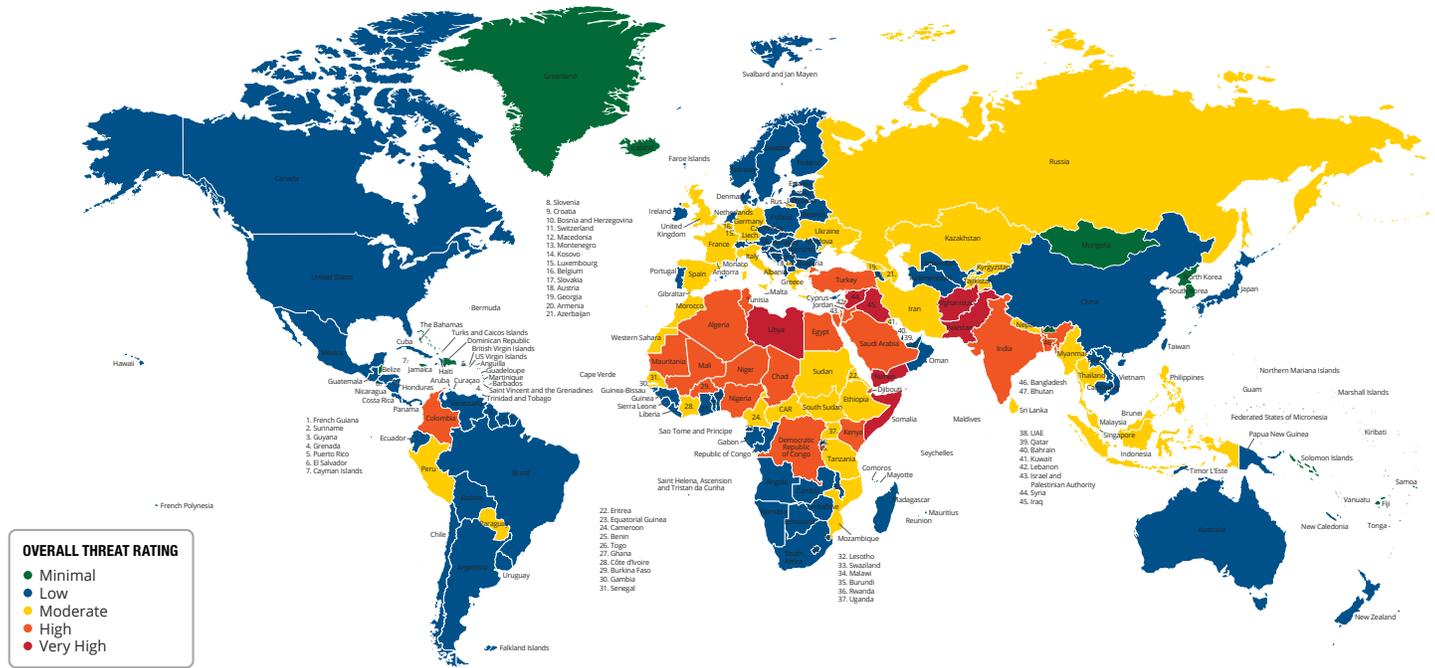


Global Terrorism Assessment Ratings



TERRORISM

The Evolving Nature of Terrorism in 2018

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The frequency of terrorist attacks in nonconflict areas across the globe will likely trend upward in 2018, though the number of fatalities resulting from political or ideologically motivated violence will likely plateau and may even decrease. This complex paradox will not only illustrate the burgeoning, but by no means permanent, gap between the intent and capability of active militant groups – notably Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State (IS), and their affiliates – but also reflect an increasingly apparent, politically motivated mischaracterization of violence and armed resistance. The threat that IS and AQ-linked groups pose will certainly persist, but global leaders will almost certainly try to spin the temporarily degraded capabilities of militants as a sort of absolute victory over "terrorism," while simultaneously exaggerating less potent threats to advance partisan agendas.

Key Judgments

- Tactical setbacks and the loss of territory in active conflict zones will force militant groups to divert from "seize and hold" strategies to lower profile guerrilla campaigns, effectively hindering propaganda efforts and forcing groups to rely increasingly on autonomous sympathizers to remain relevant in global headlines.
- The potential uptick in terrorist attacks in nonconflict areas in 2018 will not necessarily lead to an increase in civilian casualties, as militant groups are likely to revert increasingly to a decentralized structure largely dependent on networks of motivated, but less-capable, sympathizers.
- The potential uptick in terrorist attacks will also likely be partially attributed to the increased politicization of the term "terrorism" itself, and may reflect a deliberate effort by global leaders to shape a narrative by mischaracterizing nonstate actor violence to advance partisan agendas.

Shifting Global Strategy

Groups like IS and AQ have suffered tactical setbacks in recent years, forcing them to revise their strategy aimed at carving out a global caliphate, but by no means will their form of militancy be eradicated in 2018. While it will be some time before militant groups can replicate what IS achieved in

Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, the underlying factors – such as government corruption, rampant sectarianism, exploitation of resources, the persecution of minority communities, and controversial foreign policies of powerful states and their proxies – that spawn this type of militancy and allow it to flourish will persist. War-torn pockets across the Muslim world will remain somewhat permissive operating environments for IS and AQ affiliates in 2018, and a noticeable increase in cooperation between the two groups in some of these areas is very likely. However, mounting international pressure in these remaining vestiges spread across the Levant, North Africa, the Greater Sahel, and Central and Southeast Asia, will force militants to shift their strategy from one that is dependent on controlling large areas of terrain to a series of low-profile guerrilla campaigns.

Motivation vs. Capability

This significant loss of territory and reversion to guerrilla tactics will force IS and AQ affiliates to rely increasingly on networks of decentralized supporters to sustain any kind of visible momentum through 2018. Therefore, to maintain relevancy in the headlines, militant groups will turn to motivated, but inexperienced, sympathizers to launch attacks throughout "Dar al Kufar," or the "Land of Disbelievers," a term used, though not exclusively, by IS and AQ to describe parts of the world that do not subscribe to a specific interpretation of Islam. Decentralized sympathizers will almost certainly attempt sophisticated attacks, but their efforts will be hampered by a noticeable lack of resources and capabilities, meaning the use of vehicular attacks, stabbings, and extremely rudimentary explosives will persist. The effectiveness of many of these attacks will also be significantly buffered by the ever-increasing capabilities of security and intelligence services and a growing general awareness of this threat, which is already manifesting as hyper-vigilance and a rise in nationalist sentiment, particularly within communities that have been shielded from or only recently exposed to this sort of violence.

Second-order Effects

Despite degraded capabilities, militant groups can still greatly benefit from decentralized sympathizers executing attacks on their behalf, even if only in the form of rudimentary assaults. Beyond simply sowing fear, this sort of violence can trigger a public backlash that divides entire communities. The "lone-wolf" paradigm often used to describe this sort of threat affords governments the opportunity to explain away security breaches and intelligence failures, and potentially assuage fears, but it is misleading. "Self-radicalization" is almost certainly a fallacy, but so is the narrative that peddles the opposite extreme. Unfortunately, however, the public outcry that inevitably follows a wave of militant violence targeting civilians too often results in the wholesale demonization of an entire group – often already-marginalized minorities. This kind of polarization is a boon to militant groups who will almost certainly seek to exploit the rifts by identifying potential avenues to expand their intelligence, operational, and recruiting networks.

Political Spin

While the threat of "terrorism" is certainly real, governments, corporate-owned media outlets, and fear-peddlers trying to shape a narrative easily manipulate the word, and this trend will continue in 2018. But any surge in violence committed by nonstate actors in 2018 must be kept in perspective, as global terrorism data can be very misleading if not closely scrutinized. The parameters of what constitutes a terrorist attack seem to shift yearly, and 2018 will be no exception. From a purely academic standpoint, "terrorism" is little more than a description of certain tactics. However, because there is no universally applied definition of the term, terrorism is an easily politicized concept, and is often used by power-brokers to describe insurgencies, rebellion, and even resistance.

Conclusion

Despite their inability to execute complex attacks, decentralized sympathizers inspired by, or acting directly on behalf of, a global militant campaign can still serve that group's grand strategy. The tendency of governments to determine incidents to be terrorist in nature is likely to increase in 2018 due to lack of consensus on the definition of the act. An incident or group's claim of responsibility (whether accurate or not) as a means of furthering a political agenda, public perception of an event as being terrorism-related, and the ability to socialize an incident through rapid multimedia platforms on a global scale before it can be fully investigated further complicate the terrorism quandary. More frequent militant attacks will be a result of the aforementioned smaller "campaigns," improved organization of coordinated cells, and a reliance on rudimentary weapons and tactics. To combat this threat, authorities will need to continue to increase the sophistication of counterterrorism methods, eliminate public complacency, and better understand the wide variety of motivations for militant attacks.