

# Global Terrorism Index 2020: the shifting landscape of terrorism

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## Measuring the impact of terrorism

Measuring the impact of a phenomenon as complex as terrorism is challenging. However, without the ability to gauge levels and trends, it's difficult to have an informed discussion of the shifting landscapes of terrorism. The 2020 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), now in its eighth year, was designed to provide just that kind of base measure. This article provides a comprehensive summary of the key global trends and patterns in terrorism and places a special emphasis on trends since 2014, which corresponds with the start of the fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The GTI is produced by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and other sources. Data for the GTD is collected and collated by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. The GTD contains more than 170,000 terrorist incidents for the period from 1970 to 2019.

The GTI ranks 163 countries based on four indicators weighted over five years. A country's annual GTI score is based on a unique scoring system to account for the relative impact of terrorist incidents in the year. Four factors are counted in each country's yearly score:

- the total number of terrorist incidents
- the total number of fatalities caused by terrorism
- the total number of injuries caused by terrorism
- the approximate level of total property damage from terrorist incidents.

Each of the factors is weighted differently, and a five-year weighted average is applied to reflect the lingering psychological and cultural impact of terrorist acts over time. By generating and synthesising new information on evolving trends in terrorism at the national and global levels, IEP hopes to inform a positive, practical debate about the future of terrorism and the required policy responses.

## Global trends

The past five years have seen a large decrease in terrorism across the globe. Deaths from terrorism declined steadily, from more than 33,000 in 2014 to just under 14,000 in 2019—a 59% reduction. The largest decreases occurred in Iraq and Syria, while deaths in Nigeria fluctuated over time. The winding down of the Syrian civil war, the territorial defeat of ISIL and increased counterterrorism coordination at both state and international levels have all played a role in reducing the impact of terrorism around the world.

In the West, terrorist attacks and deaths from terrorism peaked slightly after the global peak of incidents in 2015, when 340 attacks were recorded, and deaths peaked in 2016 when 233 people died in terrorist attacks. Although the impact of radical jihadist terrorism has subsided in the West, there's been a rise in the level of politically motivated terrorism. The number of deaths from politically motivated terrorism in the West has increased significantly over the past five years, rising from 13 deaths in 2014 to 90 deaths in 2019.

The impact of terrorism lessened in seven of IEP's nine global regions in 2019. This matches the trend for the world as a whole, which has recorded a consistent decline in terror-related deaths and incidents. The largest improvement occurred in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for the second consecutive year. South Asia had the largest deterioration, followed by Central America and the Caribbean. The deterioration in South Asia was predominantly caused by the large increase in deaths in Sri Lanka as a result of the Easter Sunday bombings, which killed more than 266 people and injured at least 500.

Although the MENA region has recorded the highest number of deaths from terrorism since 2002 (more than 96,000 deaths in total), the region has recorded a substantial decline in the past three years. Deaths in MENA have fallen by 87% since peaking at 13,800 in 2016, reaching the lowest level since 2003. More recently, terrorist activity has been concentrated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, both of which recorded more terrorism deaths than MENA in 2018 and 2019. Collectively, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounted for over 80% of all terrorism deaths in 2019 (6,583 and 4,635 deaths, respectively).

## Terrorism in 2019

The total number of deaths from terrorism declined for the fifth consecutive year in 2019, falling by 15% compared to 2018, to 13,826 deaths. The fall in terrorism deaths wasn't restricted to a single region: the MENA, Russia and Eurasia, South America and South Asia regions all recorded falls in deaths from terrorism of at least 20% from 2018 to 2019.

Deaths from terrorism fell in 46 countries, and Afghanistan recorded the largest year-on-year reduction. Since the peak of violence in 2018, deaths from terrorism in Afghanistan have fallen by 1,654, or over 22% in a year. This was driven by a decline in terrorism deaths attributed to the Taliban and the Khorasan Chapter of Islamic State; 1,111 and 494 fewer deaths were attributed to each group, respectively. The Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State has faced significant territorial losses in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces following attacks by coalition and Taliban

forces. Despite the fall in terrorism deaths, 2019 was the second deadliest year on record after 2018, and Afghanistan remains the country most affected by terrorism, as measured by the 2020 GTI.

Countering the overall fall in terrorism deaths, several sub-Saharan African countries recorded significant rises in terrorism deaths in 2019. Burkina Faso recorded the largest increase; the number of people killed in terror attacks rose from 86 in 2018 to 593 in 2019. Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali all recorded an additional 100 terrorism deaths from 2018. Much of the increase in terrorist activity can be attributed to the proliferation of jihadist groups throughout the region, including newly established ISIL provinces and affiliates as well as groups aligned with al-Qaeda. In particular, Burkina Faso and Mali have seen a sharp increase in terrorism deaths attributed to Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin, which is an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, along with other extremist groups and militias that appear to be gaining influence in the Sahel region by exploiting existing ethnic tensions.<sup>1</sup>

## The global expansion of ISIL

While ISIL has been severely weakened, it hasn't been eliminated. Instead, the group's global provinces and affiliates have become increasingly deadly in some countries, indicating the strength of ISIL's global brand of terrorism beyond Iraq and Syria—and that's been in parallel with a collapse in the number of deaths attributable to the ISIL core in Iraq and Syria as a result of the group's territorial defeat (from a peak of more than 8,907 in 2016 to some 611 in 2019).

Deaths attributed to ISIL provinces and affiliates peaked in 2015 at 3,769 and have since fallen to 1,784 in 2019—a fall of more than 2,000 deaths in four years. Although ISIL-related terrorism as a whole has begun to decrease in the past few years, ISIL-related deaths are still 36% higher than in 2013, when the group first emerged. With the proliferation of ISIL provinces and affiliates around the world, and the concurrent demise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, provinces and affiliates now record more terrorism deaths a year. In 2019, ISIL provinces and affiliates accounted for 74% of 2,396 ISIL-related terrorism deaths.

Since their first emergence in 2013, ISIL-related groups and individuals have mounted more than 3,000 attacks in 48 countries, other than Iraq and Syria, and caused over 12,000 fatalities. The number of countries experiencing ISIL-related attacks each year has steadily increased from two in 2013 to 27 in 2019, including Mozambique and Sri Lanka, which recorded ISIL-related attacks for the first time. Countries such as Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Niger have all recorded sharp rises in terrorist attacks with the emergence of several new ISIL provinces and affiliates (the Central Africa Province of the Islamic State and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), and the expansion of existing groups, namely the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), into neighbouring countries.

The emergence of new ISIL provinces and affiliates and the problems of the ISIL core have led to a regional shift in which ISIL-related terrorist activity is now concentrated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. By 2019, ISIL-related terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 41% of the total, or 982 deaths, while South Asia accounted for 25% of the total, with 596 fatalities.

In sub-Saharan Africa, ISIL-related terrorism has predominantly been driven by ISWAP, which has been the deadliest ISIL province since it emerged in 2015. Formally a part of Boko Haram, the group pledged allegiance to ISIL and was accepted as a regional province in March 2015, when it subsequently renamed itself ISWAP.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, a dispute over the leadership of ISWAP resulted in the emergence of two factions of the group; while one faction continued to operate as ISWAP, the other faction reverted to the use of Boko Haram's formal name, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad.<sup>3</sup>

In South Asia, the increasing trend of ISIL-related deaths was driven by the Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State. The group was responsible for 3,134 terrorism deaths between 2015 and 2019, or 89% of the region's ISIL-related deaths. Of the 596 ISIL-related terrorism deaths in South Asia in 2019, more than half were attributed to the Khorasan Chapter in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. The remaining deaths were the result of the deadliest terror attack of the year when eight coordinated suicide bombings were conducted across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. The bombings, which killed more than 266 people, were allegedly carried out by National Thowheeth Jama'ath, a previously unknown group that pledged allegiance to former ISIL-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>4</sup>

## Far-right terrorism and political violence

There's also been a sharp increase in far-right terrorism in the West, concurrent with the rise of populism, civil unrest and political violence more generally. This increase has been the focus of intense political and media scrutiny, particularly after a number of high-profile attacks in 2019. In March 2019, a lone gunman attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring a further 49. Five months later in El Paso, Texas, another lone gunman shot and killed 23 people and injured 23. In total, 89 of the 108 deaths from terrorism in the West in 2019 were inflicted by far-right extremists.

Far-right terrorism has also been growing as a proportion of total terrorism in the West. Between 2002 and 2014, far-right incidents never accounted for more than 14% of total attacks in the West, or no more than 16 attacks in a year. However, that number grew to 40% in 2015, to 55 attacks out of 139, and had risen to 46% by 2019 to 49 far-right incidents recorded out of 108 attacks.

The US recorded the highest number of deaths from far-right terrorism, or 113 deaths since 2002. Norway had the second highest number of deaths at 78, of which 77 occurred in a single day when Anders Behring Breivik carried out the 2011 Norway attacks. New Zealand had the third highest number of deaths with 51, all of which occurred during the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. The US is the only country in the West to have experienced multiple attacks resulting in more than 10 deaths; three such attacks have occurred since 2002.

Much of the discourse about far-right terrorism, and extremism more generally, has focused on the threat that far-right groups pose to civil society. However, most far-right terrorist attacks are carried out by 'lone-wolf' actors who aren't affiliated with a specific terrorist group or far-right organisation, even if they may have had contact with other far-right individuals or been inspired by other far-right attacks. This shift from affiliated to unaffiliated terrorism and online rather than in person radicalisation has also been seen across most other forms of ideologically driven terrorism in the West.

The prevalence of unaffiliated far-right terrorism is even higher when looking at terrorist attacks that result in at least one death. From 2002 to 2019, there were 52 far-right attacks that resulted in at least one fatality. Of those, only seven were attributed to a specific group, while all the attacks that occurred in the past decade were classified as unaffiliated.

This doesn't mean that far-right terrorists have no contact with extremist organisations, or that the radicalisation of far-right individuals occurs entirely in isolation. Contact with like-minded individuals can be a significant factor in the radicalisation process and has traditionally been a strong predictor of whether a person will engage in violence.

## Conclusion

Terrorism and violent extremism co-evolve with political, technological and social changes. The GTI provides a comparable metric to conduct analysis and observe trends. Understanding these shifting landscapes allows PVE, CVE and CT policymakers to:

- focus attention on what's increasing
- investigate how recruitment strategies are evolving
- discuss areas of actions.

## Notes

- 1 Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country reports on terrorism 2019*, Department of State, US Government, 2020, [online](#).
- 2 Australian Government, 'Islamic State West Africa Province', *Australian National Security*, no date, [online](#).
- 3 Australian Government, 'Islamic State West Africa Province'.
- 4 Thomas Joscelyn, 'Terrorists in Sri Lanka swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 23 April 2019, [online](#).