plot more sophisticated attacks in new areas of operation.

The Islamic State organization has undergone a substantial transformation over the past four years. While it aspires to conduct external operations and is continuing to encourage global followers to launch small-scale attacks in Western countries, the group itself currently lacks the capacity to direct large-scale attacks outside of its primary operating area in Iraq and Syria. Instead, it continues to exploit weak, fragmented, and dysfunctional governance to maintain freedom of action in wide swaths of Syria and Iraq. Following its territorial defeat, the Islamic State evolved into a decentralized, highly mobile insurgent force between May 2019 and May 2020. These efforts have allowed the group to regroup and prepare for a prolonged insurgency.

Although the Islamic State's total fighting strength is well below its pre-2019 heights, the group maintains what U.S. military commanders assess as a substantial latent capability, which includes the current generation of Islamic State leaders and operatives fighting in Syria and Iraq, tens of thousands of former Islamic State members in detention in Iraq and Syria, and more than 25,000 children in Syria's al-Hol refugee camp that the group has targeted for recruitment.[39] The group maintains its desire to restore its so-called caliphate and will seek any opportunity to do so.

Turkey's increasing regional role is reshaping the risk landscape.

Turkey faces little direct threat from terrorism. Kurdish nationalist groups conduct far fewer attacks in the country than they did in their heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. Although small-scale insurgent violence still occurs in southeastern Turkey and Istanbul is the site of occasional larger attacks, terrorist groups pose little threat to the Turkish state or civilians. Groups affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are still perceived by the Turkish government as the country's main security threat, and in consequence Turkey has conducted an increasing number of attacks against Kurdish groups in

Syria and Iraq in recent years. These activities threaten to increase regional instability and pose problems for the diplomatic relationship between Turkey and its NATO allies, which the war in Ukraine has made more important than it has been in decades.

The Turkish government has expanded its campaign against Kurdish groups beyond its borders. The number of attacks in Turkey has decreased since 2020, but violence between Turkish forces and Kurdish armed groups outside of Turkey has increased dramatically in the same period.[40] The Turkey-PKK conflict continues to drive regional instability and, indirectly, terrorism in the wider Middle East. Turkey has escalated its rhetoric against Kurdish nationalist groups, including the People's Defense Units that comprise a sizable portion of the U.S.-supported Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). Following a November 13, 2022, bombing in Istanbul that killed six and wounded dozens, Turkey blamed Kurdish militants and intensified air and armed drone strikes in Syria and Iraq.[41] Continued conflict between Turkey and Kurdish-affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria increases instability and draws resources that could otherwise go to countering the Islamic State, thereby contributing to the possibility of an Islamic State resurgence. For example, the SDF serves as the main security forces in the al-Hol camp, and a diversion of resources to resist a Turkish incursion into northern Syria could create the conditions for the Islamic State to stage a major breakout, replenishing its ranks and enabling a greater number and tempo of attacks.
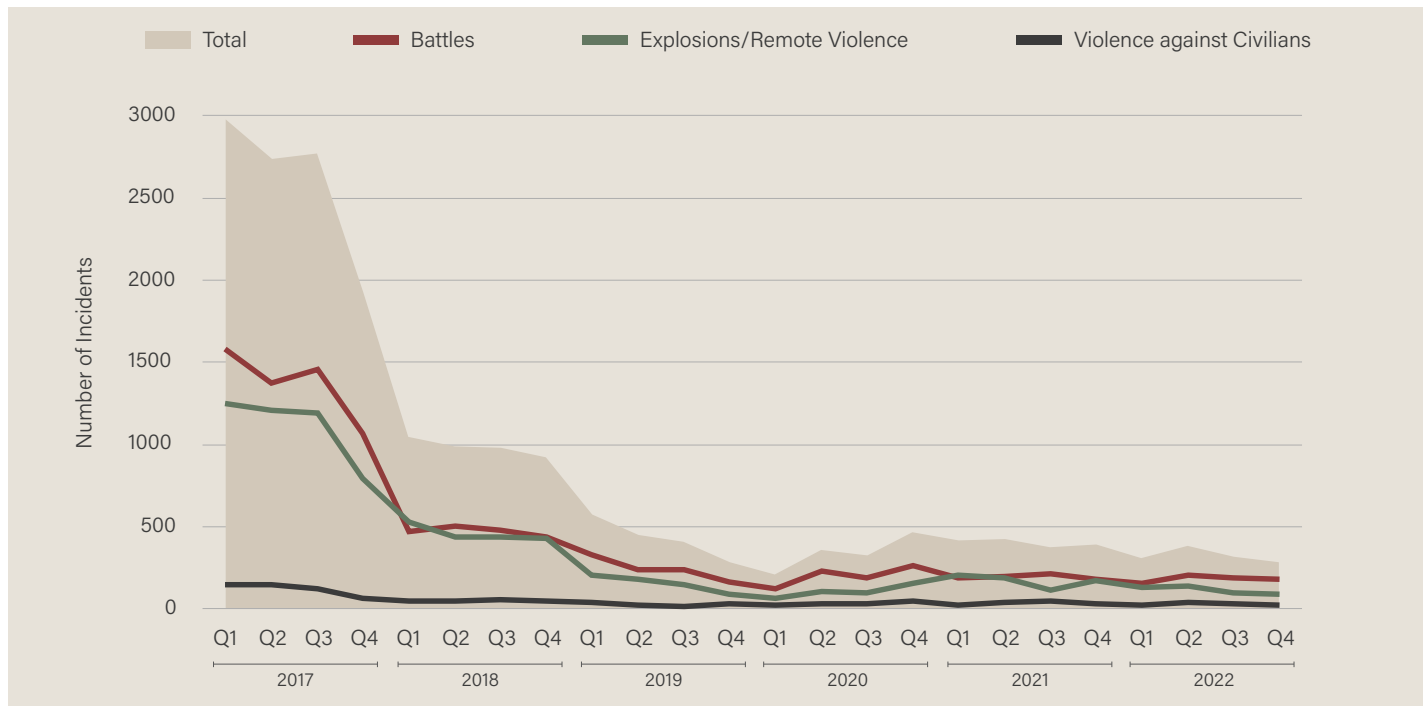
Iraq and Syria

Civil conflict, religious and ethnic violence, and dysfunctional governance continue to undermine security in Iraq and Syria. Nearly a decade of civil war in Syria has resulted in de facto partition of the country, while Iraq's politics have maintained a state of continual crisis in recent years. These factors have exacerbated long-standing militant threats in the two countries. External actors—including Iran, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and the United States—continue to pursue competing interests in the region, with the only common cause among them being the ongoing effort to combat the Islamic State. The mix of state, non-state, and proxy forces in Iraq and Syria enables cycles of violence that carry risk of regional escalation.

The situation in Syria is as uncertain as it has been in at

Figure 6.7

Violent Incidents Involving the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

least half a decade. Conflict between Israel and Hamas threatens to spill into Syria as Israel conducts air strikes, and the United States clashes with non-state groups it says are affiliated with Iran. A major increase in violence in Syria would be a boon to the region's terrorist groups, which have been in decline. They are likely to be the only major benefactors from a direct or proxy war between some combination of Israel, Syria, Iran, and the United States. Iran and Syria would probably directly sponsor terrorist groups in the country with which they have established relationships or existing affinities, while the Islamic State would benefit from reductions in counter-terrorist pressure as the states involved in the Syrian conflict turn their attention toward one another. The Islamic State in particular would welcome such a conflict. It has been in decline for several years but still seeks to return to its former prominence.

The Islamic State has been substantially reduced over the past two years. The United States and other members' of the counter-ISIS coalition have killed several of the group's senior leaders since January 2022.[42] Since the group's battlefield defeat in May 2019, the monthly volume of its attacks has dramatically declined: between January 2017 and April 2019, the group was responsible for more than 200 attacks per month, but since May 2019, the monthly rate of attacks has fallen to approximately 63.[43] Despite this decrease, the Islamic State has still been responsible for more than 2,400 attacks since its battlefield defeat and continues to operate across a wide area. The Islamic State conducts operations in Syria's Euphrates River Valley in the Deir ez-Zor governate and across wide bands of northern Iraq, primarily concentrated in Diyala and Kirkuk provinces and, to a slightly lesser extent, Saladin and Ninewa provinces. The group continues to distribute attacks roughly evenly between civilians and the various military, police, and militia elements that comprise the broader counter-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria—including the Syrian Arab Republic, SDF, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and various Iranian proxy militias.[44]

The Islamic State is no longer the centralized state-like entity that it was at the peak of its power. It is now a decentralized, highly mobile insurgent force, which poses a different kind of threat. This transformation allowed the Islamic State to regroup in preparation for a prolonged insurgency. Despite substantial leadership losses over the past year, including the death of the

group's emir in February 2022, the current iteration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is rebuilding. In January 2022, the Islamic State undertook its most complex attack since May 2019, executing a 10-day siege of a prison complex in Hasakah, in northeastern Syria. The group incurred substantial casualties in the fighting, and the attack was a significant indicator of the Islamic State's capacity to conduct large-scale operations in Iraq and Syria. Following the deaths in early 2022 of the group's emir, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, and its global spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, the Islamic State undertook a 2022 Ramadan offensive that the group called "The Battle of Revenge for the Two Sheikhs." During the offensive, the Islamic State undertook 117 attacks, making that period the group's most violent single month in three years.[45]

The tactics, techniques, and procedures that the Islamic State utilized during the 2022 Ramadan offensive reflect the group's approach to ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria. During the offensive, the Islamic State conducted a total of 117 attacks, 58 of which were fatal, inflicting at least 130 deaths. Most attacks were mobile ambushes against security forces and militia targets that used small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), snipers, and suicide bombs. The group's attacks in 2022 did not include any mass-casualty incidents of sectarian violence on the scale observed in 2021, during which suicide bombings targeting Shia neighborhoods in Baghdad killed 32 in January and 35 in July.

The Islamic State's financial reserves are likely a significant factor in the group's enduring global influence. The group likely retains $25 to $50 million in cash reserves, primarily within Iraq, according to UN estimates.[46] Much of this revenue was generated through looting, extortion activities, and kidnapping for ransom.[47] Despite these large reserves, the Islamic State relies on a global financial facilitation network that operates according to a hub-and-spoke model. Islamic State financial nodes have been exposed and sanctioned in Turkey, South Africa, Afghanistan, the United States, and the Gulf states over the past two years. These nodes transfer financial assistance between Islamic State leadership and the regional branches, with funds moving in both directions. Fundraising activities include resource extraction, various types of online fraud, and the use of social media to solicit financial support under the guise of humanitarian aid.[48] In one incident early in the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, a Turkey-based Islamic

State financier established a false business selling fake personal protective equipment.[49] Despite its decline, the Islamic State's global financial network will ensure that the group maintains its influence within the Salafi-jihadist movement.

In remarks at the end of 2022, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Michael E. Kurilla described an Islamic State threat in Syria and Iraq that is comprised of three categories. Category one is the current generation of Islamic State leaders and operatives, which the United Nations assessed in mid-2022 to be comprised of 6,000 to 10,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria. Category two is a "literal 'ISIS army' in detention in Iraq and Syria," comprised of 10,000 detainees in Syria and 20,000 detainees in Iraq. Category three is what Kurilla described as the "potential next generation of ISIS," which includes more than 25,000 children in Syria's al-Hol refugee camp.[50] In separate remarks, a senior U.S. Department of State counterterrorism official argued in March 2022 that failure to resolve the refugee crisis at al-Hol would "all but guarantee that we will again face a more capable and resurgent ISIS."[51] Reflecting the enduring challenge of demobilizing the Islamic State's cadre of child soldiers—which the group continues to tout as the "cubs of the caliphate"—the Islamic State released a video on January 23, 2023, of so-called "cubs" within al-Hol refugee camp pledging allegiance to the group's new emir, Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi.[52]

Despite the Islamic State's resurgence throughout 2022, the group has continued to endure significant leadership losses. In mid-October 2022, the group's then emir—Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—was killed in the southern province of Daraa in a Free Syrian Army operation.[53] On November 30, 2022, the Islamic State announced that Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi had been appointed the group's new emir. The impact of these leadership losses cannot yet be determined. The group's 2023 Ramadan offensive suggests that the Islamic State is decreasingly capable of violence.[54] CENTCOM noted a "significant reduction" in 2023 compared with the group's previous Ramadan offensives, attributing the decline to the activities of the Iraqi security forces and the SDF.[55]

Although several Islamic State affiliates, particularly in Africa, have overtaken the Islamic State in terms of size and operational tempo, the group's core leadership in Iraq and Syria still manages media operations, often focusing on attacks carried out by global affiliates in

order to depict a movement that Islamic State core leadership claims as truly global in scope. Exemplifying this approach is al-Naba, the group's weekly Arabic-language magazine, which integrates accounts of operations by the group's affiliates in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. While it is true that the Islamic State's central leadership exerts minimal operational oversight of its affiliates, the group benefits substantially in terms of profile and prestige by publicizing the wide range of overseas attacks that are carried out under its name.

The Islamic State's English-language media operations have declined since their peak prior to the defeat of the caliphate and the subsequent capture or deaths of a substantial number of the group's foreign fighter cadre. For example, it ceased publishing its premier English-language magazine in 2016, although the group continues to maintain substantial grassroots support in global online forums, particularly on Telegram and Rocket Chat. Using these propaganda channels, the Islamic State seeks to project an image of strength despite its losses, disparage al Qaeda, and inspire small-scale attacks in the West and India.

The threat from al Qaeda is currently low in Iraq and Syria. The primary al Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria is Hurras al Din (HAD). The group emerged in early 2018 after several pro-al Qaeda factions broke away from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which no longer appears to pose a significant threat beyond its immediate region. HAD is currently a shadow of its former self, and it probably lacks the capabilities to conduct attacks outside of its current areas of operation in northwest Syria. HAD operations have primarily targeted the military forces of Syria and its former allies in HTS, primarily in Idlib. On January 1, 2021, the group carried out its largest-scale known attack outside of Idlib, which took place against Russian forces in Raqqa, although this did not portend an expansion of the group's activities in Syria. A series of intensifying crackdowns by HTS—itself designated as a terrorist organization by the United States—have significantly weakened HAD.[56] The group will struggle to conduct attacks beyond its current area of operations as long as it is primarily occupied with local military activity.

Despite the apparently low level of threat HAD poses beyond northwest Syria, statements by U.S. officials suggest that the group desires to conduct external operations. U.S. officials accused HAD in July 2022 of leveraging Syria as a safe haven "to coordinate with their external affiliates and plan operations outside of

Syria."[57] U.S. National Counterterrorism Center director Christine Abizaid warned in January 2023 that:

> . . . the core al Qaeda presence that I focus on is Hurras al Din. It's the core al Qaeda presence that CENTCOM focuses on. You see it in some of their operations over the last year. Hurras al Din is concerning to me, not just because . . . of its space to operate in Syria, where we have lots of actors who can operate, but because . . . if we care about the ties that bind, their stature, some of the inner connectivity with other aspects of the al Qaeda network, I think, are important and really resonant in the Huras al Din presence.[58]

These assessments suggest that the group persists as a threat and will seek to conduct attacks outside of northwest Syria given the opportunity.

HTS continues to be motivated by a radical interpretation of Islam but has dramatically changed its strategy in recent years. It has publicly revoked its commitment to international jihad and has sought to emphasize its Syrian ambitions over any international ones.[59] However, the group continues to make statements expressing sympathy with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and harbors smaller foreign terrorist organizations within the
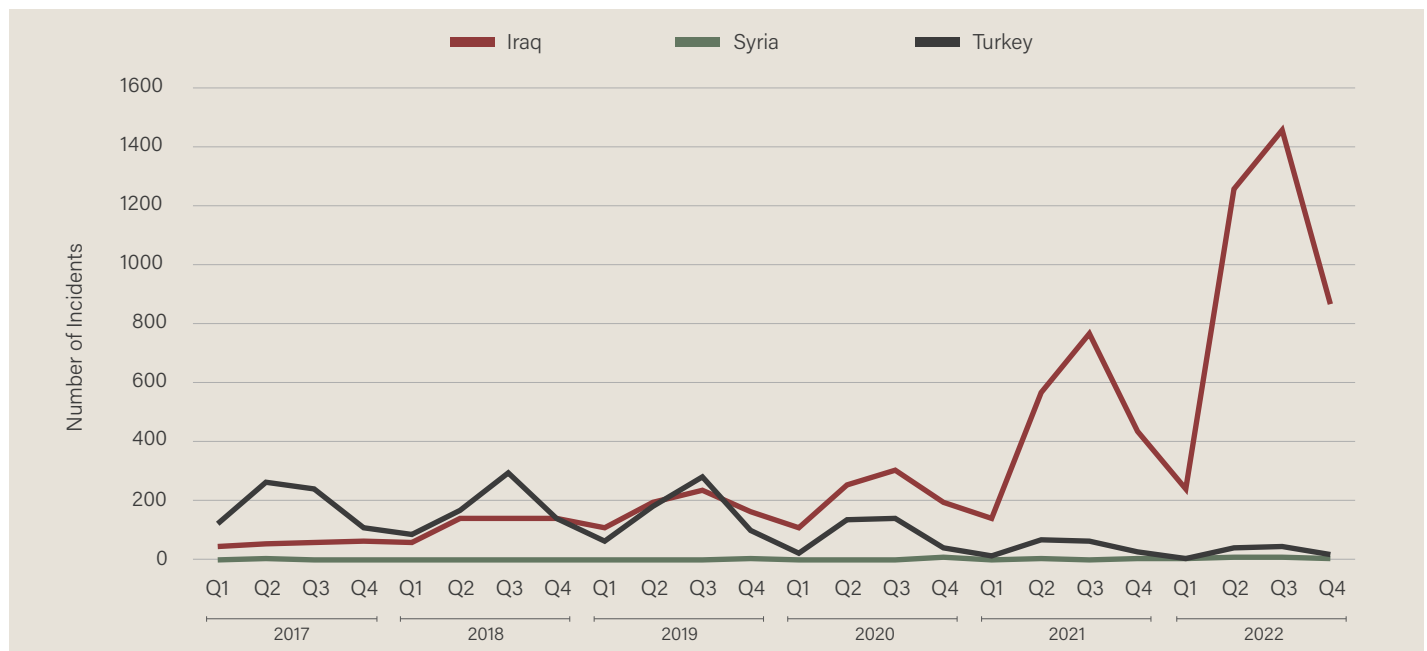
territory it controls.[60] French authorities also believe that a member or associate of the group may have encouraged the 2020 murder of French teacher Samuel Paty, although there is no evidence that the broader HTS organization was involved in planning or directing the attack.[61] The group likely could assist in plotting such attacks, but it has shown little desire to do so and appears to have shifted to a local focus. That said, a change in leadership could trigger another such shift.

Turkey

Terrorist attacks pose a minor threat inside of Turkey, although the Turkey-Kurdish conflict remains a major driver of violence and instability in the wider region. Attacks associated with Kurdish groups in Turkey generally take one of two main forms: killings of alleged "collaborators" and government employees—including off-duty security personnel—and attacks on Turkish forces involving IEDs or small arms. Most of this violence is concentrated in Turkey's southeastern provinces, where most of its Kurdish population lives, although Istanbul has seen sporadic violence involving Kurdish groups, most notably a 2016 bombing by the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks—a PKK splinter group that rejects negotiations with Ankara.[62] This decrease in terrorist violence within Turkey has

Figure 6.8

Violent Incidents Involving the PKK in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

occurred alongside a substantial increase in conflict between Turkey and the PKK in Iraq.

The PKK poses no direct threat to Western countries other than Turkey. The group began as a Marx-Leninist organization but developed pro-U.S. tendencies after the Cold War. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan disavowed communism in a 1998 interview soon before his expulsion from Syria, stating that "the United States represents development."[63] Although the United States aided in Öcalan's capture and has designated the PKK a terrorist organization, it regularly cooperates with the PKK-affiliated PYD in northeastern Syria.[64] If that cooperation were to cease, the group would still pose a minimal threat to the United States. There is nothing about its ideology that suggests a threat to the United States, and it has no history of attacks against U.S. citizens or facilities, even when it was a Marxist-Leninist organization fighting against a NATO ally during the Cold War.

The PKK threat to Turkish territorial integrity is also questionable. The group lacks the capabilities to directly challenge the Turkish military, as has been made repeatedly clear during Turkey's interventions into northeast Syria and northwest Iraq. The PKK officially accepts the current borders of Turkey and has replaced its demands for independence with calls for greater self-determination. The PKK currently espouses an ideology Öcalan calls "democratic confederalism," which attempts to achieve self-determination "without questioning the existing political borders."[65] The PKK's public statements at least suggest that the group poses no meaningful threat to Turkish territorial integrity.

Despite changes in PKK rhetoric, the group has not disavowed violence and shows no desire to do so. The result is that the PKK will pose a threat to Turkish civilians, government employees, and security forces if Turkey relaxes its military pressure while the conflict remains unresolved. Even intensification of military pressure will not eliminate the threat to Turkey. PKK-affiliated groups receive direct support from the United States and are to a degree under its protection—while the United States will not fight a NATO ally to protect the PYD, U.S. officials would not accept the destruction of a U.S.-aligned counterterrorist force by the Turkish military and apply diplomatic pressure to prevent such an outcome. The result is that Turkey has no hope of destroying the PKK while Kurdish forces are important allies in the U.S. counterterrorism fight.

The terrorist landscape in the Persian Gulf consists of two main threats: Iran-supported proxy groups and Salafi-jihadist organizations that take advantage of the war in Yemen to maintain their operational capabilities. A small Islamic State group called Ansar Baid al-Maqdis (ABM) also operates in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, but its operational capabilities seem to have been declining for the past two years, and it probably lacks the ability to conduct high-profile attacks such as the one that brought down Metrojet Flight 9268 in 2015. Uncertainty surrounding the current fate of the war in Yemen hangs over the region. Rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has led to new peace negotiations that could reduce violence and limit the ability of al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates to operate in the country. A peace agreement would likely elevate the Iran-backed Houthi movement into a more significant regional player, which could reshape regional geopolitics and have unpredictable effects on the terrorist, and the Houthis' attacks in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attacks further complicate the region's already complex politics.

Key Trends

The prevalence of terrorist proxies makes the region sensitive to international politics.

Iranian proxy groups are active throughout the Persian Gulf region. They are involved in a large amount and wide variety of violence throughout wider Middle East, but the Yemen-based Houthis account for most of it.[66] While the group conducts attacks both within Yemen and in Saudi Arabia, its operations in Yemen look far more like the activities of a state-like participant in a civil war than a terrorist group, while its attacks on Saudi Arabia bear the hallmarks of terrorist violence—including the targeting of civilians or civilian infrastructure in order to shift the policy of the target state. The Houthis also seem to have sought to involve itself in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, conducting missile and drone attacks targeting Israel in October 2023.[67]

Houthi-perpetrated violence has been declining in Saudi Arabia, with a decrease in rocket and missile attacks after a multi-year campaign. This is probably due to several overlapping factors: lower numbers of missiles supplied to the Houthis, diplomatic engagement between the

Houthis and Saudi Arabia, and increasing effectiveness of Saudi air defenses.[68] None of these trends are fully under Saudi control, however, and a resurgence in cross-border attacks remains possible. Iran could increase its support to the Houthis, for example, by giving them more weapons or providing them with more advanced systems that can evade Saudi air defenses. The Houthis could also break off diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia, sparking a return to more comprehensive conflict that includes attacks on Saudi soil. The recent diplomatic opening between Iran and Saudi Arabia intro-
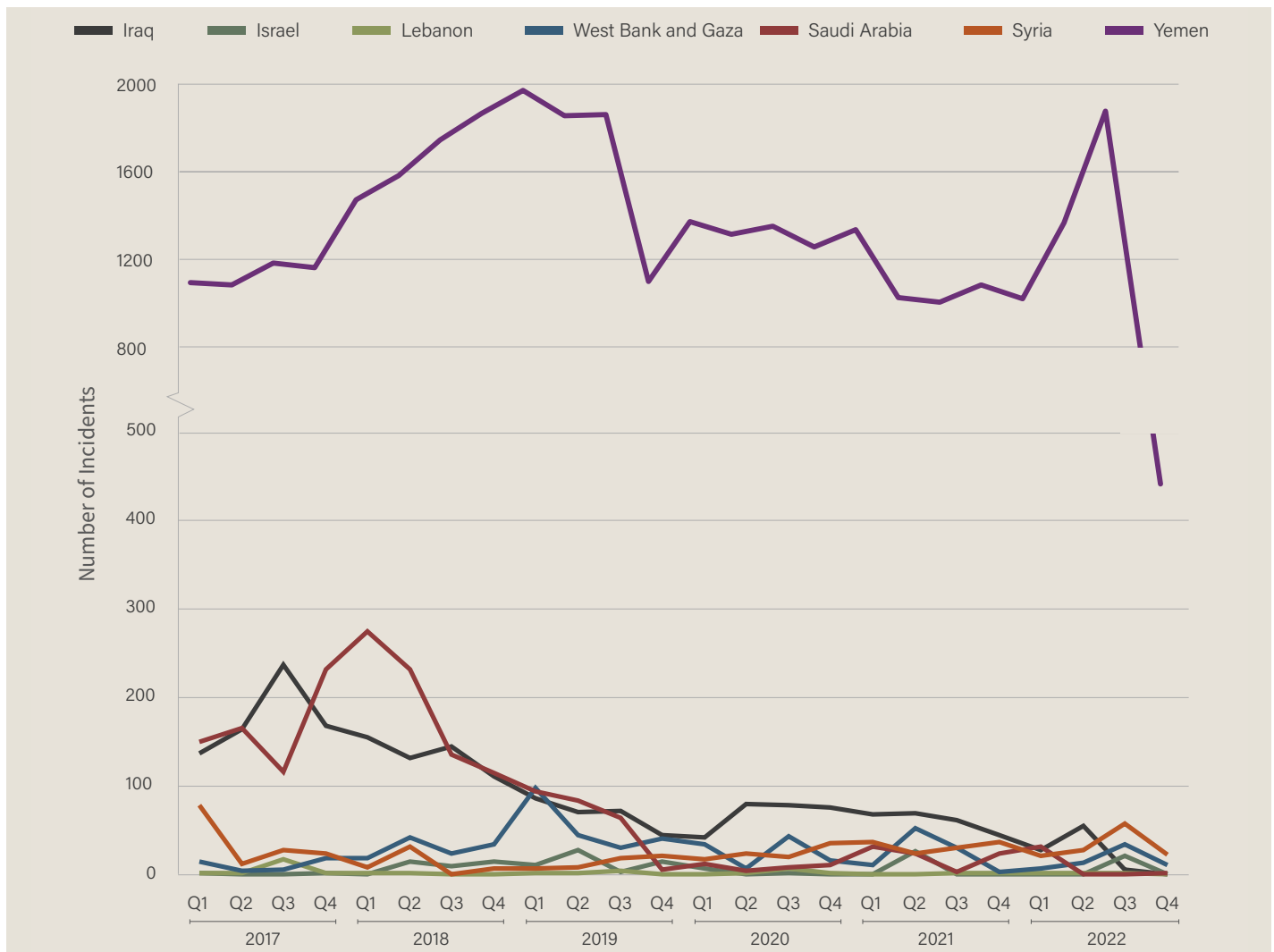
duces significant uncertainty into the situation, but what is clear is that Iran maintains the capability to increase attacks against Saudi Arabia through its Yemeni proxy.

The war in Yemen is the region's main engine of unpredictability.

The future threat posed by the Houthi movement and Salafi-jihadist groups in Yemen is currently mired in uncertainty. The agreement reestablishing diplomatic relations between the Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 included a promise from Iran to stop arming the

Figure 6.9

Violent Incidents Involving Iran-Linked Groups in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

Houthi movement.[69] This will decrease Houthi capabilities significantly if upheld—especially the group's ability to strike targets outside of Yemen, which depends on Iranian technology. Decreases in Iranian support are therefore likely to decrease the Houthi threat, particularly outside of Yemen.

As with other diplomatic developments in the Middle East, this reproachment is threatened by Hamas's October 2023 attacks. It is simply too soon to predict their impact will be on Saudi-Iranian relations generally and the war in Yemen in particular.

Although al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been significantly degraded by pressure from a variety of actors, failure to end the war will provide opportunities for the group to rebuild its former capabilities, as the foundations of its power in Yemen have not been uprooted. There is currently no indication that previously loyal tribal groups are turning against AQAP, and the Yemen's multisided civil war creates room for AQAP to survive and even innovate. The group will continue to survive and conduct attacks, at least in Yemen and possibly in the wider region, until the war ends or its main belligerents reach at least a political understanding that permits them to focus more of their capabilities on the group and decrease the attraction of partnering with them.

The Arabian Peninsula

The ongoing civil war in Yemen remains the primary driver of violence and instability in the Arabian Peninsula and broader Persian Gulf region. Although the combatants observed a six-month ceasefire in 2022 that substantially reduced violence, the agreement expired in October 2022 without a clear roadmap for peace. Yemen is home to several groups that intend to conduct terrorist attacks targeting U.S. interests or partners, particularly AQAP, Islamic State-Yemen Province (ISYP), and the Iran-backed Ansar Allah movement—more commonly known as the Houthis. The first two groups are Salafi-jihadist organizations that desire to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States. The latter is a Yemeni political and military organization that has not exhibited any intent to conduct such attacks but

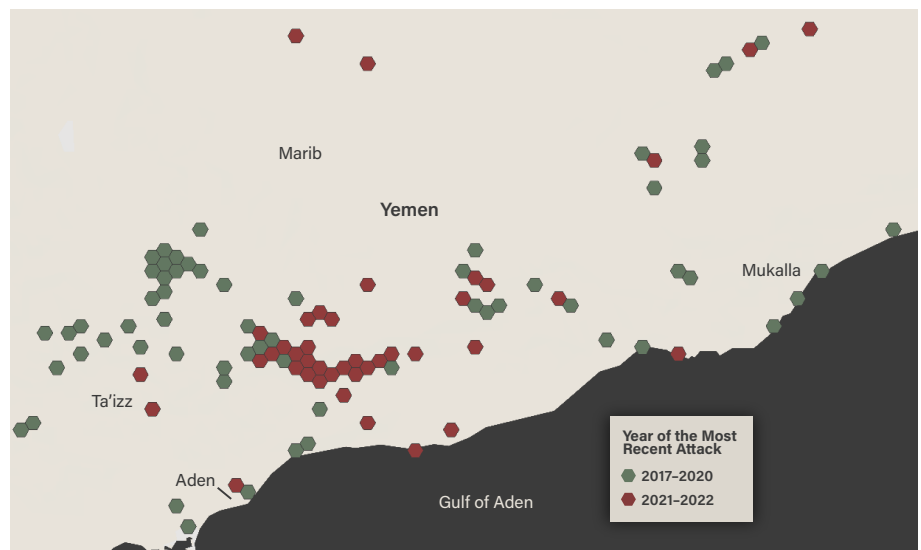that is willing and able to strike U.S. partners in the Gulf region.

AQAP continues to pose a significant threat to local civilians and security forces. Its activity has been steadily decreasing for the past several years as the group has faced significant military pressure, but it continues to demonstrate both the ability and intent to conduct small arms, IED, and more recently UAS attacks within Yemen. AQAP also poses a potential threat to countries' interests in the broader Gulf region: it has conducted few attacks outside of Yemen in recent years but likely desires to do so. Finally, AQAP continues to call for attacks against Western targets in its propaganda but has not demonstrated the capabilities that would allow it to regularly conduct attacks in the West, despite its role in the 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola.

AQAP's capabilities within Yemen have decreased in the past five years. The number of attacks it has perpetrated has been declining since at least 2017, with a recent increase in IED attacks resulting not from an AQAP resurgence but from the group's response to an offensive led by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a secessionist group that controls much of southern Yemen.[70]

The decrease in AQAP attacks has occurred alongside a more general downturn in the group's capabilities. AQAP's control over territory has declined significantly in the past several years. The last AQAP-controlled city

Figure 6.10

Attacks Attributed to AQAP, 2017–2022

"Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

was liberated in 2016, and other groups supported by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran continue to extend their control into areas formerly dominated by AQAP. The group's operational reach appears to have decreased as well: between 2020 and 2022, it conducted attacks over a much more restricted geographical area than in the previous three years.[71] The group is also much smaller than it once was: the United Nations assesses that AQAP commands fewer than 3,000 fighters, down from approximately 7,000 fighters in 2020.[72] The group's losses in manpower, territorial control, and command structures suggest that it will struggle to conduct regular attacks beyond southern Yemen absent a significant change in the conflict's trajectory.

AQAP has also been undergoing an important shift in group structure for the past several years which will further decrease its ability to conduct high-impact attacks in Yemen and abroad. The group has adopted an increasingly decentralized structure under pressure, relying on personal couriers to communicate out of fear of drawing UAS attacks.[73] Its internal cohesion has also been harmed by fears of infiltration, which are apparent in its own propaganda.[74] Such changes result in decreased command and control, along with a lower
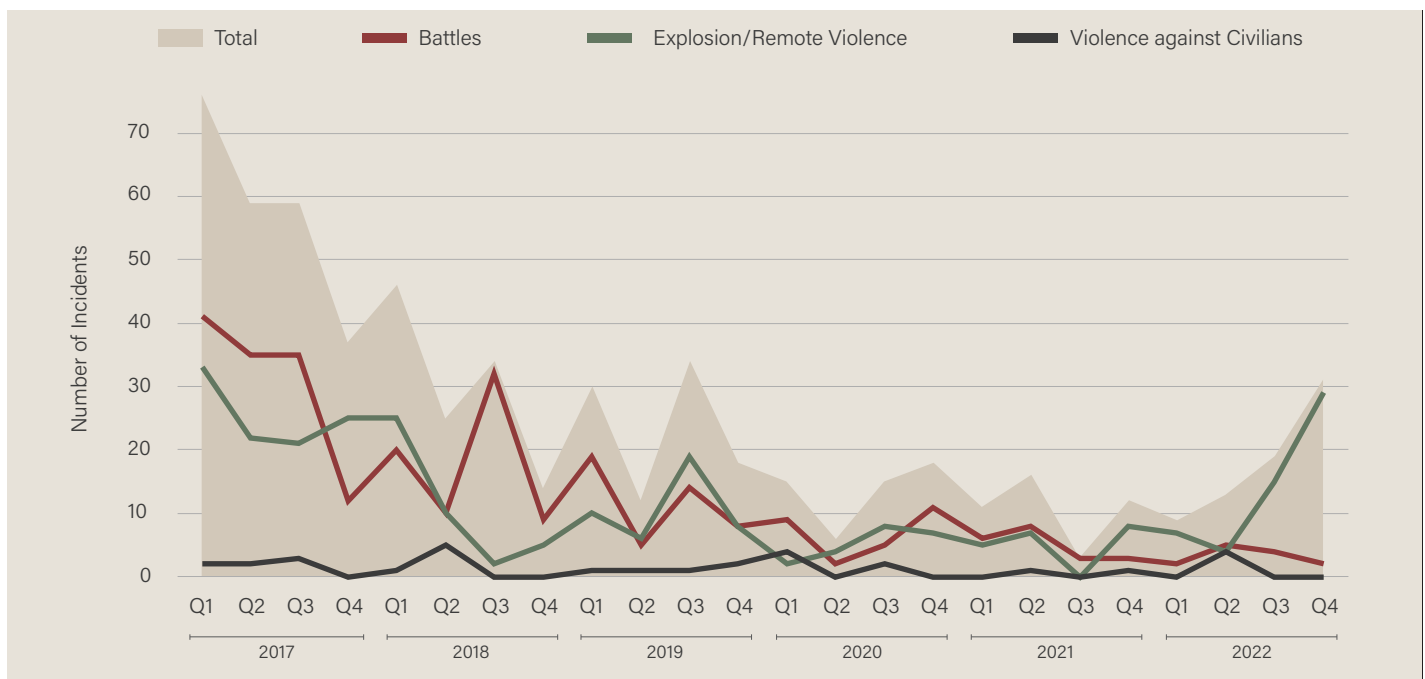
ability to coordinate forces across a large area or to plot attacks that require a large number of enablers—such as high-casualty attacks in Europe or the United States that would draw on AQAP for operational support rather than mere inspiration.

Most of these signs point to diminished AQAP capacity, although AQAP "enmeshment" with other forces in Yemen could help explain some of the decline in activity. Under such an interpretation, AQAP has become integrated into other armed groups aligned with one or more sides of the war.[75] Such a hypothesis is impossible to disprove without direct access to members of Yemeni armed groups, and it remains a plausible explanation that does not rule out a rapid increase in threat from AQAP. Such a process of enmeshment would have an unpredictable effect on AQAP's intentions and capabilities. For example, the group could become more focused on local concerns, increase its capacity for violence through integration into groups supported by state actors, or both.

AQAP almost certainly maintains its intent to attack the United States and its interests in the region despite its diminished capacity to do so. Currently, its direct involvement is limited to relatively small-scale attacks, such as the 2019 Pensacola shooting, in which a member of the

Figure 6.11

Attacks Attributed to AQAP by Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

Saudi armed forces killed three people at the apparent direction of AQAP.[76] It will also likely continue to incite so-called "lone actor" attacks through its propaganda, which frequently calls for Muslims in the West to conduct attacks in their communities and provides instructions on how to do so.[77] In the longer term, AQAP could threaten shipping in the Gulf of Aden. International shipping is currently the only international target currently within reach of AQAP operations, and the group's propaganda has itself raised the possibility of such attacks.[78] AQAP maintains the ability to conduct attacks on land along Yemen's southern coastline, implying that it could develop the ability to conduct attacks on the water once again.

AQAP will likely have plenty of time to develop these capabilities if the war continues. The group has been degraded but remains far from defeated; its capabilities have been diminished, but the foundations of its power in Yemen have not been broken. The group has successfully managed tribal politics to gain access to manpower and safe havens from which it continues to benefit.[79] Neither publicly available data nor open-source reporting suggests that formerly loyal tribal groups are turning against the group. If it remains embedded in local Yemeni communities, it will survive and encourage attacks in the West until a window of opportunity opens for its reemergence.

That said, AQAP's continued survival does not guarantee that it will pose a wider threat. A key question for the future of the group is its ability to maintain a focus on conducting attacks in the West. Current leader Khalid Batarfi has called for or praised attacks against the United States in numerous propaganda videos since his escape from prison in 2016, and he directed AQAP's external operations prior to ascending to the group's top position.[80] However, numerous analysts have argued that the group is increasingly local in its membership and orientation.[81] The degree to which changes in membership will drive higher-level AQAP policy is unpredictable, particularly in the context of an ongoing civil war. While the potential threat and continued propaganda activities emanating from AQAP suggest that the group maintains the desire to strike against Western interests, changes in the group's leadership, structure, and activity will be important to monitor, especially if the conflict moves toward a political settlement. The balance between the group's local and international agendas will determine whether its members will be able to play a role in post-conflict Yemen or whether it will remain an international terrorist group.
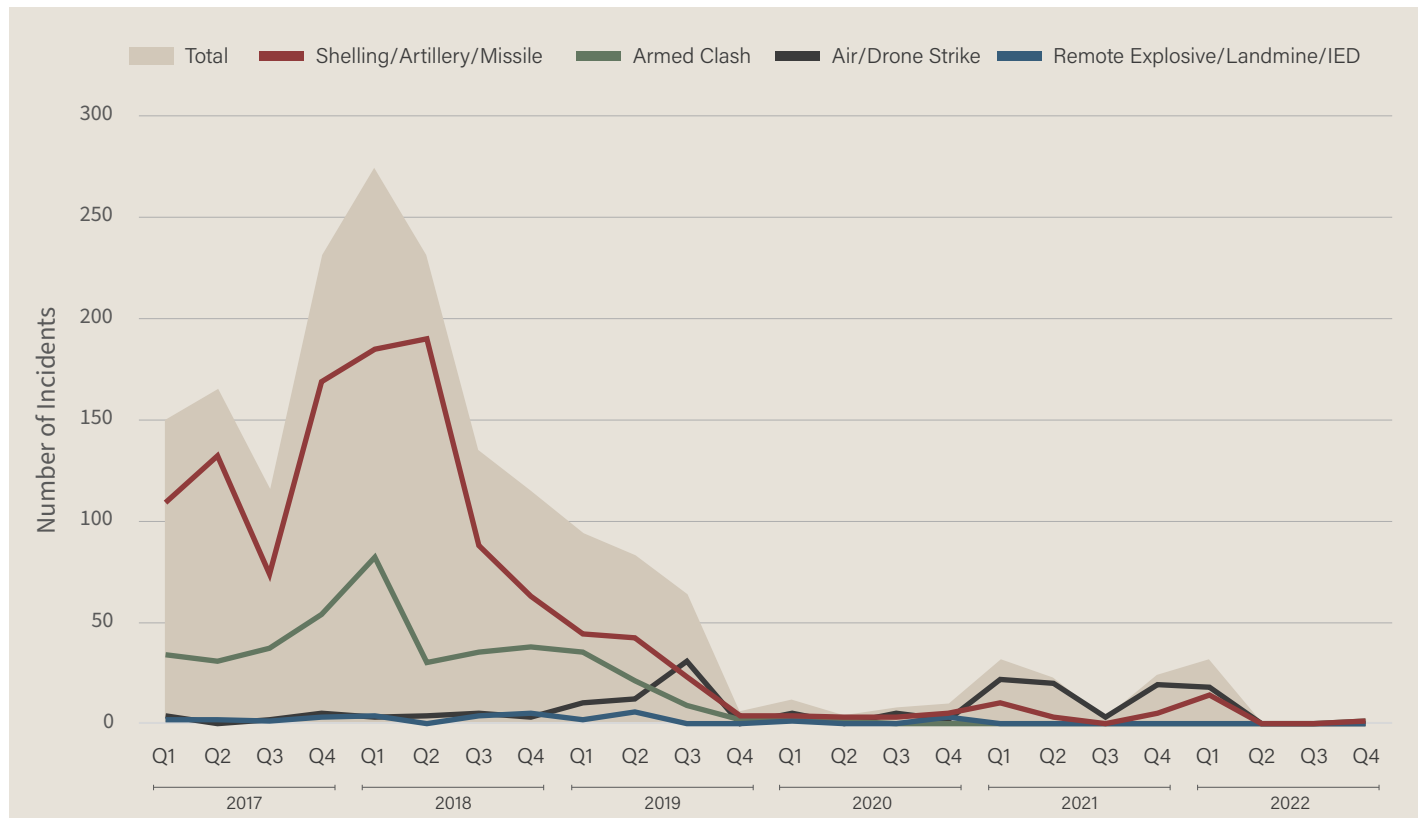
The other Salafi-jihadist group in Yemen is the local Islamic State franchise, which has almost ceased to exist as a terrorist force. Never a particularly capable group, it has faded into obscurity following its decision to directly confront AQAP on the battlefield in late 2018. It has only claimed a single attack since 2020, a suicide bombing of a Houthi convoy in July 2022, a claim of questionable authenticity.[82] It controls no significant territory, is currently leaderless, and consists of approximately 250 fighters.[83] Even assuming that the group intends to conduct attacks outside of Yemen—which is difficult to ascertain, given the group's lack of leadership and propaganda activity—its ability to do so is minimal.

Yemen is also home to several non-state armed groups not designated as terrorist organizations by the United States or United Nations.[84] Of these, Ansar Allah (better known as the Houthi movement) poses the greatest threat to civilians and regional interests. The group is stronger than most regional terrorist groups and operates less as an insurgency than as the de facto government for much of Yemen. Even so, it has been involved in more incidents of violence against civilians in Yemen during the past five years than any armed group in the country and has demonstrated the greatest ability to both conquer territory and conduct attacks abroad. The Houthis have conducted missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and maintain ties to the IRGC, although Iran regularly denies links between its security forces and the Houthi movement.

A multitude of evidence indicates a connection between Iran and the Houthis. Media outlets have reported meetings between Iranian officials discussing aid to the Houthis; the United States government has repeatedly stated that it has information that establishes the material links between Iran and the Houthis; and an Iranian general later said to be retired told an IRGC-affiliated news agency that the IRGC had instructed the group to strike Saudi targets.[85] Iranian military personnel and Lebanese Hezbollah members are also currently embedded in the Houthi command structure, according to research by a set of U.S. and Yemeni analysts.[86] Technology appearing to be of Iranian origin has also been found in Houthi weapons, including those used in attacks on Saudi Arabia.[87] The result is that the Houthi threat is influenced by the capabilities and intentions of Iran, although the Houthis are not under the direct command of Iran and have their own capabilities and interests.

Violent Incidents Involving the Houthi Movement in Saudi Arabia, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.
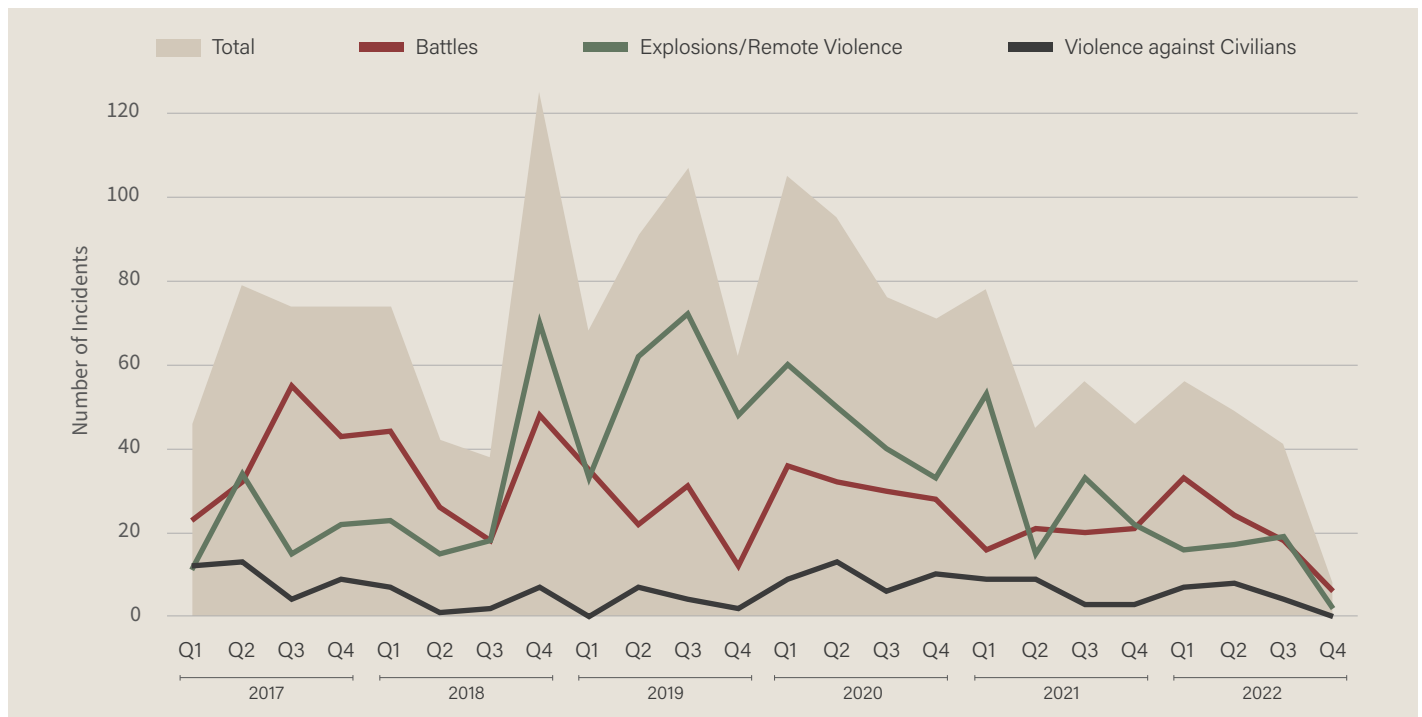
Iran

Iran's main role in the international terrorist ecosystem is as an enabler of terrorist groups. Iran maintains a large network of proxy forces across the Middle East, many of which engage in terrorist attacks.[88] Non-state armed groups associated with Iran have conducted attacks on U.S. embassies and bases in the Middle East over the past several years.[89] The Trump administration alleged that Iran provided approximately $700 million to Lebanese Hezbollah and $100 million to various Palestinian groups each year.[90] The groups Iran supports pose a direct threat to Israeli citizens and to U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria, as shown by the events of October 2023. They also consistently threaten to increase regional instability, having been involved in several civil and international wars.

Iran's involvement in Hamas's October 2023 attacks is unknown. U.S. intelligence suggested that Iranian leaders were surprised by the attack, while the Wall Street Journal reported that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards-Quds

Force was directly involved in planning.[91] However, the attacks drew on the long-term support Iran has granted to the group.[92] In the wake of the attacks, Tehran seems to by trying to walk a very fine line supporting its long-time proxy without prompting a direct conflict with Israel and the United States. Iran has benefitting from the attacks, but supporting Hamas against the Israeli response holds major risks.[93] Iran's support for non-state groups is a strategy for avoiding conventional war, not precipitating it. Tehran will probably continue trying to balance its support for non-state groups against its hesitance to be pulled into a wider conventional conflict in the region.

Decreases in violence observed since 2017 in Iraq and Saudi Arabia are driven by different trends. The first is the result of the territorial defeat of the Islamic State and the calcification of the Syrian conflict between 2014 and 2019. The second is the result of shifts in the pattern of conflict between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, the decrease in attacks likely has to do with the lack of desirable targets—suggesting that Iran's Iraqi proxies

Figure 6.13

Violent Incidents Involving ABM in Egypt by Event Type, 2017–2022

Source: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Project," ACLED.

remain at least as capable as they were in past years or that Iran could once again return them to that level of military capacity. In Saudi Arabia, the decrease in attacks is the result of a declining supply of Iranian missiles, increasing diplomatic engagement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, and the improving capabilities of Saudi air defenses.

Iran's main proxies in Iraq operate under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a collection of militias integrated into the official state security apparatus, including Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, and the Badr Organization.[94] All of the groups pose a threat to the United States within the region. They are capable of conducting attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities, which allows Iran to frustrate U.S. efforts in the region without sparking a direct military confrontation between the two states. For example, Kataib Hezbollah openly displays Iranian-made armaments in its propaganda and has praised attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq.[95] Iran-affiliated militias have continued to strike U.S. forces in Syria in 2023.[96] There is little reason to believe that the threat will recede absent a significant change in Iran-U.S. relations.

Iran's support for terrorist groups goes beyond its use of Shia proxy militias to include its enabling of al Qaeda. Iran is currently home to Saif al-Adl, a leading figure in al Qaeda and a candidate for the group's leadership since the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri.[97] The relationship between Iran and al Qaeda has been a long one, and al-Adl has been a central figure in that relationship.[98] The nature of Iran's influence over the group is uncertain, as is almost everything about al Qaeda's leadership after al-Zawahiri's death. The relationship will likely influence the threat posed by the al Qaeda core itself as its strategy and capabilities develop following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which will merit monitoring and exploration in the coming years.

Egypt

Terrorism in Egypt has been declining for the past two years. The main terrorist group in the country is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM)—an Islamic State affiliate active in the Sinai Peninsula—although the group is in decline. Most violence associated with ABM is confined to the North Sinai Governorate, although the group declared its intent to conduct operations farther south in 2019.[99]

Since then, it has claimed several attacks closer to the Suez Canal and launched a small number of attacks against Egypt's armed forces, but it has not yet realized its threat to attack the tourist-heavy areas in the peninsula's south.[100] ABM has conducted several attacks that demonstrate local offensive capability but has not conducted attacks east of the Suez Canal since 2018. In 2022, it conducted raids on military outposts and sabotaged a pipeline. Although it has conducted attacks further afield in the past, including an attack on a civilian airliner in 2015, the group's activities appear to have been successfully contained in recent years.

The United Nations attributes the reduction in violence to Egyptian military pressure, investment in public works, and efforts to address grievances among the Sinai's Bedouin communities, although other analysts point to the Islamic State's alienation of local tribal groups instead.[101] The consensus view is that the Bedouin groups in the northern Sinai represent the most important factor for Egyptian terrorism in the Islamic State era. If ABM regains these groups' support, it will once again pose more than a highly local threat. But if the government wins over the tribes, the ABM's decline will continue and solidify.

Conclusion

As is the case with most other regions, the terrorist threat in the Middle East stands in a moment of transition. In Israel and Palestine, Hamas' October 7 attacks have sparked a conflagration of violence. Even before the attacks, political instability—the ongoing turmoil in Israeli politics and the looming leadership transition in the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Fatah—had changed the relationship between security and terrorist actors as violence related to terrorism steadily increased. Israel's relationship with Hezbollah carries similar risks of escalation, albeit with far lower probability of prolonged violence. Israel and Hezbollah demonstrate continued capability and desire to de-escalate crises, although external pressures may prevent their doing so in the wake of October 7.

The uncertainty is lower in Iraq and Syria, where the terrorist threat will probably continue to decrease as the counterterrorist coalition maintains pressure and the war in Syria continues along its current lines. The threat of an Islamic State resurgence will persist as the Islamic State continues to operate and seeks a window of opportunity to reemerge despite the obstacles its faces. The United

States remains committed to the region in order to minimize this possibility, which exposes it to the threat of attack by Iran's terrorist proxies and endangers its relationship with Turkey.

The terrorist threat in the Persian Gulf has been dominated for almost a decade by violence emanating from Yemen and driven by competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The sudden shift in the bilateral relationship in early 2023 has the potential to end that war and remake the terrorist threat in the wider region.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

By delving into each area of the globe individually, this report has sought to present a guide to the major regional and local terrorism challenges today. Beyond the regional scope, however, it draws out three main trends that U.S. and allied policymakers should consider as they balance counterterrorism activities with concerns about the myriad of other current international security challenges, not least of which is competition with major state adversaries such as China.

Overall, in contrast to the two decades following the 9/11 attacks, the international terrorist threat to the United States is not imminent. Instead, the Salafi-jihadist threat is relatively contained, with groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State and their affiliates primarily posing a regional threat—particularly in Afghanistan, East and West Africa, and Iraq and Syria. Even the groups that have demonstrated the will to attack the United States and other Western nations are largely in a regrouping phase, with their primary ability to orchestrate external

operations relying on inspired individuals abroad.

Meanwhile, the danger to Western nations from what have traditionally been considered domestic threats—from violent far-right and far-left extremists—has grown in recent years, particularly from white supremacists and anti-government extremists. Many of these individuals radicalize online as part of loose, informal ideological movements rather than within formal, hierarchical groups. Their ideologies increasingly spread through conspiracy theories, disinformation and propaganda, manifestos, and live streams of attacks.

State-linked terrorist threats also persist, primarily linked to Iran and Russia. Iran primarily acts through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, which works closely with non-state partners such as the Houthis and Hezbollah. Iran's reach extends beyond its own region, including a strong presence in places such as Latin America and the ability to orchestrate assassinations,

bombings, and other attacks across continents. Russia has been linked to several forms of international terrorist activity and is likely to continue to rely on this type of irregular activity as a component of its own strategy for state competition.

In addition to identifying current global trends in the terrorism landscape, it is important to forecast potential future drivers of terrorist violence. While there is a significant amount of uncertainty in such analysis—especially given the methodological limitations to understanding the terrorism landscape in key locations such as Afghanistan—CSIS proposes four potential drivers of near- to medium-term terrorist threats to the United States. Based on cross-regional emerging trends, CSIS researchers expect the following factors to further complicate and shape the terrorism threat environment in next one to five years:

1. Unchecked transnational spread of violent far-right ideologies, particularly white supremacism, anti-government extremism, and violent misogyny, will increase radicalization and the potential for far-right terrorist attacks. Far-right extremist violence currently poses the most significant threat in the United States and in many of its closest Western allies. Without the ability to limit the spread of disinformation and extremist materials, particularly on digital platforms and as endorsed—intentionally or not—by high-profile political or media figures, this threat is likely to continue to multiply globally. Adversaries such as Russia are likely to continue to exploit this weakness, including to provoke attacks against the United States and its allies based on political divisions and conspiracy theories. Containing the problem will be further complicated by the division and inconsistencies of legal authorities for responding to extremist threats domestically and internationally.

2. Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations with the will to strike U.S. targets will seek to build the capabilities necessary to conduct such attacks, particularly against in-region facilities such as embassies and military bases. While Salafi-jihadist groups do not currently appear able to lead external operations against Western targets beyond inspiring individuals in the West to take up arms, this could change rapidly, particularly in places such as Afghanistan with highly motivated actors, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province and a dearth of intelligence collection capabilities.

3. Blending of extremist ideologies, such as in response to climate change and other national and international crises, including political polarization, mass migration, and global health emergencies will make it harder for authorities to monitor the extremist threat and counter extremist narratives. Recent years have seen an increase in extremists cherry-picking components of different political ideologies to create unusual new combinations of motives. This includes crossover between traditionally far-right and far-left views, such as the case of ecofascists responding to the threat of climate change. As major international threats continue or grow, extremist segments of the population are likely to become more reactionary and less bound by traditional ideological boundaries.

4. Increased terrorist access to and use of emerging technologies and innovation will make terrorists more capable and less predictable. Terrorists of all ideologies, particularly Salafi-jihadists and white nationalists, have long encouraged followers to carry out attacks using easily accessible weapons and tools, including firearms, vehicles, and improvised explosives that can be constructed at home. As emerging technologies and innovative uses for accessible technology expand, extremists will likely have a wider set of tactics from which to choose. This may include the growing use of drones, 3D-printed firearms or other weapons, and cyber capabilities.

Overall, the global terrorism threat environment is increasingly complex and diverse, but the outlook is not as bleak as it has been over the past 20 years. Although the threat of terrorism is unlikely to ever disappear, Salafi-jihadist groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State currently pose the lowest threat to the United States that they have in many years, and terrorist activity in many regions is either locally contained or trending downward. Nonetheless, policymakers must continue to proactively counter terrorist networks, particularly as the growing relevance of terrorism to state adversaries and the globalization of traditionally domestic violent extremist ideologies challenge the fundamental structure of U.S. counterterrorism infrastructure.

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Chapter 3

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