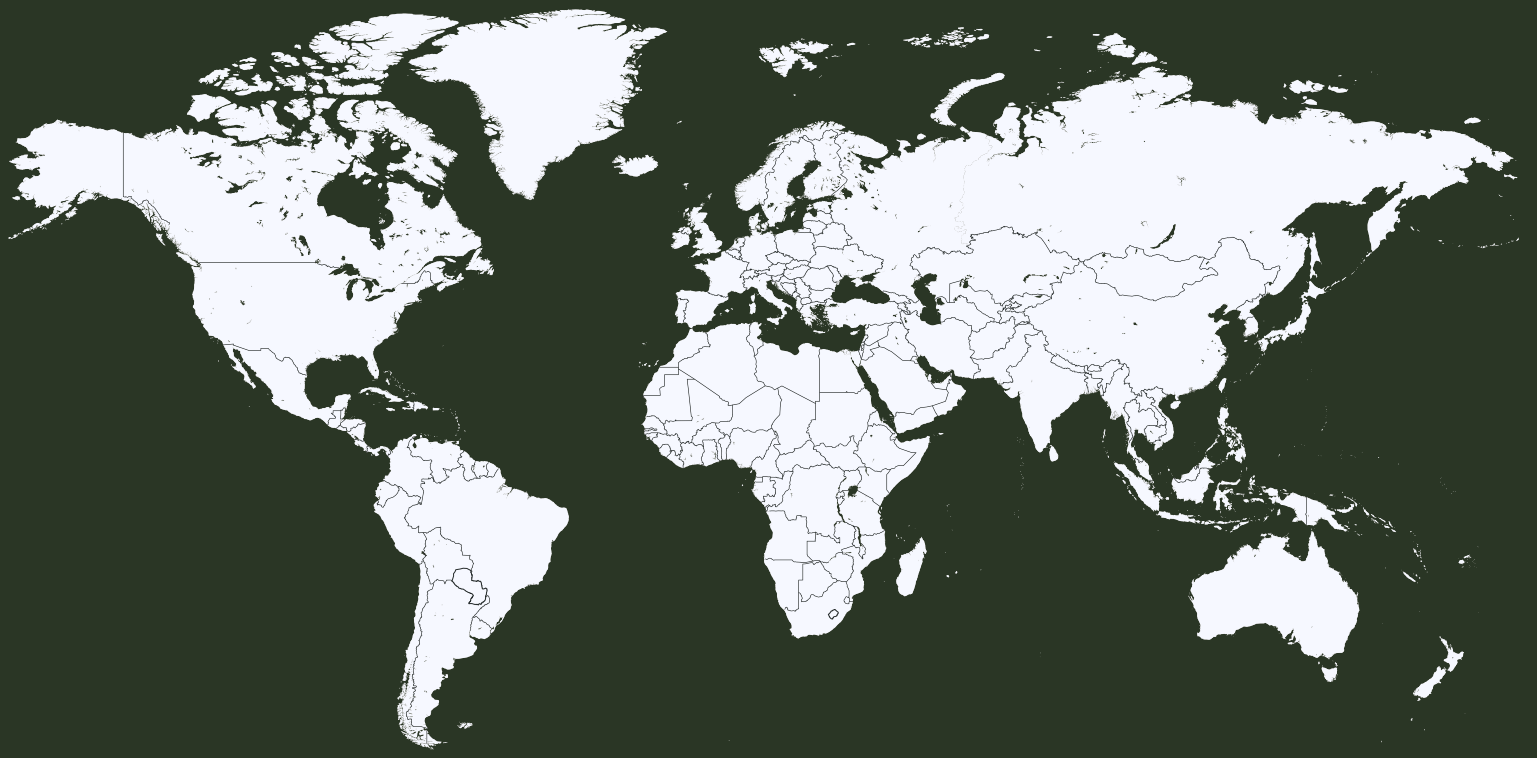

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Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025

AUTHORS

Alexander Palmer
Riley McCabe
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List of Abbreviations

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
Al Shabaab	Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
AUSSOM	African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FAMa	Malian armed forces
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
ISIS	Islamic State
ISKP	Islamic State–Khorasan Province
IS-M	Islamic State–Mozambique
IS-Somalia	Islamic State–Somalia Province
ISSP	Islamic State–Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State–West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
PA	Palestinian Authority
SADC	Rwandan and Southern African Development Community
UAS	Unmanned aerial system

Contents

Executive Summary

Terrorism remains a threat to U.S. citizens, assets, and interests despite the national security community's decreasing focus on counterterrorism. However, the threat is lower than in previous eras when organized transnational terrorist groups conducted mass-casualty attacks against U.S. targets across the world—most spectacularly on September 11, 2001.

In 2025, domestic terrorism represents a greater threat to the United States than do international terrorist organizations. Most domestic terrorist attacks in the United States are carried out by lone actors or small groups who believe in a wide range of ideologies, the most significant being white supremacy. Since 2020, white supremacist terrorists have been responsible for most terrorist attacks and fatalities in the United States, making that ideology the greatest terrorist threat to U.S. citizens. Partisan extremists represent a similar level of terrorist threat, although their focus on government targets means that they pose more of a threat to political stability than they do to the average American. Salafi-jihadist attacks, while in decline since the territorial collapse of the Islamic State, pose a resilient threat in the United States, as demonstrated by the Bourbon Street attack in New Orleans on January 1, 2025. All three movements merit particular law enforcement attention.

In the Middle East, the Al Qaeda core, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Islamic State remain committed to conducting attacks against U.S. interests, including the U.S. homeland. Though the groups have been weakened by years of military pressure, they have proven resilient. With the notable exception of the Islamic State's main affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, their international activities have been limited to inspiring attacks by like-minded individuals rather than sending operatives to conduct attacks overseas. The groups merit continued military, intelligence, and law enforcement pressure to prevent them from resurging as a major international threat.

The Middle East remains in a moment of enormous uncertainty. Iran's terrorist allies—the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Hamas—have all survived their confrontations with Israel. Although they have been degraded to different degrees, with Hamas and Hezbollah bearing the brunt of Israel's opposition, all maintain control over territory and are already rebuilding their capabilities. The Houthis are a relatively new concern for the United States, and they have attacked shipping and U.S. Navy vessels in the region. The intentions of all three groups may also change, with new leaders bringing new priorities and strategies that will affect the threat they pose to Israel, the United States, and the region. Meanwhile, former Al Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has seized power in Damascus, ushering in a new era in Syria. Although it has formally renounced Al Qaeda, the group's true intentions are murky and its ability to bring stability to the country unknown. Finally, Al Qaeda retains a presence in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, where its core leadership retains a safe haven.

Africa remains the most active theater for Salafi-jihadist organizations, but the continent's groups are mostly tertiary priorities for the United States. The main exception is East Africa's Al Shabaab, which is likely to grow stronger in 2025 while retaining its intent to attack the United States. The Islamic State-Somalia Province also seeks to target the United States, although its size means it poses only an indirect threat—financing terrorist operations by other affiliates rather than training its own attackers. These groups merit a multidimensional East Africa strategy aimed at containing their threats, particularly that of Al Shabaab.

West Africa's Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates threaten the region's political stability, which undermines U.S. interests on the continent, but pose only a latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets due to their apparent lack of intent to directly attack the U.S. homeland or core U.S. allies. Al Qaeda's affiliate in the Sahel poses an especially significant threat as political stability in the region continues to decline. These groups primarily merit an intelligence response as well as continued counterterrorism cooperation with area governments. The United States can invest in warning analysis that seeks not to roll back these groups through military action but rather minimize the risk of catastrophic surprise by focusing analytic energy on watching for telltale changes in their activities that indicate that an attack might emerge from the region.

Despite an overall decrease in the threat of domestic and international terrorism in recent years, the United States cannot completely eliminate the risk of terrorist violence. In the United States, lone actors and small extremist networks are difficult to disrupt. They can and will continue to conduct lethal attacks against targets in the United States for the foreseeable future. In the Middle East, a shift away from prioritizing counterterrorism over other policy goals will result in a degree of outsourcing of U.S. counterterrorism policy to actors that may not share U.S. priorities, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey. In Africa, refraining from efforts to roll back West Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups means accepting the long-term risk that they will overthrow one or more governments in the region and establish a statelet like that operated by the Islamic State in the Middle East.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this assessment is to help U.S. national security policymakers, intelligence and law enforcement professionals, and military decisionmakers prioritize among different terrorist threats. Counterterrorism currently competes with other government priorities—for example, the United States' growing rivalry with China, the war in Ukraine, and the dangers of drug cartels—in a way it did not in the 20 years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As attention paid to terrorism decreases, the likelihood of surprise attacks goes up. At times, such as on 9/11, massive attacks seem to come out of the blue. In other cases, such as the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, a known terrorist actor uses violence on a scale it heretofore had avoided. In still other cases, such as partisan extremism in the United States, the threat receives insufficient attention from policymakers despite the danger it poses.

A prioritization list helps with providing warning against such surprises. Warning intelligence is a specialized discipline aimed at regularly reviewing developments in key areas in order to avoid unpleasant surprises such as terrorist attacks, military offensives, or coups d'etat that affect U.S. interests.[1] Strategic warning cannot be assumed to emerge as a byproduct from normal intelligence gathering and analysis processes.[2] A warning function must be intentionally built, staffed, and resourced, which in turn requires prioritizing where those functions will be built and how much resourcing they should be given.

A classification of priorities also suggests where the United States can accept risk. This report assumes that terrorism is a secondary national security priority for the United States relative to the threats from state competitors such as China.[3] This assumption entails a need to prioritize both between and within theaters, which means accepting risk.[4] Accordingly, this report seeks to identify the terrorist groups or movements that pose relatively little threat to the United States and can therefore be deprioritized with greater confidence.

Methodology

Definitions

This report defines terrorism as the deliberate use or threat of violence by nonstate actors to achieve political goals by creating a broad psychological impact. This does not include hate speech or hate crimes. Nor does it include violent crime, including what is now sometimes called narcoterrorism.[5] Criminal organizations may use violence to create a broad psychological impact, but they seek to achieve personal or economic goals rather than political ones and, as such, those actions are not considered terrorism for the purpose of this analysis.[6]

Many of the terrorist groups addressed in this study are engaged in civil wars or insurgencies. This fact makes it difficult to distinguish between terrorism (violence aimed at creating political change through broad psychological impact) and other violence perpetrated as part of a civil war, which frequently involves killing civilians for other reasons.[7] In most cases, this report does not attempt to draw a clear distinction, assuming that groups responsible for greater insurgent violence can also conduct greater terrorist attacks within the group's area of operations.

Terrorism in the United States today primarily stems from loose networks of ideologically aligned individuals and lone actors rather than structured organizations or formal groups. Therefore, the analysis in this study of domestic terrorism in the United States does not use terrorist groups as the main unit of analysis, unlike other chapters of the larger report. Instead, it assesses four terrorist movements in the United States according to their core ideology. These ideologies were selected due to their prevalence in recent years as measured by the number of terrorist incidents and victim fatalities attackers motivated by them caused.

This report assesses the threat associated with terrorist groups. It conceives of threat as being a function of a terrorist group's intent to conduct attacks against a target group and the terrorist group's capability to do so.[8] Intent is the desire or willingness to perpetrate violence against a particular group.[9] Capability is the combination of resources and competencies required to conduct terrorist attacks. A highly capable group that intends to conduct attacks against U.S. individuals and assets is more threatening than a highly capable group that does not intend to conduct such attacks.

Data Gathering

The methods used in this assessment are primarily qualitative, although quantitative data provided inputs into categorical judgements. The main method was that of structured, focused comparison in which researchers used a standardized list of questions and indicators to gather and compare data.[10] Researchers constructed profiles of terrorist groups or movements, which were then used to compare the intent and capability of the assessed groups.

Indicators of intent included a group's rhetoric, stated goals, ideology, and recent history of significant attacks or plots.[11] Domestic terrorist movements varied most significantly by whether they intended to conduct mass-casualty attacks or targeted assassinations that advanced certain policy priorities and undermined political stability. All international terrorist groups had extremely revisionist intentions within their areas of operation but varied dramatically in their level of hostility toward and intent to conduct attacks against the United States.

Indicators of how capable a group is included the number of people killed or injured in a single attack, having conducted targeted attacks against specific individuals rather than random ones, having conducted attacks on hard targets, having conducted coordinated attacks, group size, possession of specific armaments, demonstrated possession of specific skills like advanced-explosive making, significant financial resources, control over territory or access to a safe haven, access to state support, hierarchical command and control, links with other terrorist groups, types of attacks conducted or attempted, number of attacks conducted in a given time period, and geographical coverage of attacks.[12]

Key data sources for this report were terrorist propaganda, historical assessments by other experts—especially those drawing on sources not available to the general public—media reports of attacks and plots, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a dataset of U.S. terrorist attacks compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and a provisional version of the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset including attacks through November 2024 generously provided to the research team by the scholar Peter Nesser.

Synthesis and Categorization

Following qualitative and quantitative research on the groups of interest using the above data sources and indicators, groups were organized into categories derived inductively.[13] In the case of international terrorist organizations, a four-category framework emerged. In the case of domestic terrorist movements, three types of groups came into view.

All domestic terrorist movements in the United States are relatively weak, consisting of loosely connected, ideologically sympathetic individuals rather than formally organized extremist groups. These movements vary in size, as approximated by the number of attacks committed. As of 2025, attacks in the United States typically have involved a small group or lone actor using easily accessible weapons to enact violence.

Analysis reveals three main types of large terrorist movements in the United States. The first is distinguished by a willingness and capability to conduct mass-casualty attacks. These movements are committed to conducting relatively indiscriminate attacks in public locations, such as mass shootings and vehicle attacks, which are likely to continue in the coming years and remain difficult to disrupt.

The second is distinguished by a willingness to conduct more targeted violence against U.S. political and government personnel, which poses a threat to U.S. political stability. These movements are likely to attempt attacks against U.S. politicians, political staff, and government personnel in the coming years.

The final category is distinguished by a declining capability to conduct attacks and a decreasing commitment to ideological goals, which make serious violence from these movements relatively unlikely.

Analysis of terrorist groups in the Middle East and Africa revealed four different group types (Table 1.1). The first is the *direct threat*, consisting of highly capable organizations that have demonstrated an intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. If left unchecked, these groups are likely to attempt an attack against U.S. interests in the coming years and perhaps strike the U.S. homeland.

The second is the *indirect threat*, reflecting relatively low-capability organizations that have demonstrated an intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. These groups still aim to conduct attacks against any U.S. military and diplomatic personnel in their areas of operation and seek to inspire or facilitate attacks by like-minded individuals or groups in the United States and Europe.

The third is the *latent threat*, highly capable organizations that have not demonstrated a recent intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets as their primary targets, though they may have done so in the past or may have killed U.S. citizens present in other countries when conducting an attack. These groups, though unlikely to conduct direct attacks against U.S. interests in the coming few years, indirectly threaten U.S. personnel because they have the strength to threaten regional stability, often in important parts of the world.

The fourth is the *minor threat*, comprising relatively low-capability organizations that have not demonstrated an intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. The risk of an attack against vital U.S. interests by one of these groups is low, and the likelihood that one of these groups seriously undermines the stability of the regional state system is similarly low.

Limitations

No framework can accurately and precisely reflect the diversity of real-world terrorist organizations. The pre-9/11 Al Qaeda core conducted major attacks against the United States in Africa, the Middle East, and the homeland with

Table 1.1

Simplified Framework for Categorizing International Terrorist Groups

CAPABILITY	INTENT: Demonstrated	INTENT: Not Demonstrated
High	Direct threat	Latent threat
Low	Indirect threat	Minor threat

far fewer personnel and less funding than today's most powerful groups, for example, although it benefitted from state sponsorship due to its relationship with the Afghan Taliban. Such unique qualities of terrorist organizations are discussed in the relevant chapters of this report.

Measuring intent is difficult and controversial, whether for states or nonstate groups like terrorist organizations.[14] There is no expert consensus on what indicators are appropriate for assessing terrorist intent, and the covert nature of terrorist organizations makes observing specific intentions extremely difficult.[15] Estimating the capabilities of nonstate groups also poses unique problems for analysts. Terrorist capabilities are far less amenable to counting and tracking than are states' military capabilities: One cannot exhaustively catalog the location of all terrorists to assess a threat the way one can for North Korean missile batteries or Iranian submarines.[16] Both of these limitations introduce significant uncertainty that can only be reduced with more granular research on priority groups, including using sources not available to the open-source analytic community.

Due to resource constraints, the report was unable to cover every single terrorist group or movement that might theoretically pose a threat to the United States. It does not assess any groups in the Indo-Pacific or Europe, assuming the primacy in those regions of state threats in military, intelligence, and policy planning. In addition, terrorist violence in both regions has declined both absolutely and as a share of global terrorism.[17] In addition, groups or movements that could not reasonably be assumed to pose some sort of threat were excluded from analysis in the Africa, Middle East, and United States chapters. The report also excludes foreign groups whose goals are entirely local and have never been involved in external operations, like Israeli settlers and Cameroon's Ambazonian separatists, even though their local activities have indirect implications for the United States. These limitations mean that uncertainty regarding the terrorist threats from these regions or groups is high, although the threat is probably low.

The report also does not assess the threat to Europe. Although attacks and plots in Europe are frequently discussed, they are used as indicators of a group's intent and capability to conduct external operations. Assessing the threat to the United States requires understanding (in most cases) a group's desire and capability to conduct attacks against targets on a different continent. Terrorist attacks, plots, and propaganda targeting Europe provide important data to assess intentions and capabilities for attacks against the United States, but European officials and analysts will likely assess the threat posed by various groups differently.

Structure

The report consists of three regional assessments of the threat from terrorist groups and movements in the United States, the Middle East (including Afghanistan), and Africa. Each chapter begins with an introduction that briefly outlines its findings, proceeds to assessments of key groups, continues to a discussion of trends for policymakers to watch in 2025, and ends with a description of implications for policy: how the analysis suggests policymakers should prioritize and what risks they should accept. The report concludes with a brief discussion of lessons for global-level policymaking drawn from cross-cutting themes identified in the three chapters.

Chapter 2

The United States

Introduction

This chapter assesses four domestic terrorist movements in the United States according to their core ideology: white supremacy, partisan extremism, Salafi-jihadism, and anti-government extremism.[1] The overall analysis suggests that domestic terrorism poses a real but limited threat in the United States. Partisan extremism and white supremacy represent the greatest threats among the four movements due to their relatively high rate of terrorist attacks, plots, fatalities, and political impact. Salafi-jihadism, while in decline, continues to pose a resilient terrorist threat in the United States. Anti-government extremism, which was historically a major driver of U.S. domestic terrorism, is responsible for a decreasing share of terrorist incidents.

Terrorism is significantly less prevalent in the United States compared with other parts of the world, particularly those examined in other chapters of this report. Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States has experienced 16 terrorist attacks and 13 victim fatalities on average each year.[2] In 2024, the United States experienced 15 terrorist attacks and 5 victim fatalities, although the attack in New Orleans on January 1, 2025, which killed 14 victims, is a stark reminder of the ongoing threat. To put that in a larger context, in the last year with complete data, approximately 41,000 people died in motor vehicle accidents, more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses, and nearly 50,000 people died of suicide in the United States.[3]

The United States boasts strong preventative measures that limit terrorism, including advanced intelligence capabilities, well-resourced law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and strong counterterrorism laws. These measures have successfully limited, though not completely halted, the impact of foreign terrorist organizations and the growth of homegrown domestic terrorists for several decades. The United States also experiences

many conditions that limit the formation and spread of terrorism, such as robust political institutions, limited ethno-religious divisions, geographical distance from active conflict zones, border security, and economic opportunity for citizens. Although terrorism remains a concern for the United States, its overall prevalence and impact is significantly mitigated by these factors.

Because terrorism in the United States is most commonly carried out by individuals or small groups of actors radicalized in private, it is difficult to assess when, where, and what types of future threats are most likely or will be most significant. This chapter relies on U.S. terrorism data compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies to assess recent trends and possible futures.[4] However, while data can highlight patterns and provide insights into the most likely sources of future threats, these patterns cannot always anticipate the unpredictable behavior of lone actors, who conduct the majority of terrorist attacks in the United States. Moreover, the relatively low number of terrorist attacks and fatalities in the United States makes the impact of single events far more prominent. These exceptions underscore the inherent challenges of forecasting terrorism in the United States.

This chapter begins with an overall assessment of the domestic terrorist threat in the United States. It proceeds to spotlight the terrorist threats posed by white supremacists, partisan extremists, and Salafi-jihadists. It then discusses key trends for U.S. policymakers and intelligence and law enforcement agencies to watch in 2025 and concludes with recommendations for U.S. domestic counterterrorism policy.

Threat Assessment

Comparative Assessment

All domestic terrorist movements in the United States lack significant capabilities to carry out attacks due to a combination of structural, operational, and external factors.[5] Unlike many foreign terrorist organizations with centralized leadership, funding, and training infrastructures, most domestic terrorist actors operate as loosely affiliated networks or as lone individuals, limiting their ability to plan and execute complex operations.[6] In addition, U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies have developed robust counterterrorism measures, particularly since 9/11, that disrupt plots and largely deter large-scale attack planning.[7] Moreover, legal restrictions, such as controls on explosives and surveillance of known extremist networks, further constrain terrorist operational capacity. Social and technological factors, including reliance on online radicalization, often result in isolated actors lacking the resources, expertise, or coordination needed for high-casualty events. Combined, these dynamics help ensure that, while the threat of terrorism remains, the capacity of U.S.-based terrorist movements to execute sophisticated attacks is significantly diminished.

In contrast to the years after 9/11, the greatest terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland in 2025 comes from domestic extremists rather than foreign Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations (Table 2.1). Salafi-jihadism continues to inspire a small but resilient community of extremists in the United States to conduct occasional mass-casualty attacks. The 2025 New Year's Day terrorist attack in New Orleans, the deadliest Salafi-jihadist attack in the United States in the previous eight years, highlights the resilience of the Salafi-jihadist movement in the country, but overall trends suggest it is not resurgent. The number of terrorist attacks and plots coordinated or inspired by Salafi-jihadist groups have declined since the Islamic State's territorial defeat in 2019, while incidents involving homegrown extremists motivated by a range of other ideologies are on the rise.[8]

"In contrast to the years after 9/11, the greatest terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland in 2025 comes from domestic extremists rather than foreign Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations."

The most significant of these rising ideologies is white supremacy. White supremacist terrorism involves acts of violence motivated by the belief in the superiority of white people and the perceived need to maintain or strengthen racial hierarchies. Since 2020, white supremacy has motivated more terrorist attacks and plots and killed more people in the United States than any other terrorist ideology. The increase in white supremacist terrorist activity over the past decade should make it one of the highest U.S. counterterrorism priorities for policymakers and intelligence and law enforcement agencies.[9] Like nearly all terrorists in the United States, white supremacist terrorists have limited capabilities to conduct sophisticated attacks. However, because white supremacist terrorists' grievances often reflect mainstream political and cultural debates—such as those around immigration, racial equity,

Table 2.1

Comparative Assessment of U.S. Terrorist Movements

NAME	CAPABILITY	INTENT	THREAT ASSESSMENT
White Supremacy	Extremist movement consisting of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Intimidate, eliminate, or subjugate perceived racial and ethnic enemies to maintain or strengthen racial hierarchies	Resilient threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against soft targets and critical infrastructure
Partisan Extremism	Extremist movement consisting of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Intimidate or eliminate perceived political opponents	Growing threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against hard and soft targets
Anti-Government Extremism	Extremist movement consisting of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Undermine, overthrow, or violently resist government authority and eliminate or intimidate public servants	Declining threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against hard and soft targets
Salafi-Jihadism	Extremist movement consisting of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Terrorize civilians, punish perceived enemies of Islam, or alter U.S. policy in the Middle East	Resilient threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against soft targets

and social and economic change—their violence often deepens societal polarization and generates significant political impact, even when the casualty counts are low.[10]

Partisan extremism represents a similar level of terrorist threat to white supremacy, although the former's focus on government targets means that partisan extremists pose more of a threat to political stability than to the average U.S. citizen. Partisan terrorism includes attacks motivated by partisan political beliefs, typically directed at government targets—including government representatives, workers, and leaders—based on political affiliation. Partisan extremism is the fastest-growing ideology motivating terrorist attacks and plots in the United States. Between 2016 and 2024, there were a total of 25 domestic terrorist attacks and plots against government targets motivated by partisan extremism, compared to a total of just two such incidents in the more than two preceding decades. Terrorists motivated by partisan extremism have attacked targets on both sides of the political aisle. They do not reflect broader political movements in the United States and often hold a mix of competing or even contradictory beliefs that cannot be neatly categorized along traditional political lines.[11] Like most terrorism in the United States, attacks motivated by partisan political beliefs are almost always unsophisticated and involve an individual or small group of extremists taking violent action using easily accessible resources. Despite their limited capabilities, the importance of their targets, including political leaders, makes them capable of significant impact.

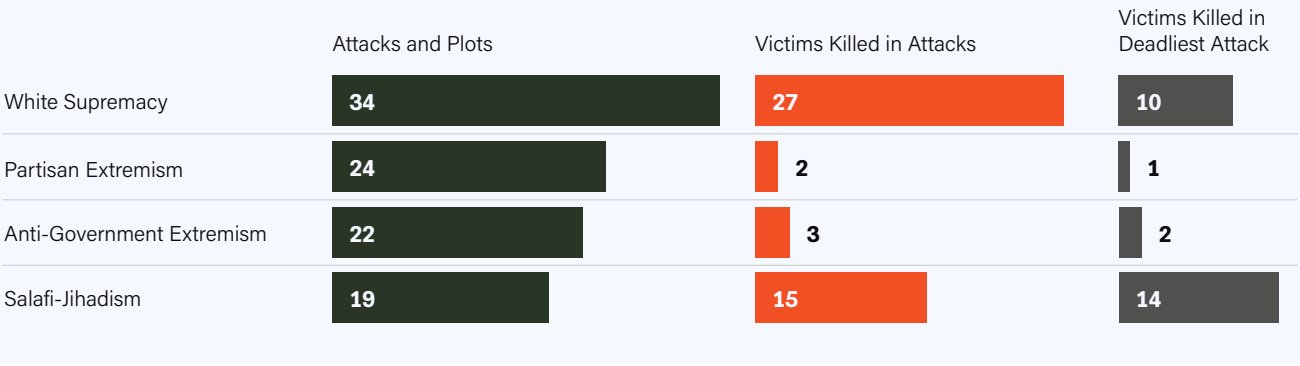
Finally, anti-government extremism has declined as a motivating force for domestic terrorists. In the 1990s, most terrorist attacks and plots against government targets in the United States were inspired by general opposition to federal authority.[12] This wave of attacks was spearheaded by the broader U.S. militia movement, which emerged as a reaction to perceived government overreach and was fueled by concerns about gun control, taxes, regulations, and a growing mistrust of the federal government.[13] However, the number of general anti-government terrorist incidents has declined since 2020, in part replaced by the rise of partisan terrorism.

Threat Spotlight: White Supremacy

White supremacist terrorists in the United States exhibit an intent to kill U.S. civilians and damage critical infrastructure. Since 2020, 34 terrorist attacks or plots in the United States have been motivated by white supremacist beliefs, more than any other ideology in that period (Figure 2.1). Furthermore, these attacks have killed more victims than attacks motivated by any other ideology. This combination of frequency and lethality makes white

Figure 2.1

Terrorist Incidents and Victim Fatalities in the United States by Ideology, January 1, 2020–January 1, 2025



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

supremacist terrorism the most significant terrorist threat in the United States today. This finding aligns with recent assessments from the United States government.[14]

In 2024, the United States experienced only three white supremacist terrorist incidents, none of which resulted in fatalities, marking a decline in both the number of incidents and associated deaths compared to previous years. However, this decline is probably primarily attributable to random variation, as demonstrated by the annual fluctuations in the number of incidents and fatalities each year over the past decade, as shown in Figure 2.2. While certain trends in white supremacist terrorism can be linked to specific world events—such as the spike in incidents in 2020 that occurred in direct response to the Black Lives Matter movement—other changes in the number of incidents lack clear external drivers. The decline in the number of white supremacist terrorist incidents and fatalities in 2024 is therefore more likely a reflection of the inherent unpredictability of individual or small-group actions rather than a meaningful shift in the broader threat landscape.

"Since 2020, 34 terrorist attacks or plots in the United States have been motivated by white supremacist beliefs, more than any other ideology in that period."

In fact, the four deadliest years of white supremacist terrorism in the last 30 years have all been in the last decade, revealing a trend toward greater lethality. The deadliest white supremacist attacks involved a lone-actor terrorist using firearms to conduct a shooting at a store or business, such as the 2023 Jacksonville Dollar General shooting, where a gunman motivated by racist hatred killed three Black victims before taking his own life, and the 2022 Buffalo supermarket shooting, where a perpetrator inspired by white supremacy targeted a predominantly Black community, killing 10 people.[15]

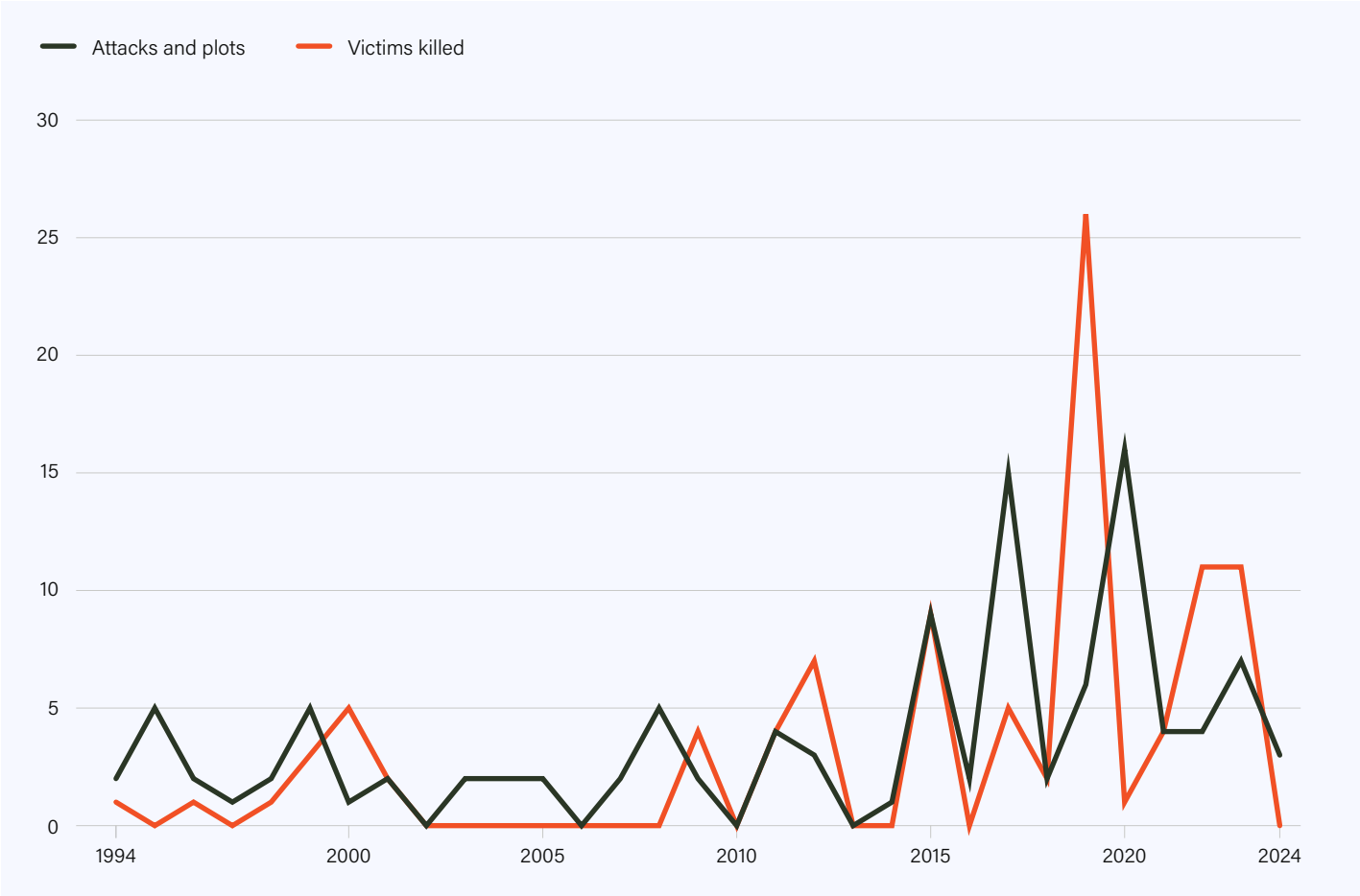
White supremacist terrorist attacks are as deadly as Salafi-jihadist attacks and far deadlier than partisan extremist or anti-government extremist attacks because their ideology encourages mass casualty events and attacks on soft targets. White supremacist terrorists primarily target private individuals, typically people belonging to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Of the 34 white supremacist terrorist incidents in the last five years, 12 have been directed at private individuals, followed by 8 at demonstrators, 6 at transportation and infrastructure targets, and 5 at religious institutions. White supremacist terrorists also commonly target busy public spaces with the intent to instill fear through large-scale violence. The capacity and intent for lone-actor white supremacist terrorists to access weapons and conduct an attack at a public location remains a significant threat in 2025.

Threat Spotlight: Partisan Extremism

Partisan extremist terrorists in the United States exhibit an intent to kill and intimidate government targets, including

Figure 2.2

Incidents and Victim Fatalities Caused by White Supremacist Terrorism in the United States, 1994–2024



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

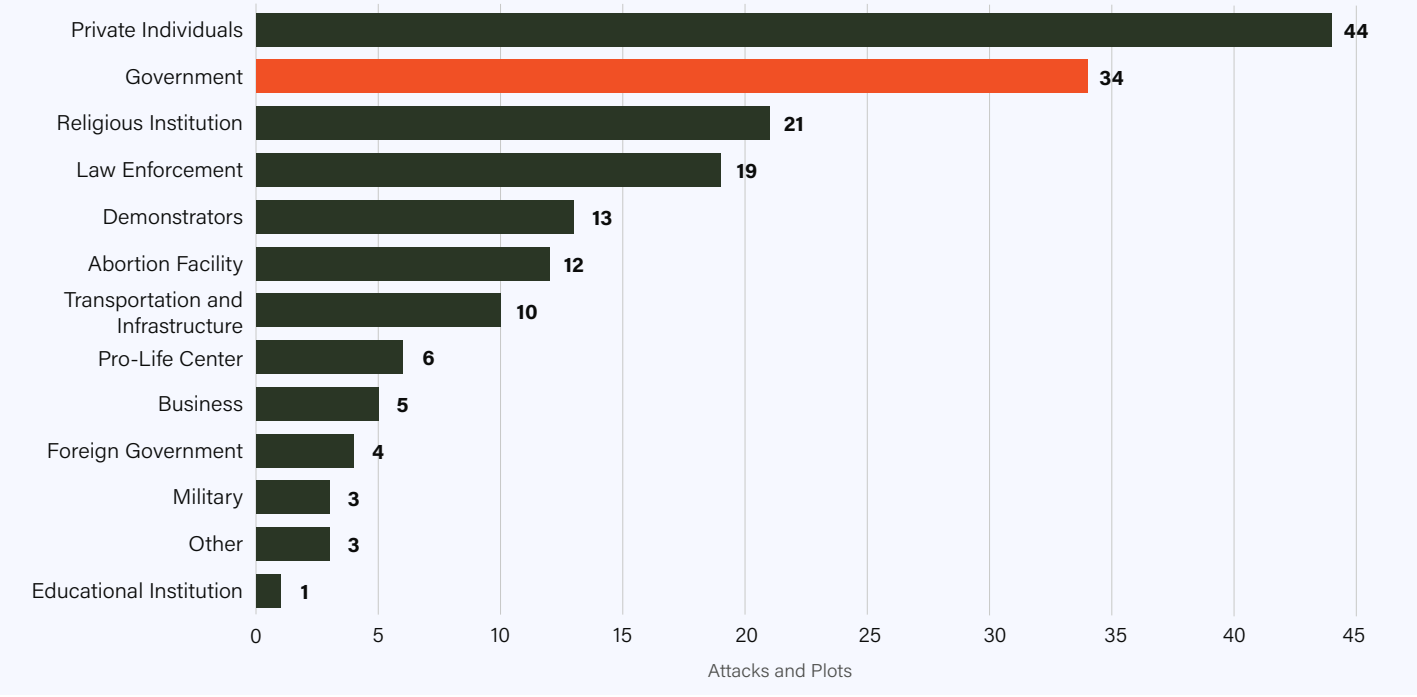
government workers, elected officials, political candidates, and political staff. Since 2020, 34 terrorist attacks and plots in the United States have been directed at government targets, the second-most frequent target of terrorism in that period (Figure 2.3). Government targets include government employees and political figures—excluding military and law enforcement personnel—in their private residences, public areas, or any other locations if they were targeted because of their work or role in the government.

The number of terrorist attacks against government targets in the United States has been at elevated levels since 2016 (Figure 2.4). The current increased threat is driven by a dramatic rise in the number of perpetrators motivated by partisan political beliefs. From January 2016 to January 2025, there were a total of 25 domestic terrorist attacks and plots against government targets motivated by partisan political beliefs, compared to a total of just two such incidents in the more than two preceding decades.

Despite the recent increase in the number of terrorist attacks and plots motivated by partisan extremism, such incidents have resulted in very few deaths. Since 2016—when the rise in partisan extremist attacks began—only two victims have been killed in such incidents in the United States.[16] This phenomenon is probably attributable to three main factors. First, in the past 30 years, nearly 50 percent of all partisan extremist terrorist attacks have occurred at government buildings or political offices, which are often protected by physical fortifications and security personnel that limit the lethality of the attack. Second, partisan extremist terrorists are usually motivated by specific polit-

Figure 2.3

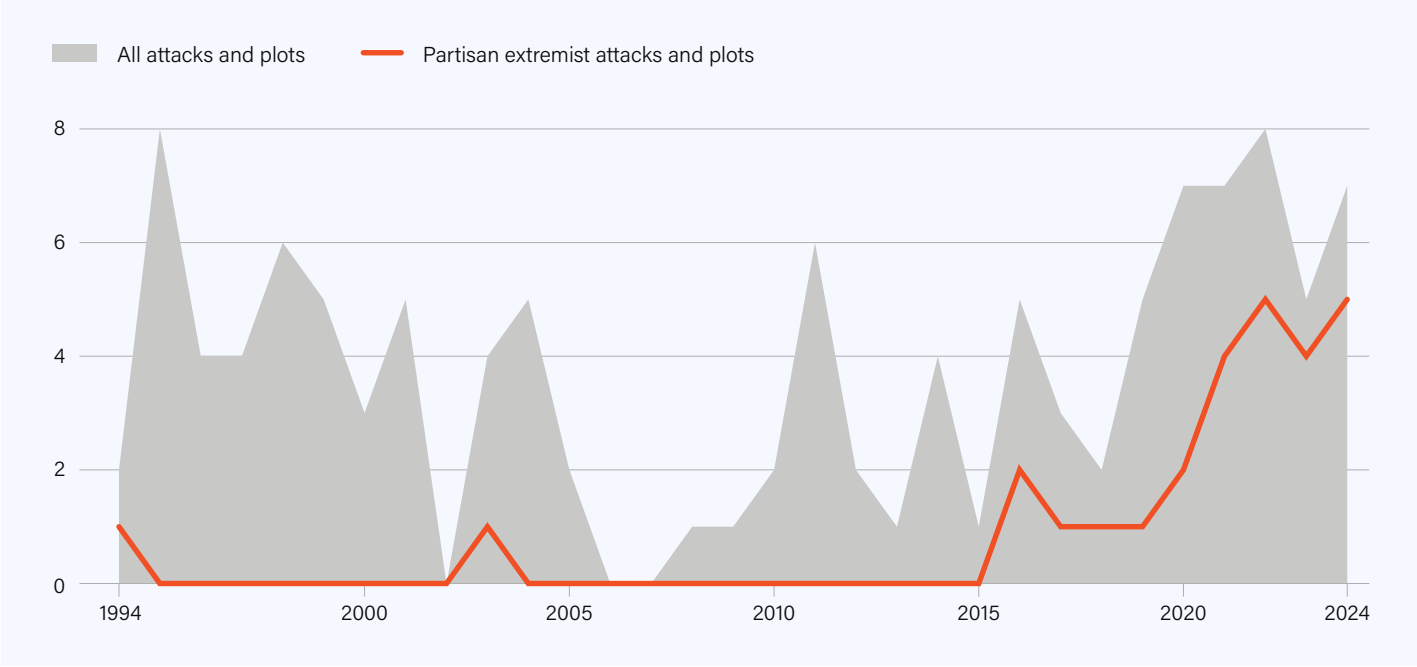
Targets of Terrorist Attacks and Plots in the United States, January 1, 2020–January 1, 2025



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

Figure 2.4

Terrorist Attacks and Plots Against Government Targets in the United States, 1994–2024



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

ical grievances, leading them to target only one or a small number of specific individuals rather than indiscriminately killing bystanders. Third, these perpetrators typically lack the weapons and tactical training necessary to maximize their impact, as is the case more broadly with many U.S. domestic terrorists.

Although partisan extremist terrorists have largely failed in their attempts to kill their targets in the past three decades, there have been several close calls that suggest a successful attack is possible. For example, the response of police officers during the 2017 shooting at a congressional baseball practice targeting Republican lawmakers undoubtedly saved many lives.[17] However, it was also to some extent a matter of luck that those shot at, including the four people wounded by gunfire, were not killed.[18]

Partisan extremist terrorist attacks have the potential to have significant political impact. Attacks targeting political leaders, elected officials, or government workers can have a direct and destabilizing impact on governance by removing key decisionmakers, disrupting government processes, and instilling fear among public servants. The assassination or attempted killing of politicians and other key government personnel can force leadership changes and alter policy direction. Such attacks also erode public confidence in government institutions. Even when attacks are unsuccessful, the broader chilling effect of partisan extremism can deter participation in democratic processes and discourage open political discourse.

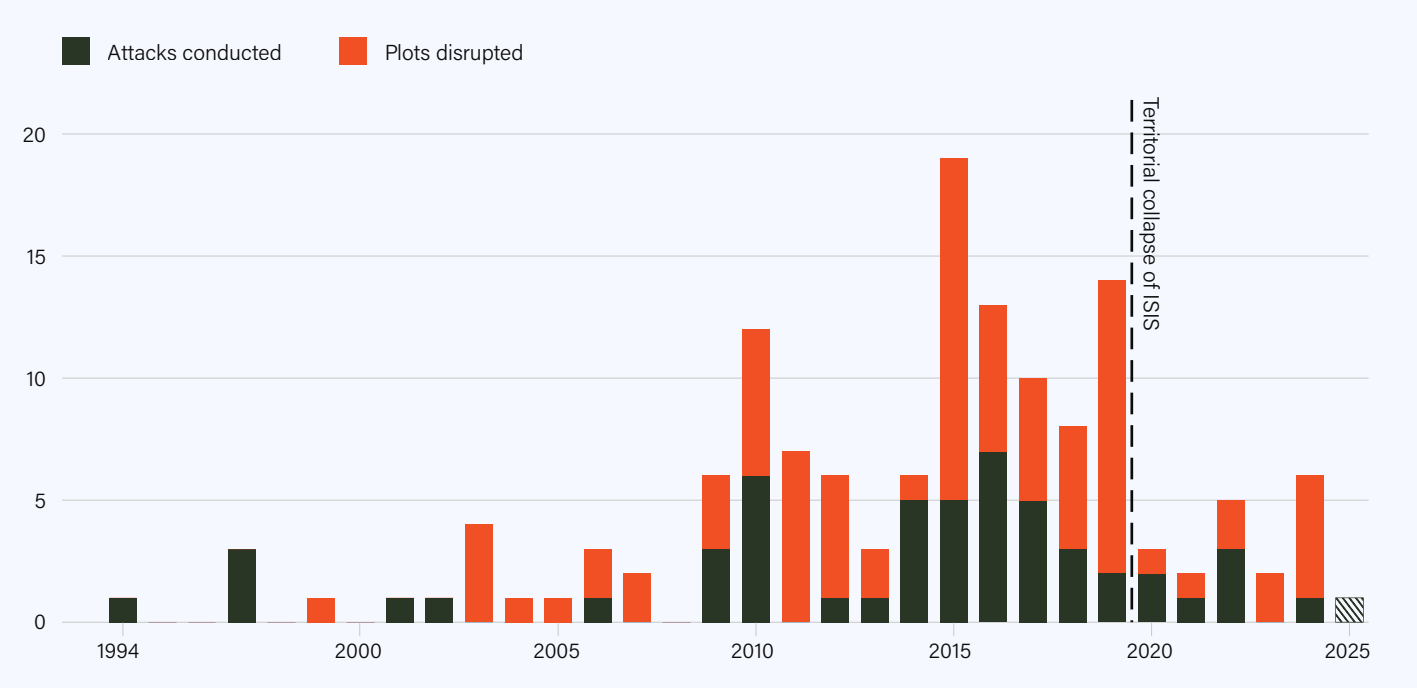
Threat Spotlight: Salafi-Jihadism

Salafi-jihadist terrorists in the United States still aspire to conduct mass-casualty attacks, often inspired by foreign terrorist organizations like the Islamic State. The terrorist attack in New Orleans on January 1, 2025, that killed 14 people is the deadliest Salafi-jihadist attack in the past eight years. As the Bourbon Street attack suggests, the Salafi-jihadist movement in the United States is resilient; however, it is not resurgent. The number of Salafi-jihadist attacks and plots against the United States decreased after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in 2019 and has remained much lower than at the peak of the Islamic State's territorial control (Figure 2.5). Between 2013 and 2019, Salafi-jihadists conducted 27 attacks and had 46 plots disrupted—an average of about 10 attacks or plots per year. Since 2020, 8 Salafi-jihadist attacks and 11 disrupted plots occurred—an average of about 4 attacks or plots per year.

The general decline of Salafi-jihadist attacks and plots in the United States is a complex phenomenon result-

Figure 2.5

Salafi-Jihadist Attacks and Plots in the United States, January 1, 1994–January 1, 2025



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset. Data for 2025 is partial.

ing from a variety of factors. Perhaps most important is that Salafi-jihadist mobilization in the United States appears closely tied to geopolitical events, and recent developments lack the impact of the 2014 declaration of an Islamic state.[19] While events like the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and Israel's war in Gaza held the potential to inspire attacks, no significant surge in plots or attacks has occurred in the United States. Similarly, the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in Africa has not generated the same level of mobilization as ISIS's prominence in Iraq and Syria once did.

Another key factor behind the recent decline in Salafi-jihadist attacks may be the loss of territory and influence by the Islamic State, which previously leveraged a "virtual facilitator" model to coordinate and inspire attacks remotely.[20] Since the collapse of ISIS's territorial control, the number of such facilitated plots have significantly decreased. Between 2013 and 2019, 13 attacks or plots in the United States involved virtual facilitation, compared to only 3 since the group's territorial defeat. The diminished frequency of these facilitated attacks is likely attributable to sustained U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Specifically, the killing or capturing of skilled facilitators has weakened ISIS's operational capacity, reducing their ability to connect with would-be attackers.

Another important factor is the low level of radicalization within the U.S. Muslim community, which has played a critical role in thwarting attacks. Cooperation with law enforcement, including community vigilance and reporting of suspicious activity, has been instrumental in disrupting plots.[21] Notably, the FBI's investigation of the 2016 Pulse nightclub attacker was initially prompted by concerns raised by Muslim community members.[22]

The lethality of Salafi-jihadist terrorism in the United States has also declined since the Islamic State's territorial defeat. Between 2013 and 2019, Salafi-jihadist attacks in the United States resulted in an average of 3.4 deaths per attack, whereas since 2020, the average has dropped to approximately 1.9 deaths per attack. The heightened lethality from 2013 to 2019 was likely fueled by the Islamic State's ability to inspire individuals abroad rather than from any increase in capability created by the Islamic State. The abstract nature of Salafi-jihadist goals, combined with the Islamic State's intent to punish its enemies, made Salafi-jihadist terrorists particularly focused on symbolic, mass-casualty attacks.[23] To them, violence is often viewed as an end in itself, and the Islamic State's apocalyptic vision amplified their willingness to pursue highly lethal operations.[24] From 2013 to 2019, these ideological motivations drove many of their deadliest attacks in the United States, including the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, where 49 victims were killed; the 2015 San Bernadino attack, where 14 victims were killed; and the 2017 New York City truck attack, where 8 people were killed.

The 2025 Bourbon Street attack is a stark reminder of the threat of Salafi-jihadist terrorism and the potential for a radicalized lone actor to cause significant harm. Nevertheless, the declining number of Salafi-jihadist terrorist incidents in the United States and their decreased lethality suggest that the threat is not resurgent in 2025.

Trends to Watch

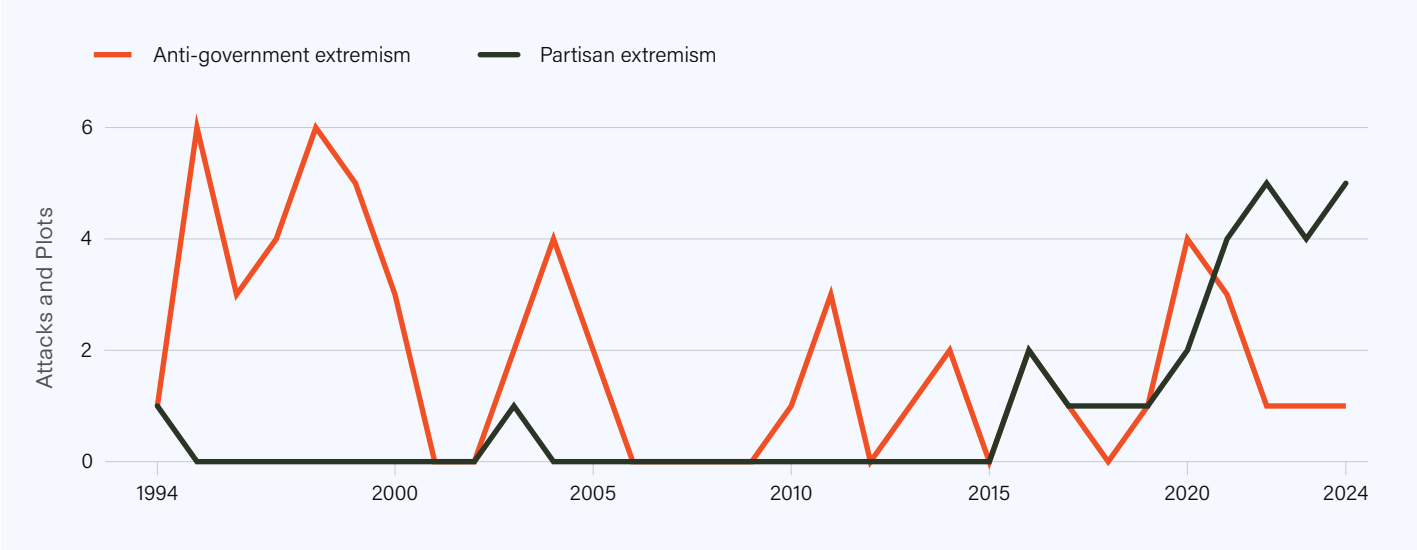
Partisan extremist terrorism is the fastest-growing terrorist threat in the United States.

The increase in attacks and plots against government targets in the United States motivated by partisan extremism represents an ongoing shift in U.S. domestic terrorism. Between 1994 and 2004, 74 percent of attacks and plots against government targets in the United States were inspired by general opposition to federal authority. This wave of attacks was the result of the broader U.S. militia movement. Since 2016, however, only 29 percent of attacks and plots against government targets were inspired by general opposition to federal authority, while a remarkable 51 percent were inspired by partisan political views (Figure 2.6).

This rise of terrorism directed at government targets in the United States motivated by partisan extremism is probably explained by several factors. Most significant is the rise of conspiracy theories surrounding U.S. elections. Although terrorist attacks and plots motivated by election conspiracy theories are typically concentrated around the time that elections take place, they also have occurred months or years later. For example, on October 28, 2022, more than a year and a half after the 2020 presidential election, David DePape broke into the San Francisco home of U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, seeking to hold her hostage, and attacked her husband. DePape was motivated by a mix of conspiracy theories, including that Nancy Pelosi and other Democrats were responsible for undermining the integrity of the 2020 presidential election.[25] The lack of major national elections in 2025 suggests that the threat of terrorist attacks

Figure 2.6

Terrorist Attacks and Plots Against Government Targets in the United States by Ideology, 1994–2024



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

and plots motivated by election conspiracy theories is lower than in 2024, but could revive in future years.

Increased levels of polarization and the mainstreaming of violent political rhetoric in general also contribute to the increase in terrorist attacks and plots motivated by partisan political beliefs. On September 15, 2024, Ryan Wesley Routh, a 58-year-old man originally from North Carolina who had recently resided in Hawaii, attempted to assassinate then-former President Donald Trump at the Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida. Armed with an SKS-style rifle, Routh concealed himself in the shrubbery near the golf course for approximately 12 hours before aiming his weapon through the fence line toward Trump, who was playing golf at the time.[26] Investigations revealed that Routh had a history of political activism. He claimed to have voted for Trump in 2016 but later became a vocal critic, expressing regret for his previous support.[27] In a 2023 self-published book, Routh invited foreign adversaries to assassinate Trump.[28] Routh's case is one of several that appear motivated by extreme political differences. The beginning of another Trump presidency is likely to sustain or increase high levels of political polarization in the United States, suggesting that terrorism motivated by extreme differences of political views remains likely in 2025.

White supremacist terrorists are turning their attention toward attacking energy infrastructure.

In addition to attacking soft targets with firearms, an increasing amount of white supremacist terrorism in the United States is directed at energy infrastructure. While there is a long history of extremist attacks on critical infrastructure in the United States, the rise in the number of plots motivated by white supremacist beliefs is a new phenomenon. Since 2017, there have been six terrorist plots targeting energy infrastructure motivated by white supremacy, including five plots since 2020. That is up from zero such incidents in the more than two decades prior to 2017.

Of the three white supremacist terrorist attacks and plots in the United States in 2024, two targeted energy facilities. The most recent occurred in November 2024, when Skyler Philippi, a 24-year-old from Columbia, Tennessee, was arrested for attempting to use a drone armed with explosives to damage a Nashville electricity substation in furtherance of his violent white supremacist ideology. His meticulously planned plot, which included reconnaissance, the purchase of explosives, and operational security measures, was disrupted by the FBI.[29]

The increased attention from white supremacists on energy infrastructure is driven at least in part by the resurgence of accelerationist ideology, which views the destruction of critical systems like the power grid as a means to hasten societal collapse and radical social transformation. This shift has been fueled by white supremacist propaganda materials, which emphasize targeting infrastructure to create chaos and pave the way for their vision of a white ethnostate. The decentralized nature of modern extremist networks, particularly those connected through online platforms, has further facilitated the spread of these tactics.[30] The energy sector's critical role in supporting other infrastructure makes it a particularly attractive target for extremists aiming to maximize societal disruption and amplify their ideological message.

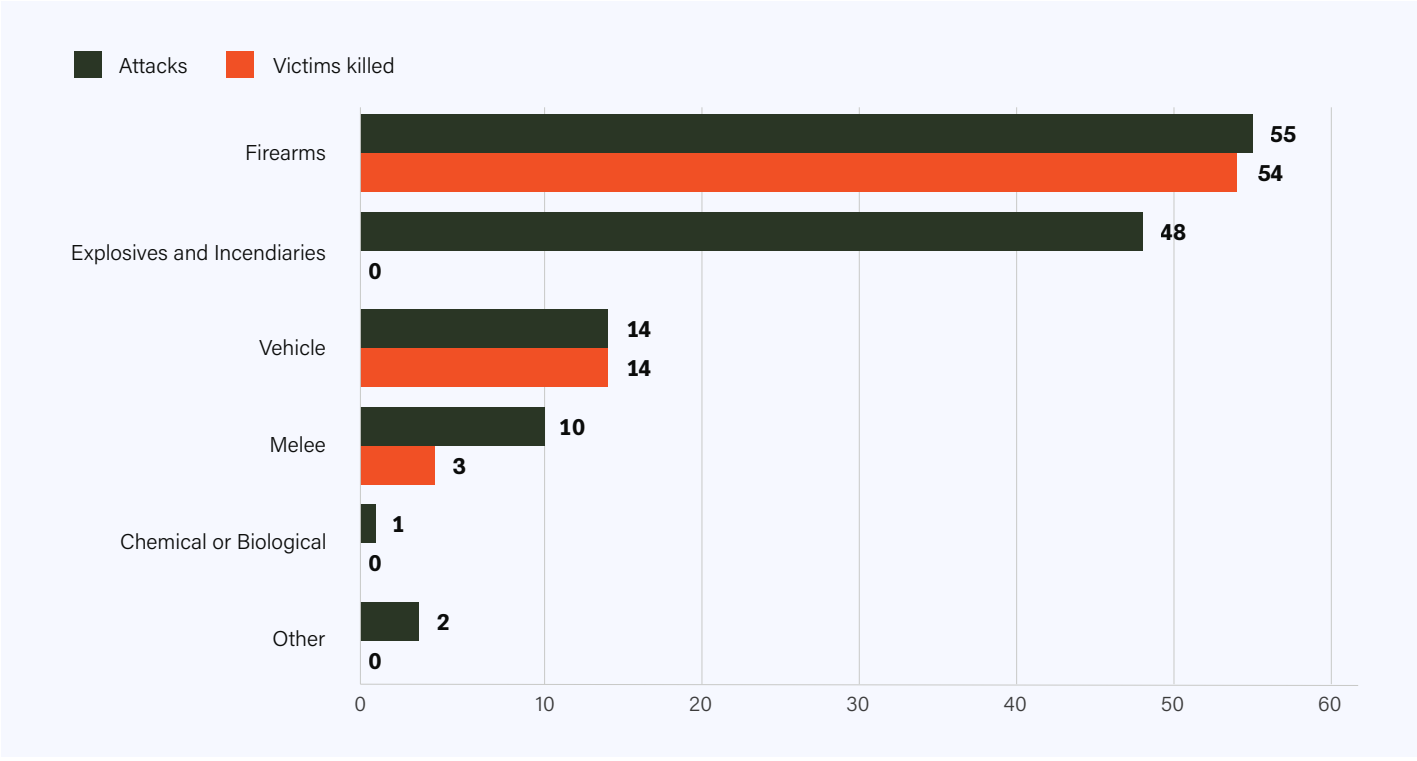
Despite the increased number of attempts, no white supremacist plots against energy facilities have succeeded. All such plots have been disrupted by authorities before they could be carried out, probably due to the high level of sophistication required to carry out such an attack. While plotting their attack against energy facilities, perpetrators typically do online research, in-person surveillance, and weapons training and preparation, including in some cases the preparation of explosives. Most perpetrators of attacks against energy facilities also seek out assistance from other individuals to facilitate their attacks. These activities open them up to having their communications, whereabouts, purchases, and other indicators identified and tracked by authorities. Sting operations have been particularly successful at disrupting white supremacist plots against energy facilities, including undermining both such plots in 2024. While U.S. authorities have a proven track record of successfully limiting the threat, continued vigilance is necessary to prevent a severely disruptive attack against energy infrastructure in 2025.

Firearms remain the deadliest weapon of choice among terrorists in the United States.

Firearms are the most common weapon used by terrorists in the United States due to their widespread availability, relatively low cost, and ease of use (Figure 2.7). Since 2020, firearms were used in 55 terrorist attacks in the United States and were overwhelmingly responsible

Figure 2.7

Main Weapon Used in Terrorist Attacks in the United States, January 1, 2020 –January 1, 2025



Source: CSIS Domestic Terrorism Dataset.

for deaths caused in terrorist attacks. The prevalence of firearms in the country, combined with varying degrees of regulation across states, makes it relatively easy for individuals to acquire them legally or illegally. Firearms are also versatile, capable of inflicting significant casualties in a short amount of time, and require less technical expertise compared to other methods like explosives. Additionally, their portability and concealability make firearms a practical choice for attackers seeking to carry out surprise attacks or evade detection before striking. There is no indication that significant cultural or legal changes in 2025 will limit the appeal of firearms to those seeking to conduct terrorism in the United States.

Explosives and incendiaries are the second-most common weapon used by terrorists in the United States. They are often chosen for their ability to target infrastructure, symbolic locations, or large groups of people and for their potential for dramatic destruction and psychological impact. However, explosives are far less deadly in practice than firearms, probably due to the complexity involved in constructing and deploying them effectively.[31] Explosive devices usually require more training to make and use and frequently fail to detonate as intended. Incendiaries and acts of arson often lack precision, resulting in damage that can be severe but not necessarily lethal.

The attack on January 1, 2025, that killed 14 people in New Orleans is a reminder of the threat vehicle attacks pose in the United States. Vehicle attacks have become more common in the United States, with 14 such attacks taking place since 2020. Though vehicle attacks are relatively rare, they have a lethality rate as measured by victims killed per attack roughly equivalent to firearm terrorist attacks. Vehicles attacks are likely to remain a rare but potentially deadly tactic for terrorists in 2025.

Policy Implications

Priority 1: Continue monitoring potential lone actor terrorists across a variety of ideologies

Lone actors make up the majority of terrorists in the United States across all ideologies and present an ongoing challenge to counterterrorism and public safety efforts. These individuals operate outside formal organizational structures, making their detection and monitoring particularly difficult. Recent incidents, including the 2025 Bourbon Street attack, demonstrate the capacity of lone actors to execute deadly attacks and underscore the need for robust mechanisms to identify, track, and mitigate risks associated with such individuals. This primarily means the continued resourcing of existing counterterrorism measures, including behavioral analysis units; community-based reporting programs; intervention programs; data sharing among federal, state, and local agencies; and online monitoring of spaces where extremist content is known to circulate.

The diversity of ideological motivations driving domestic terrorists necessitates a balanced approach to threat assessment and resource allocation. White supremacist and Salafi-jihadist terrorists are responsible for the greatest number of victims killed in recent years and should be prioritized accordingly. Similarly, the rapidly growing threat of partisan extremist terrorism warrants increased attention, particularly given the potentially significant impact of attacks on government personnel and political figures.

At the same time, overemphasis on specific ideologies can create blind spots, undermine public trust, and allow emerging threats to grow unchecked. The United States is home to a wide array of ideologies that continue to proliferate and evolve, fueled in large part by the internet, which accelerates the spread and mutation of extremist beliefs. These evolving ideologies are shaped by ongoing world events, allowing individuals to adapt their narratives and grievances to align with current social, political, or economic developments, further complicating efforts to predict and prevent violence. To account for this diversity, lawmakers and intelligence and law enforcement agencies must prioritize evidence-based threat assessments, improve data collection on all ideological threats, and enhance coordination among federal, state, and local agencies. These steps are essential to effectively address both established and emerging threats and to allocate resources where they are most needed.

Priority 2: Increase security for government targets and strengthen systems to reduce political disruption

The rise in partisan extremist terrorism underscores the need for robust protective security measures for elected officials, political candidates, political party officials, political staff, and other government personnel. In recent years, Congress has responded to high-profile attacks and escalating threats by authorizing increased funding for initiatives such as strengthening Capitol security, enhancing personal and residential protection for lawmakers, and safeguarding campaign and district

offices.[32] Agencies like the Capitol Police, Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives have typically received annual budget increases since 9/11 to bolster their investigative and security capabilities, with the Biden administration significantly increasing funding to combat domestic terrorism. Similar measures have also been implemented to protect judges, including shielding personal information and increasing security details.[33] These efforts have proven effective in mitigating fatalities, even as attacks on government targets have risen. Defunding or shrinking these agencies risks undermining these protective measures, leaving government targets (and other types of targets) more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. A reduction in resources could weaken intelligence-gathering capabilities, delay responses to credible threats, and limit the ability to investigate and prosecute individuals plotting terrorist attacks.

In addition, recent close calls, such as the attempted assassination of then former-President Donald Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania, reveal that, while current security measures have been effective in preventing fatalities, the possibility of a highly impactful event remains.[34] Such close-call incidents highlight the necessity of not only maintaining robust security measures but also strengthening contingency systems to respond effectively to a successful mass-casualty or high-profile attack.[35] Developing protocols and planning for such events can disincentivize attacks on government targets, maintain stability in governance, and build public trust in democratic institutions.

Priority 3: Maintain protections for critical infrastructure

Energy infrastructure has become an increasingly popular target for U.S. domestic terrorists, particularly white supremacist terrorists. Though attacks on energy infrastructure in recent years have been unsuccessful, energy facilities and other critical infrastructure remain potentially vulnerable targets.[36] To address these challenges, the United States should continue regular vulnerability assessments for high-risk facilities, consider new investments in physical defenses, and improve coordination between government agencies and private operators. By prioritizing these steps, the United States can strengthen its energy infrastructure and reduce the likelihood of catastrophic disruptions from terrorist attacks.

Priority 4: Tighten firearms regulations focused on members of extremist movements

Given that firearms are the most popular weapon of choice for terrorists, effective regulation and control are essential to countering their use in attacks. Policies such as comprehensive background checks and mental illness prohibitions can reduce the threat of terrorism-related violence.[37] While these measures could reduce the risks and lethality of terrorism, their political feasibility varies due to differing legal frameworks, cultural attitudes toward gun ownership, and political dynamics. Balancing Americans' civil rights against the desirability to reduce terrorists' access to firearms requires a thoughtful approach sensitive to local context.

Risks accepted: Lone actors remain capable of unpredictable violence

Adopting the recommended priorities above can reduce, but will not eliminate, the threat of domestic terrorism in the United States. Though it currently boasts some of the most capable intelligence and law enforcement agencies in the world, the United States still cannot stop altogether the risk of a small group or lone actor radicalized in private from carrying out violence with easily accessible weapons. Likewise, even with enhanced security measures, government targets will remain at risk, as demonstrated in recent high-profile attacks that penetrated existing extensive security measures. Moreover, lower-profile government personnel, such as staff and employees, will in many cases not be afforded extra security measures despite also being targeted in attacks motivated by growing partisan extremism. Lastly, although tighter gun regulations could make it more difficult for domestic terrorists to access firearms, there will remain ways for terrorists to circumvent these measures to acquire guns or use other weapons and tactics to carry out violence.

Chapter 3
The Middle East

Introduction

This chapter assesses the terrorist threat from six groups in the greater Middle East (including Afghanistan): Ansar Allah (better known as the Houthis), Hezbollah, Hamas, the Islamic State (often referred to as ISIS), the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Al Qaeda (both the Al Qaeda core, which is present in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its Yemeni affiliate).[1] The overall analysis suggests that terrorist groups in the Middle East pose a real but limited threat to civilians in the U.S. homeland but that they remain resilient and committed to attacks against U.S. interests, meriting continued counterterrorist attention to the region. In addition, several groups pose a major threat to regional stability, as demonstrated by the ongoing effects of Hamas's October 7 attacks against Israel.

While previously considered a latent threat, the Houthis are developing into a direct threat for the United States, with an intent to attack U.S. military assets in the Red Sea, although they still have not demonstrated an intent to attack the U.S. homeland. U.S. military strikes against the group in March 2025 raise additional uncertainties about future Houthi intent.[2] Hamas and Hezbollah are latent threats—lacking the demonstrated intent to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland but actively threatening U.S. allies (e.g., Israel and Saudi Arabia) and having the capability to dramatically undermine regional stability. Hamas's attacks on Israel have also led to the death and capture of U.S. citizens. The Islamic State, ISKP, and Al Qaeda primarily pose indirect threats to the United States. They lack the capability to conduct major attacks on most U.S. interests but remain extremely hostile and seek to inspire and facilitate terrorist attacks beyond the region by sympathetic but loosely affiliated members of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. ISKP in particular has shown the ability to conduct attacks on its enemies outside the greater Middle East.

The year 2024 marked a significant change in the threat several groups posed, with shifts in both capabilities and intentions. Though the Houthis' capabilities did not change substantially, they expanded their attacks on Israel, U.S. Navy warships, and U.S. and international shipping in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea area, indicating broad ambitions. The Islamic State and the Al Qaeda core largely stayed constant, with both organizations significantly degraded from their peaks but retaining active affiliate groups and the capability to inspire terrorism. Hezbollah and Hamas changed the most. Israel significantly degraded Hezbollah's capabilities, although the group's influence in Lebanon remains strong. Hamas's capabilities are also degraded, and, although it remains the most powerful Palestinian entity in Gaza, it is far weaker than it was before October 7, 2023.

This chapter begins with an overall assessment of the threat to U.S. interests posed by international terrorist groups in the Middle East. It proceeds to spotlight the terrorist threats posed by ISKP, ISIS, and Al Qaeda. It then discusses key trends for U.S. policymakers, intelligence agencies, and military personnel to watch in 2025 and concludes with implications for U.S. counterterrorism policy in the Middle East.

Threat Assessment

Comparative Assessment

The Middle East is home to three basic types of terrorist organizations—those posing direct threats, latent threats, and indirect threats (Table 3.1). The Houthis have become the only current *direct threat* to U.S. interests in the region, following attacks against the U.S. military and international shipping. Historically, they have posed a regional threat to the Yemeni government and surrounding Gulf states. Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7, 2023, the Houthis significantly expanded their interests to include attacks against Israel and international shipping, as well as directly targeting U.S. military assets.

Hezbollah and Hamas represent *latent threats* to the United States while undermining regional stability. Although they pose an active threat to the many U.S. citizens who spend significant time in the Middle East, especially in Israel, they see the United States as at most a secondary enemy.[3] Though they are among the world's most powerful nonstate actors, along with the Houthis, they lack the demonstrated intent to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland that characterizes the region's Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates. Hezbollah and Hamas are, however, actively hostile to important U.S. allies in the region, most notably Israel. Hamas has also killed and kidnapped U.S. citizens in its attacks on Israel.

These groups have the power, and at times the intent, to massively destabilize the region, as demonstrated by Hamas's October 7 attacks and the Houthis' campaign against international shipping, making both serious threats to U.S. interests in the region. Although the Houthis and Hezbollah are more powerful than Hamas, the third group's particularly radical intentions increase the threat it poses to U.S. interests via its hostility toward Israel.

The Middle East's Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates represent *indirect threats*. They currently lack the capabilities to direct significant attacks on the U.S. homeland but remain highly hostile to the United States. Stripped of their deadliest capabilities by years of international military and counterterrorist pressure, they depend primarily on their ability to inspire and facilitate attacks by actors or groups that sympathize with the broader Salafi-jihadist movement rather than an ability to direct attacks by members integrated into an organizational structure. It was a Salafi-jihadist-inspired individual—not one integrated into any sort of organization—who, on January 1, 2025, killed 14 people in New Orleans in the name of ISIS.

The most capable Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates have demonstrated the capability to conduct external operations, although intelligence and law enforcement measures have disrupted most of their plots in Europe and the United States. In 2024, ISKP conducted deadly attacks in Iran and Moscow and attempted operations in Europe that Western intelligence services disrupted. Al Qaeda was less active in 2024, but it and its affiliates retain global objectives. Their intent and capability suggest that they remain potentially deadly, and merit continued attention from U.S. intelligence services, even if their deadliest days seem to be behind them.

Threat Spotlight: Islamic State-Khorasan Province

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) announced its existence in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2015. ISKP has challenged the Taliban in several Afghan provinces, especially those in northeastern Afghanistan, but has failed to gain control over significant territory.[4] In fact, the Taliban has been effectively weakening ISKP in Afghanistan, even if the former's claims that ISKP has "no physical presence in any part of the country" are clearly

Table 3.1

Comparative Assessment of Middle East Terrorist Groups

NAME	AREA OF OPERATIONS	CAPABILITY	INTENT	THREAT ASSESSMENT
Houthis	Yemen	De facto state with access to state-like military capabilities	Intent to seize national power and exert greater influence over the region	Active threat to regional stability and U.S. allies; direct threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region
Hezbollah	Lebanon	De facto state with access to state-like military capabilities	Intent to maintain high degree of national power and decrease U.S. influence in the region	Active threat to regional stability and U.S. allies; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region
Hamas	Gaza, West Bank	De facto state with access to rudimentary state-like military capabilities	Regional intent to create a new state that would eliminate a U.S. ally	Active threat to regional stability and U.S. allies; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region
Islamic State Core	Iraq and Syria	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but maintains the power to inspire attacks	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders and demonstrated intent to conduct attacks in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world	Indirect threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals, assets, and allies outside of the region; minor threat to U.S. interests in the region
Al Qaeda Core and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	Al Qaeda Core: Afghanistan, Pakistan; AQAP: Yemen	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but maintains the power to inspire attacks	Intent to promote anti-regime movements in the Middle East and inspire attacks in Europe and the United States	Indirect threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals, assets, and allies outside of the region; minimal threat to U.S. interests in the region
Islamic State-Khorasan Province	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia	Weak insurgency that no longer controls significant territory but maintains the ability to direct and facilitate attacks	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders and demonstrated intent to conduct attacks in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world	Indirect threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals, assets, and allies outside of the region; minimal threat to U.S. interests in the region

false.[5] Despite the Taliban's pressure on the group, ISKP currently poses the region's greatest threat of external operations. It has both ideological and strategic reasons to direct, facilitate, and inspire mass-casualty attacks not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also farther afield, including in the United States.

ISKP has an estimated size of 2,000–3,000 fighters from across central Asia.[6] ISKP has shifted away from its use of extortion and kidnapping for finances due to ongoing counterterrorism pressure and in 2025 heavily relies on funding from the Islamic State core and from international donations.[7]

ISKP's operations have expanded globally in the past few years. In 2022, ISKP carried out attacks in three countries: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. It then expanded its operations to places such as Austria, India, and the

Table 3.2

Incidents Involving ISKP by Country, 2022–2024

COUNTRY	2022	2023	2024	TOTAL
Afghanistan	214	53	39	306
Austria	0	1	0	1
India	0	2	0	2
Iran	2	6	7	15
Netherlands	0	1	0	1
Pakistan	54	27	37	118
Russia	0	0	3	3
Turkey	0	0	1	1

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

Netherlands in 2023 and Russia and Turkey in 2024 (Table 3.2).[8] ISKP members or sympathizers have been arrested in Germany and the United States in recent years.[9] This past election day—November 5, 2024—a suspected ISKP operative's plot to carry out an attack in Oklahoma was foiled.[10] Another ISKP plot revolving around a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna was also foiled in 2024.[11] However, not all of ISKP's international plots have been stopped. ISKP killed nearly 100 people in Iran in an attack at a memorial for Qassem Soleimani in 2024. Earlier the same year, ISKP successfully executed an attack in Russia that took place at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow, leaving over 130 dead, making it the deadliest attack in Russia since the Beslan school siege in 2004.[12]

Threat Spotlight: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

According to U.S. government reporting from December 2023, the Islamic State remains "militarily defeated" and is "incapable of mounting large, complex attacks domestically and externally."[13] The Islamic State has now been forced to rely on its other branches, yet still seeks to conduct and inspire attacks around the world.[14] Core Islamic State leadership remains in Syria, increasing the region's importance to the indirect threat the group poses to U.S. civilians.[15]

The Islamic State is estimated to have between 1,500 and 3,000 fighters and maintains access to $10–20 million in cash and liquid assets.[16] The U.S. government assesses that ISIS holds no significant territory.[17] Though there was an increase in attacks in Syria throughout 2024, the attacks remain largely unsophisticated, mainly involving small arms and IEDs.[18] In Iraq, low-level attacks persist with "little change in [ISIS's] day-to-day operations."[19]

The Islamic State retains the capability to inspire those abroad to commit terrorist acts, despite its limited ability to direct and execute such attacks itself. There have been several recent attacks carried out in Europe for which the Islamic State has claimed responsibility, including a stabbing in Germany leaving three dead and a shooting in Brussels that killed two, both in 2024.[20] The New Year's Day attack in New Orleans, Louisiana, in which a man killed 14 in a car ramming, appears to have been inspired, but not facilitated or directed, by the group.[21] The New Orleans attack demonstrates the enduring inspirational role that the Islamic State plays in international jihadist attacks. The Islamic State has also sought to capitalize on the conflict in Gaza by encouraging its affiliates and supporters to conduct attacks against Israeli interests and Western targets, although a feared wave of attacks has not yet emerged.[22]

Threat Spotlight: Al Qaeda

After years of intense counterterrorism pressure and mounting competition with other rebel groups, Al Qaeda is not the same organization it was two decades ago, or even close, due to the drastic decline in its capabilities. The Al Qaeda core is estimated to have fewer than a dozen members left in Afghanistan.[23] An estimated 3,000 members are in AQAP, mostly consolidated in southern Yemen. According to the United Nations, AQAP has struggled to pay its members and has increased kidnapping-for-ransom operations in Yemen, suggesting a group in continued decline.[24] For the most part, Al Qaeda has ceded most of the land it controlled in the

2010s, though it still retains a presence in several Yemeni provinces and has strong affiliates such as Al Shabaab, as discussed in the Africa chapter.[25]

Al Qaeda has become more decentralized in its operations. Due to the success of continuous drone strikes on Al Qaeda leadership, the once hierarchical organization has struggled to replace and retain its leaders. In July 2022, the United States killed Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in an airstrike, and the organization has yet to formally announce a successor. In 2020, AQAP leader Qassim al-Raimi was killed during a U.S. counterterrorism operation.[26] Raimi's successor, Khalid Batarfi, was subsequently pronounced dead by AQAP in 2024.[27]

Al Qaeda's short-term intentions are difficult to discern. The Al Qaeda core appears to be abiding by the Taliban directive prohibiting the mounting of external operations from Afghanistan, though this may also be due to the former's weak capabilities.[28] Despite this limitation, there is still a committed effort to rebuild some capability in Afghanistan as the Al Qaeda core prioritizes its relationship with its Taliban host.[29] There is little doubt, however, that Al Qaeda maintains its ideological hostility toward the United States and its willingness to conduct mass-casualty attacks.[30]

AQAP's intent to conduct operations in the region and beyond has not ceased. AQAP has attempted to mount and inspire attacks in the United States and Europe likely more than any of the other Al Qaeda affiliates.[31] The continued counterterrorism pressure placed on AQAP not only by the U.S. drone strikes but also by the Houthis has left its objective of establishing an Islamic state in Yemen "in tatters" and placed the group "at its weakest point in a decade," thereby making its extra regional goals even more important.[32] There has been evidence that Al Qaeda is attempting to ramp up its anti-Western propaganda with the recent dissemination of a step-by-step bomb-making video and a renewed "Inspire" series specifically targeted at inciting supporters to commit acts of terrorism in the West after Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack.[33] So far, however, Al Qaeda has not successfully used the October 7 attacks to greatly expand its operations.

Trends to Watch

Hamas and Hezbollah are weakened but already rebuilding.

Hamas's power and strength declined dramatically in 2024, although it remains the strongest group in Gaza and maintains some strength in the West Bank. Although not the focus of this chapter, Palestine Islamic Jihad, which is also based in Gaza, has also declined due to Israeli military operations.

Before the October 7, 2023, attacks, Hamas was the de facto government of Gaza, had perhaps 25,000–30,000 fighters, and controlled Gaza's revenues and people. After October 7, Israel launched a devastating military campaign, occupying the strip with its army and conducting constant air strikes on Hamas leadership and infrastructure targets, killing over 45,000 fighters and civilians in total, as well as Hamas leaders. As of early 2025, although Gaza is devastated and many innocent Palestinians there have died, Hamas's military and political power endure, though the group is weaker than it was before October 7.

Much of Hamas's leadership, both senior and mid-level, is dead, as are many of its fighters—perhaps half of its pre-October 7 cadres.[34] Hamas has recruited many new fighters, but these probably lack the training of many of those it has lost.[35] Israel has also targeted Hamas leaders outside of Gaza, notably the head of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, whom Israel killed in Tehran in July 2024.[36]

> *"Hamas is not defeated and is already rebuilding its strength. Israel's onslaught seriously weakened the group, but it remains the most powerful Palestinian political entity in Gaza."*

Israel has also stepped up attacks on Hamas and other groups in the West Bank, as has the Palestinian Authority (PA), which administers the area and often works with, and for, the Israeli government.[37] Although Israeli and PA actions have led to Hamas deaths and arrests, the overall violence has increased anger among Palestinians, and the crackdown has further weakened the already-discredited PA.

Despite these efforts, Hamas is not defeated and is already rebuilding its strength. Israel's onslaught seriously weakened the group, but it remains the most powerful Palestinian political entity in Gaza. In early 2024, Hamas was already returning to northern Gaza, months after the beginning of Israel's response to October 7.[38] In February 2025, Hamas flexed its muscles by threatening

to postpone hostage releases.[39] The speed at which the group will reconstitute itself is uncertain, but there is little doubt that it will seek to do so as quickly as it can.

Hezbollah has long been considered one of the most capable, if not the most capable, terrorist groups in the world. Before it attacked Israel on October 8, 2023—purportedly in solidarity with the Palestinians—Hezbollah employed approximately 30,000 fighters and 20,000 reserves.[40] The group was known for the skill of its fighters, its vast rocket and missile arsenal, and its impressive operational security. It was even called on to prop up the Assad government in Syria—an extremely unusual development in which a nonstate actor needed to come to the aid of an established state.[41]

For the first half of 2024, Hezbollah continued its limited war against Israel, using military operations—primarily directed at military sites in northern Israel—to demonstrate solidarity with Hamas while avoiding more massive escalation. This balancing act failed. Demonstrating its deep intelligence penetration of the group, Israel used exploding pagers and walkie-talkies, airstrikes, and other means to kill numerous senior Hezbollah leaders, including Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, and decimate the group's rank and file.[42] Much of Hezbollah's arsenal was destroyed (Israel claims around 80 percent) and its leadership is in disarray.[43] The destruction of much of the rocket and missile arsenal, as well as Hezbollah's inability to use what it had to achieve strategic effects, has greatly reduced Hezbollah's ability to deter Israel. As a result of Israeli military operations, Hezbollah accepted a cease-fire deal that not only ends its war on behalf of Hamas but also is supposed to end Hezbollah's armed presence in southern Lebanon.[44]

Hezbollah's weakness is visible in both political and military dimensions. In January 2025, Hezbollah acquiesced to the election of a president, Joseph Aoun, a relatively pro-U.S. candidate, ending two years of stalemate.[45] Israel has systematically targeted Hezbollah's military infrastructure, such as the airfield in Jabbour used to launch drones (Figure 3.1), degrading the group's military capabilities. Sources close to Hezbollah cited in the Israeli media have

Figure 3.1

Imagery of a Damaged Runway Used by Hezbollah in Lebanon

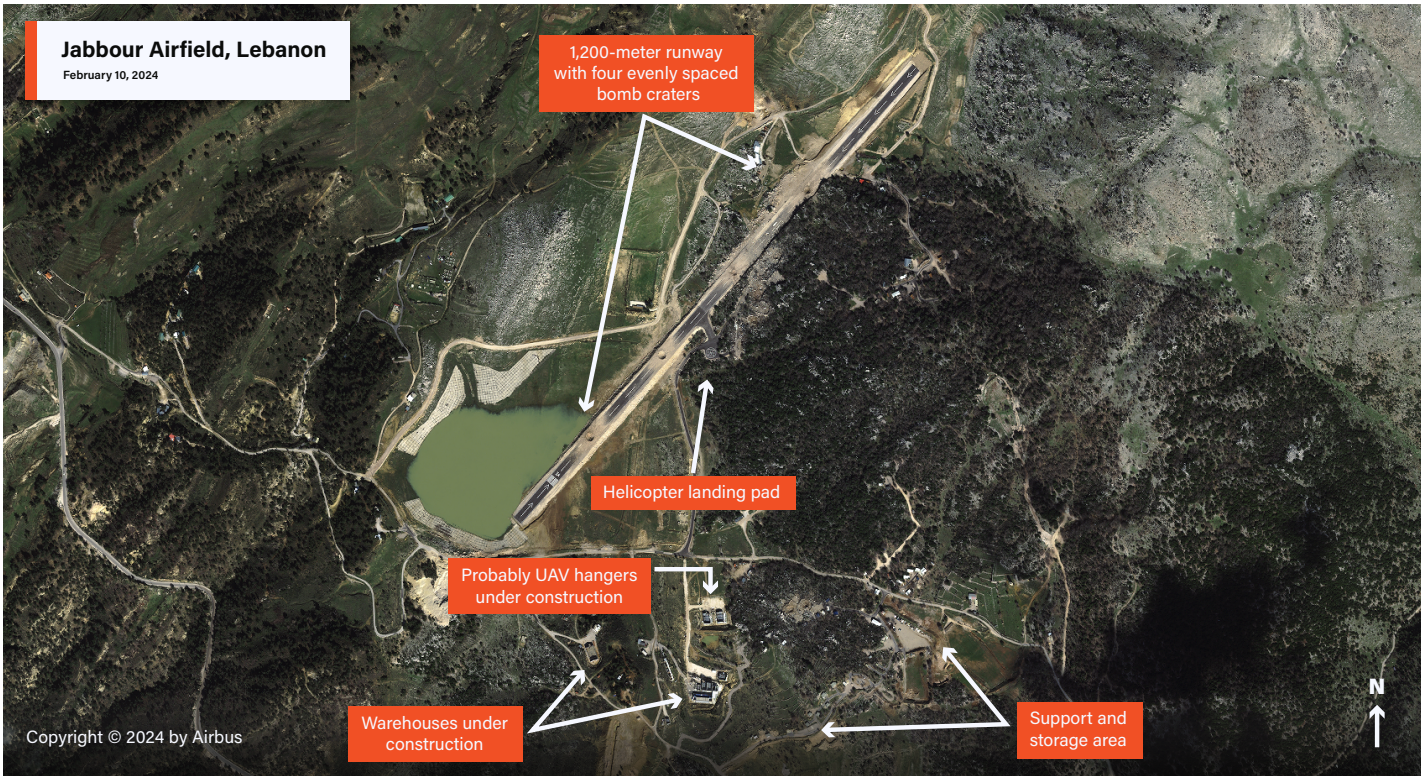
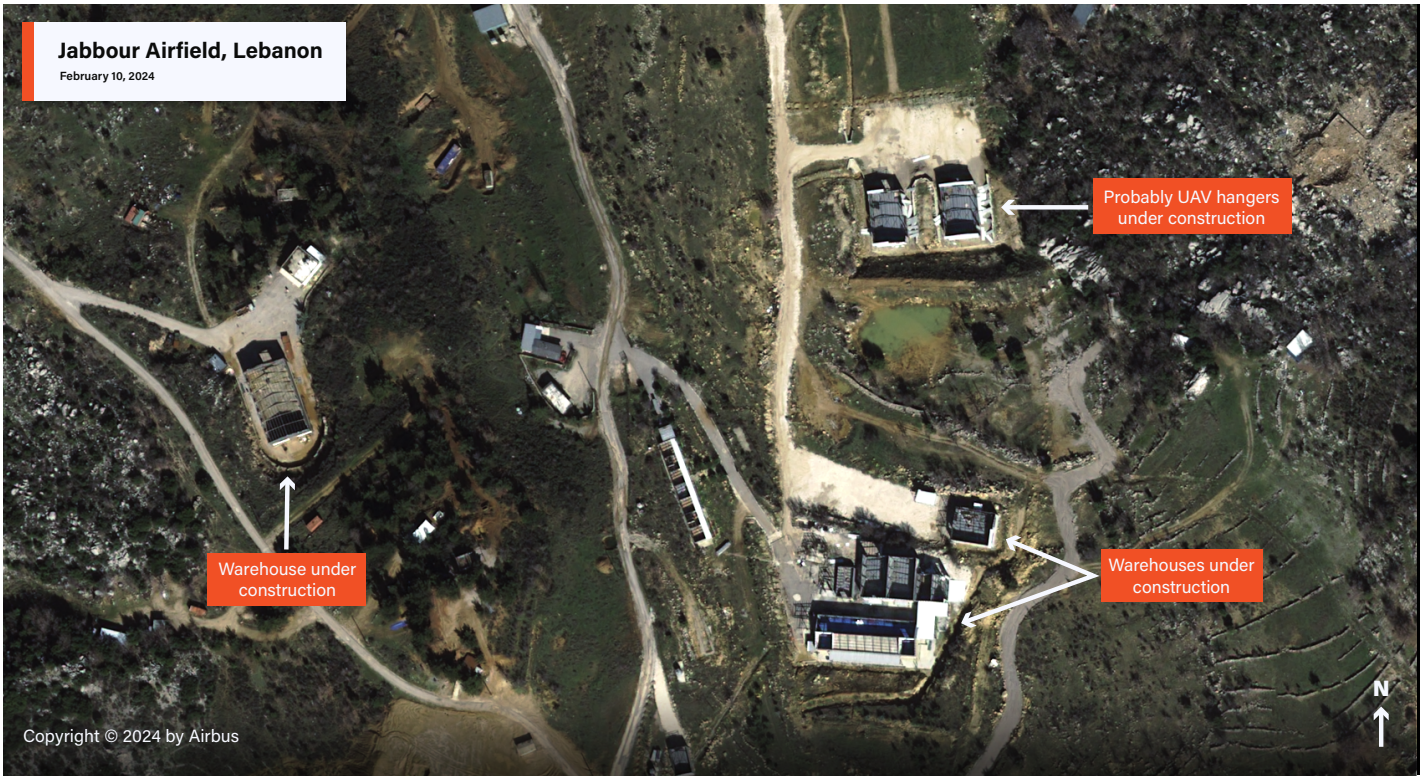


Figure 3.1

Imagery of a Damaged Runway Used by Hezbollah in Lebanon



estimated that Hezbollah lost 4,000 fighters in Israel's onslaught—about 10 percent of its prewar strength.

Evidence of Hezbollah's rebuilding is less readily available than that of Hamas, but Hezbollah will return as a threat to Israel and regional stability. Iran will continue to aid the group, and it retains a strong base in parts of Lebanon. The group, however, will take years to rebuild its forces to their prewar strength. Moreover, it must constantly worry about further intelligence penetrations and Israeli strikes, both incentives to tread cautiously.

The Houthis will remain a major regional actor and threat to U.S. interests.

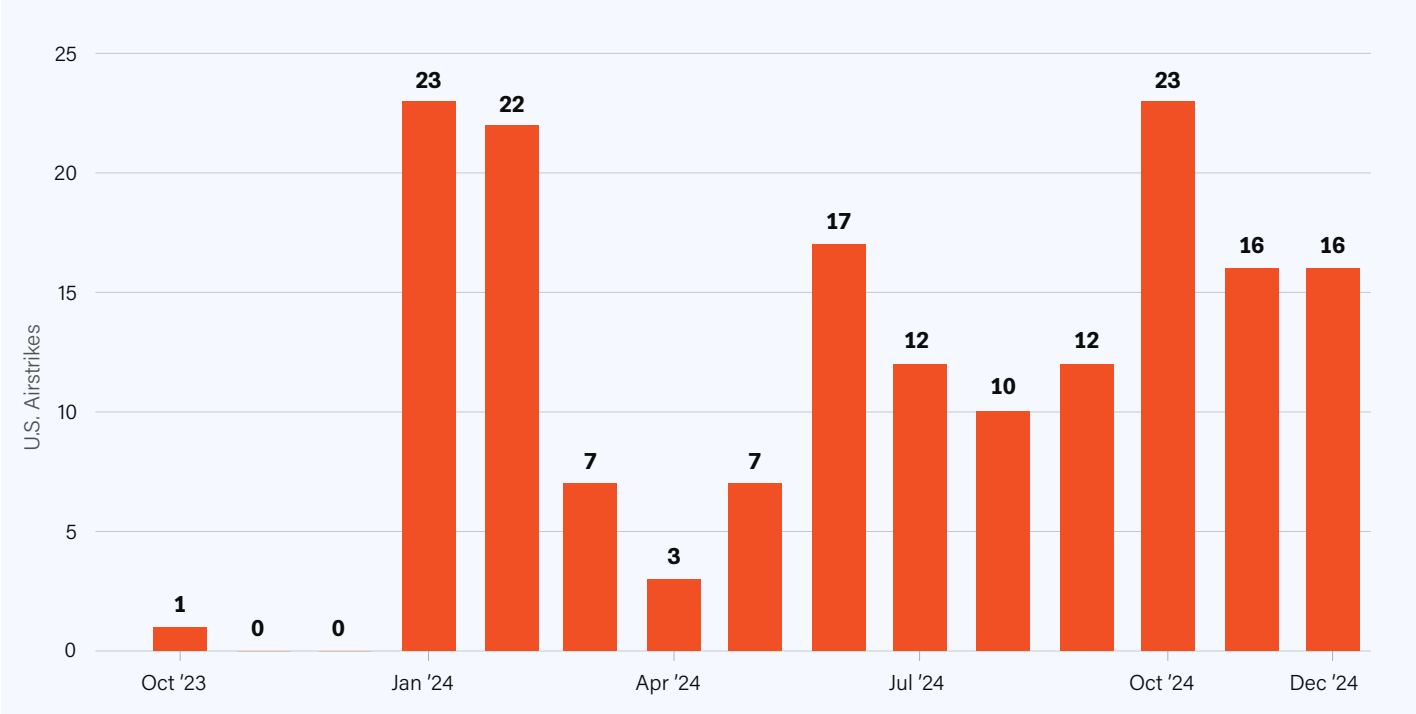
The Houthis in Yemen, backed by Iran, took advantage of the Israel-Hamas war to expand their operations. The Houthis conducted over 100 attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab el Mandeb Strait, as well as on U.S. and other naval vessels there. These attacks have had a far-reaching effect on international trade, with at least 65 countries being impacted and at least 29 major energy and shipping companies altering their routes as a result. Using alternate shipping routes around Africa increases fuel costs by about $1 million per voyage.[46] The Houthis also targeted Israel directly, launching over 400 missiles and drones in 2024.[47] Though most were shot down en route or exploded harmlessly, in July 2024, a Houthi drone struck Tel Aviv, killing one Israeli and wounding another 10 people.[48] In response to Houthi threats, Israel has conducted repeated strikes on Houthi leaders, personnel, and infrastructure.

Before the Gaza war, the Houthis primarily confined their attacks to Yemen or focused on countries like Saudi Arabia that had intervened in the Yemeni civil war against the group. The Houthis have an ideological commitment to opposing Israel, although they did not prioritize this before the Gaza war. By attacking Israel and shipping in the name of helping Hamas, the Houthis burnished their credentials regionally and at home, where the group was increasingly unpopular due to its repressive rule and the poor conditions of Yemenis under its control. In addition, the attacks help Iran, which arms and trains the Houthis and otherwise supports them, and seeks to use the Houthis to strike at their common enemies.

The United States has responded to Houthi attacks on Israel and shipping with strikes on Houthi positions in

Figure 3.2

U.S. Airstrikes Targeting the Houthis, October 7, 2023–December 31, 2024



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

Yemen. The number of U.S. attacks rose and fell throughout 2024, but they appear to have had little impact on the Houthis' determination or ability to continue their own attacks (Figure 3.2).[49] In March 2025, the United States conducted large-scale military strikes against the Houthis. It is unclear how extensive this campaign will be, and if the strikes will deter the Houthis from future attacks or inspire them to conduct more. However, Houthi Foreign Minister Jamal Amer responded to the strikes by stating that the group was "at war with America."[50]

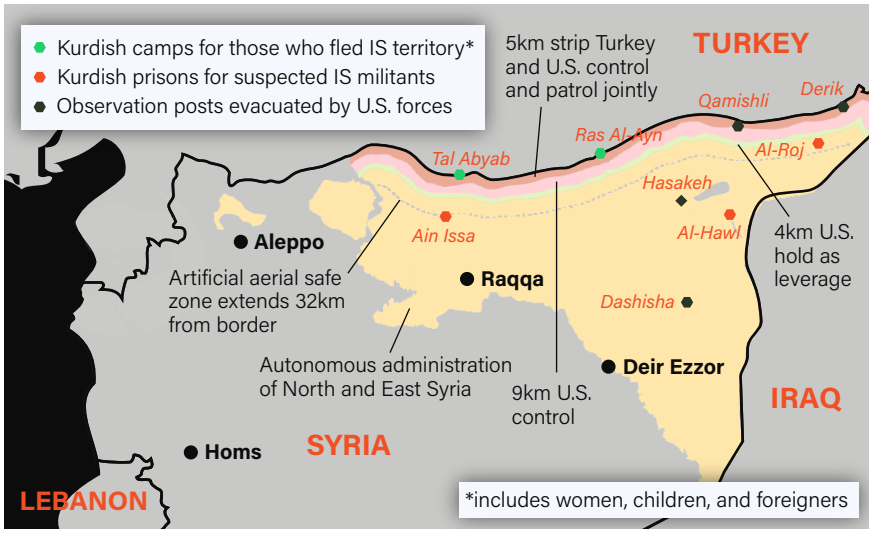
Syria's transformation means a new era of uncertainty.

Perhaps the biggest long-term changes in the region in 2024 were the defeat of the Assad regime in Syria and its replacement with a government led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), commanded by individuals once part of Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria but who had previously broken with the group and rejected international terrorism.

Assad's fall will weaken terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. The Assad regime had a horrible human rights record and was a sponsor of terrorism, working with Hezbollah and a range of Palestinian groups in recent years.[51] Assad was also a leading partner of Iran, and his regime facilitated the flow of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.[52] His regime's overthrow—and the resultant loss of support—will weaken those groups.

Figure 3.3

Camps Holding Islamic State Militants in Syria



Source: Adam Lucente, "Al-Hol Detainees Attack Guards and Start Fires as Turkish Assault Begins," Middle East Eye, October 9, 2019, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/al-hol-detainees-attack-guards-and-start-fires-turkish-assault-begins.

Assad's overthrow, however, raises many questions for counterterrorism. HTS's rejection of terrorism may be genuine, but this is uncertain. Moreover, HTS's capabilities have changed dramatically, going from a strong insurgency to state control. In addition, Kurdish forces in Syria helped maintain pressure on ISIS, and their role in the new order is unclear.[53] Turkey has already attacked Kurdish forces since the fall of Assad; ISIS may be able to expand its operations if that conflict intensifies. Expansion is particularly likely if ISIS can free many of its captured fighters, currently held in places like Al Hol and Roj camps in Syria (Figure 3.3).[54]

Although some of the camps, like Al Hol, contain many people who fled the Islamic State, many other residents were simply caught up in violence. The Islamic State has successfully recruited many people in these camps.55 If the Islamic State can conduct large-scale jailbreaks due to a Turkish offensive against the Kurdish groups guarding the camps, its manpower will swell and the gains made against the group over the past decade will risk evaporation. HTS has conducted operations against the Islamic State in the areas it controlled prior to the fall of the Assad government, but attempting to suppress the group across the whole country without the aid of a U.S.-backed military actor is a task of a much greater scale.[56]

Iran's regional strategy is in flux.

Iran, like its Hezbollah proxy, is also in a weaker position than it was a year ago. Initially, Iran benefited from the shift in the regional narrative after October 7, 2023, before which Israel-Saudi Arabia peace talks had seemed promising, and the Palestinian issue was on the back burner. The defeat of Hezbollah, however, weakened one of Iran's most important partners, and the loss of an ally in Damascus is another major blow. In addition, despite twice launching large barrages of drones and missiles against Israel, Iran failed to inflict serious harm on the Jewish state, while Israel's precise but limited attacks destroyed important Iranian air defense sites and showed it could hit Iranian military bases and, if necessary, successfully target at least some of Iran's nuclear infrastructure.[57]

Iran is likely to reinvest heavily in its proxies. Its influence in Iraq has declined slightly and Tehran will move to reassert control over groups there and to restore lost influence. In

Lebanon, Iran will continue to support Hezbollah. Iran has relied on both its proxies and its missile program to deter and coerce its enemies, including Israel and the United States. Both sets of tools are intact, but they now seem less threatening than they were a year ago, with Israel's (and, presumably, the United States') air defenses proving themselves, and the proxies far weaker after over a year of clashes with Israel.

It is uncertain how much Iran will push its proxies to attack Israel and the United States. On the one hand, Israeli attacks on Iran, the devastation of Iran's close partner Hezbollah and the loss of its senior leaders, and U.S. attacks on Iranian proxies in Iraq all give Iran incentives to strike. On the other hand, the risk of more U.S. and Israeli retaliation, which 2024 has shown Iran cannot counter, is a strong deterrent. Hezbollah and Iran may play the long game, believing that the United States does not have the patience to stay in the Middle East, and such a possibility must be taken into account.

Implications for Policy

Priority 1: Enhance monitoring and analysis of key regional groups

The enormous uncertainty resulting from Hamas's October 7 attacks continues to dominate the regional outlook in several ways. The United States already focuses heavily on Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, ISKP, and Iran and should continue to invest in analyzing their activities, but it should also increase investments in the analysis of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and HTS.

Hamas and Hezbollah have been battered by Israel but are almost certain to resurge. How their experiences of war will reshape the groups as they replace their leaderships and reconstitute their organizations is uncertain. Their new leaders might be chastened by the experience, eager to avoid direct confrontation with Israel, or they might be emboldened by their survival and the attack's role in propelling the Israel-Palestine conflict to the center of the global discourse. Monitoring these changes within both groups will be important for assessing the threat they pose to U.S. allies, regional stability, and the United States in the future.

The emergence of the Houthis and HTS as major regional players drives a need for investment in information gathering and analysis of these groups. Neither had demonstrated significant influence over regional stability before 2024. The Houthis were powerful but focused on Yemen, while HTS had little power outside of northeast Syria. They are now important regional players, and U.S. diplomats, intelligence analysts, and policymakers will have to increase their understanding of the groups' histories, leaders, and politics accordingly.

Priority 2: Maintain a military presence capable of counterterrorist operations in the region

The Islamic State and Al Qaeda have been weakened by sustained military pressure, but withdrawing U.S. forces from the region will reduce that pressure and set the stage for their revival. As of early 2025, U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria currently total around 4,500 troops, and the United States has around 40,000 forces in the region as a whole. These troops and others in the region reassure allies, assist with intelligence gathering on the Islamic State, and provide strike capabilities against HTS, the Islamic State, and Iranian proxies if necessary. Reducing these U.S. capabilities will increase the threat posed by the Islamic State and Iran's terrorist allies.

"The Islamic State and Al Qaeda have been weakened by sustained military pressure, but withdrawing U.S. forces from the region will reduce that pressure and set the stage for their revival."

Priority 3: Cautiously engage HTS

It is possible that HTS no longer supports terrorists and will ensure a modicum of good governance in Syria, but it is too early to know for sure. Despite this uncertainty, Syria's position in the region makes it impossible to ignore. The territory remains of vital symbolic importance to the international Salafi-jihadist movement, has been used to strengthen Hezbollah, and could be used to launch transnational attacks against U.S. allies. The United States, working with key regional partners such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, should encourage HTS moderation, offering both political engagement and economic support if this moderation is genuine.

Priority 4: Devise a broader Yemen strategy

For too long, Yemen has been an afterthought in U.S. thinking on the region; it has often been considered a spin-off of U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia or even

thought of in narrow counterterrorism terms. The Houthis' actions, however, show that they can play a disruptive role, imposing costs on international commerce and destabilizing the region. In future conflicts, they may try to play a similar or greater role. U.S. allies have often worked at cross-purposes in Yemen, supporting different factions or otherwise diluting their impact. Because the Houthis are resilient and have shown that they can resist sustained, large-scale bombing campaigns, the United States should avoid one-off military strikes in isolation, and should instead try to coordinate with regional allies, including Israel, to coerce and deter the Houthis.

Priority 5: Strengthen the security zone in Lebanon

Previous Hezbollah-Israel deals have required Hezbollah not to deploy troops to southern Lebanon, but Hezbollah has repeatedly violated this agreement, with its forces at or near the Israeli border until Israel pushed them back in 2024. Under the 2024 ceasefire arrangement, Lebanon's armed forces are supposed to prevent Hezbollah fighters from returning, but they have not stopped Hezbollah in the past. UN forces, along with monitors from the United States and France, are supposed to verify the ceasefire, and the United States must play an active role to ensure Hezbollah forces do not return. Based on past failures of implementation, the likelihood of success is low, but Hezbollah's high level of capability means that efforts to reduce the threat it poses merit continued resourcing.

Risks accepted: Reduced U.S. control over the implementation of its Middle East policy

The Middle East is home to some of the world's most dangerous and consequential terrorist groups. The United States, however, should not, and cannot, do everything. In many cases, it will lean heavily on Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other allies, relying on their intelligence, military capabilities, and economic and political influence. Though this reduces the burden on the United States and adds additional resources, it also means that the interests and biases of U.S. allies will shape overall U.S. policy.

Chapter 4
Africa

Introduction

This chapter assesses the threat from eight terrorist groups in Africa, including Al Qaeda's two main African affiliates: Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen (Al Shabaab) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). It also examines five Islamic State groups: the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP); the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP); the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), also known as the Islamic State-Democratic Republic of the Congo; the Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M); and the Islamic State-Somalia Province (IS-Somalia). Finally, it examines Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), which is currently affiliated with neither Al Qaeda nor the Islamic State but remains one of the most prominent Salafi-jihadist groups in Africa.

The overall analysis suggests that Al Shabaab is the African terrorist group most likely to conduct a deadly terrorist attack against a U.S. target. It is a direct threat with a demonstrated intent to conduct such attacks and is likely to grow more capable in 2025. A second set of groups—JNIM, ISWAP, and ISSP—are latent threats to the United States that have not demonstrated an intent to strike the United States either in Africa or in the U.S. homeland but are serious threats to regional governments, civilians, and political stability. IS-Somalia represents an indirect threat—locally weak but with global intent and capabilities. The remaining groups—JAS, the ADF, and IS-M—are unlikely to conduct attacks against U.S. interests in Africa and do not pose a meaningful threat of overthrowing the government in the states in which they operate.

The assessment also uncovered three key trends for policymakers to watch in 2025. The first is that the likelihood of a terrorist statelet emerging in the Sahel is growing as JNIM and ISSP become more powerful. The second is that intra-jihadist conflict in the vicinity of Lake Chad is increasingly shifting the terrorist threat into Nigeria. The third is that even the continent's weaker groups survived

significant state offensives in 2023 and 2024 and appear poised to rebound amid distractions caused by international politics.

This chapter begins with an overall assessment of the international terrorist threat in Africa. It proceeds to spotlight the terrorist threat posed by Al Shabaab, West Africa's main Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates, and IS-Somalia. It next discusses key trends for U.S. policymakers, intelligence agencies, and military personnel to watch in 2025 and concludes with implications for U.S. counterterrorism policy in Africa.

Threat Assessment

Comparative Assessment

Africa is home to four basic types of international terrorist groups (Table 4.1): direct threats, latent threats, indirect threats, and minor threats. The greatest direct threat to U.S. interests is the continent's only *direct threat*: Al Shabaab, which combines a demonstrated intent to strike at the United States in Africa and the homeland with the financial and human resources necessary to plot, and in some cases execute, such attacks. It is the continent's most capable group and one of only two groups with a demonstrated desire to target U.S. individuals and facilities. Al Shabaab has demonstrated the ability to hold territory in the face of Western-backed government offenses, collect taxes through extortion, and provide a modicum of public services through its operation of internal security forces and a version of a justice system. It regularly conducts mass-casualty attacks and poses an existential threat to the Somali state, which could collapse if external support were withdrawn. Al Shabaab also continues to conduct attacks against the military forces of states that back the Somali government—particularly Ethiopia, Kenya, Turkey, and the United States—and has plotted or executed terrorist attacks against civilians in these countries.

A second type of danger is posed by West Africa's *latent threats*: JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP. All three are ideologically hostile to the United States but have not recently or frequently demonstrated the intent to directly attack U.S interests. Rather, they have used their significant and still-growing capabilities to threaten local populations and destabilize the regions in which they operate. All three groups are weaker than Al Shabaab but control increasing amounts of territory and have access to significant financial resources through extortion, smuggling, and rudimentary mineral extraction. Though none of these groups have yet demonstrated an intent to conduct attacks against the United States, their significant resources would almost certainly permit them to launch small-scale plots if they desired. They are also conducting increasingly brazen attacks against African forces and civilians and have contributed to major political instability in West Africa in recent years, a trend that will probably continue.

A third type of danger is posed by the region's main *indirect threat*, IS-Somalia, which plays a vital role in the international Islamic State network, although it lacks the capabilities to mount direct attacks on U.S. interests in Africa or the homeland. The group is extremely small but contributes funding to Islamic State branches as far away as Afghanistan. It has also specifically called for attacks against the U.S. homeland and operated at least one attack cell in Europe, suggesting a willingness to conduct external operations, distinguishing it from most of Africa's other terrorist organizations.

Finally, Africa is home to several *minor threats*—groups that pledge their allegiance to an international movement or ideology hostile to the United States but have demonstrated neither the intention nor the capability to attack the United States. These groups—JAS, the ADF, and IS-M—threaten civilians and military personnel in their areas of operation and contribute to national instability but pose a minimal threat to U.S. interests.

Threat Spotlight: Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab is one of Africa's oldest and most successful terrorist groups. It grew out of the Islamic Courts Union, a coalition of sharia courts that sought (and briefly exercised) control over Somalia in the early 2000s and maintains the imposition of its interpretation of sharia throughout Somalia, along with parts of Ethiopia and Kenya, as its primary objective.[1] Al Shabaab seeks the withdrawal of foreign troops from Somalia as a particularly important intermediate goal, recognizing that their presence has been pivotal in propping up the Somali government.[2]

As Africa's most capable terrorist group, Al Shabaab was estimated to command between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters in early 2024.[3] It controls significant territory in the south of the country and has staunched the Somali government's erosion of its control. The group generates more than $100 million per year, enough to disburse funds to other Al Qaeda affiliates while maintaining its own operations.[4] The group has a developed hierarchy with tax collection, governance, military, and intelligence

Table 4.1

Comparative Assessment of African Terrorist Groups

NAME	AREA OF OPERATIONS	CAPABILITY	INTENT	THREAT ASSESSMENT
Al Shabaab	Horn of Africa	De facto state with access to rudimentary state-like military capabilities	Demonstrated intent to conduct attacks against U.S. targets; regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders	Active threat to regional stability, U.S. allies, and U.S. individuals and assets both in the region and beyond
JNIM	Western Sahel	Strong insurgency that has displaced the state from significant territory	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders	Latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region; active threat to regional stability
ISWAP	Lake Chad Region	Strong insurgency that has displaced the state from significant territory	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders; possible intent to direct attacks in Europe	Latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region; active threat to regional stability
ISSP	Western Sahel	Moderately strong insurgency that has displaced the state from significant territory	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders; possible intent to direct attacks in Europe	Latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region; active threat to regional stability
IS-Somalia	Somalia	Weak insurgency that does not control significant territory but has an outsized ability to facilitate attacks	Demonstrated intent to facilitate attacks against U.S. targets as part of a transnational network	Active threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals and assets outside of the region; minor threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region
ADF	Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory and has a minimal ability to inspire attacks	Vague but likely to include the creation of a state crossing international borders	Active threat to national political stability and local civilians; not a major threat to U.S. individuals or assets
JAS	Lake Chad Region	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory and has a minimal ability to inspire attacks	Official goals involve seizing national power, but actual goals more related to local-level power and wealth	Active threat to national political stability; not a major threat to U.S. individuals or assets
IS-M	Northern Mozambique	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory and has a minimal ability to inspire attacks	Vague but likely to include the creation of a state crossing international borders	Active threat to national political stability; minor threat to U.S. individuals and assets in Northern Mozambique

arms capable of extorting civilians in areas the government appears to control.[5] It conducts frequent attacks in Mogadishu and against hard military targets.[6]

Although its primary goal is to establish its rule in the Horn of Africa, Al Shabaab has repeatedly demonstrated its intent to attack U.S. interests.[7] The most spectacular of these plots was disrupted in 2019 when Philippine security forces arrested Cholo Abdi Abduallah, who was found guilty in 2024 of plotting a 9/11-style effort to crash a hijacked airplane into a building in the United States.[8]

The most successful action was the 2020 attack against U.S. forces at Camp Simba, Kenya, which killed three U.S. personnel and destroyed $75.1 million worth of U.S. government resources.[9]

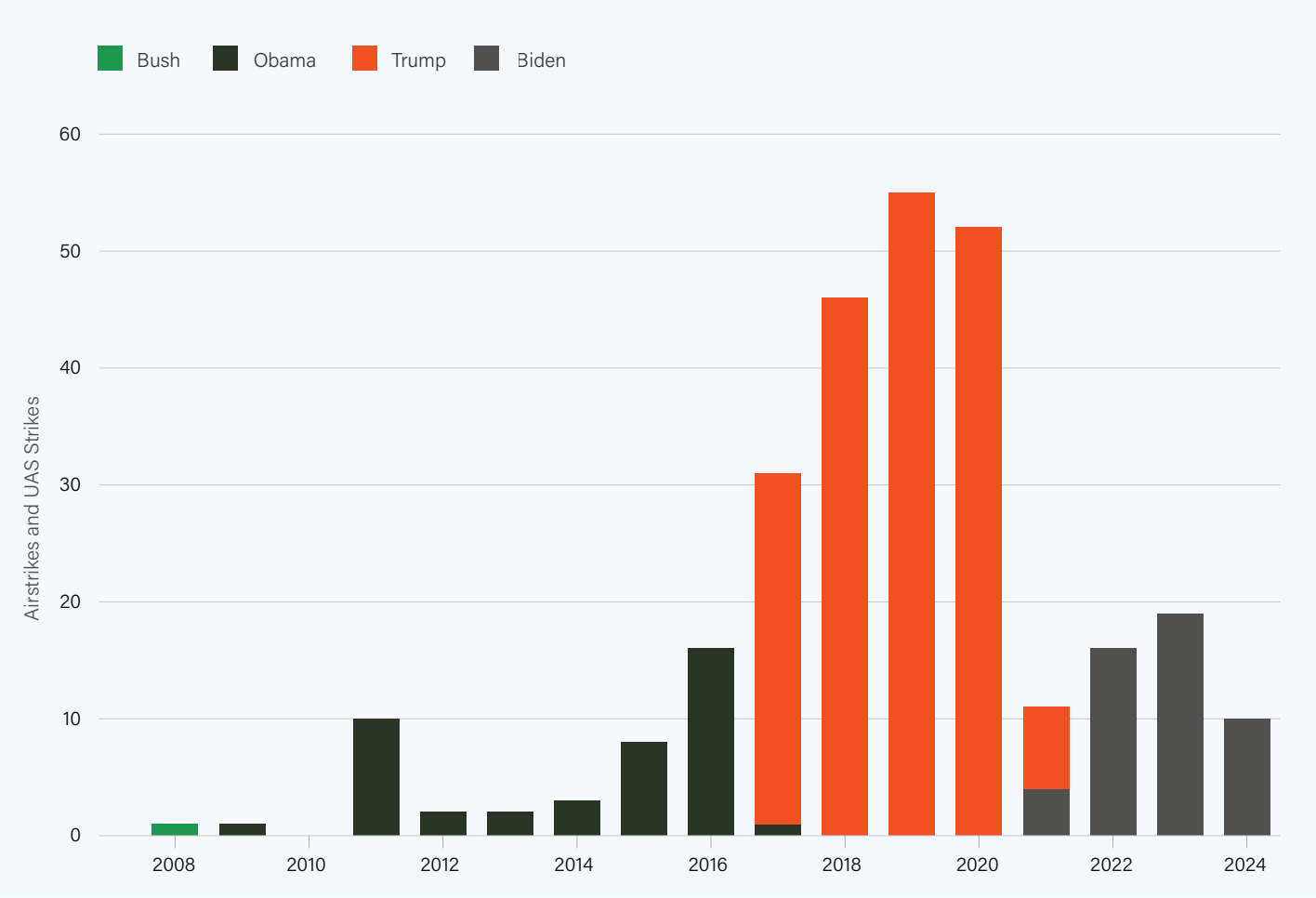
Al Shabaab's attacks and plots against the United States are driven by two main factors that are unlikely to change in 2025: its strategic interest in coercing an end to U.S. support for the Somali government and its ideological position within the global Al Qaeda movement.

Al Shabaab has consistently sought to coerce the Somali government's international supporters to reduce their support to Mogadishu and the direct military pressure they place on the terrorist group.[10] Attacks against the United States increased around 2019, nominally in response to the U.S. decision to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.[11] But the Trump administration's decision to move the embassy was also accompanied by a major increase in U.S. unmanned aerial system (UAS) attacks against Al Shabaab (Figure 4.1), suggesting that the 2019 campaign might have been part of a larger strategy of responding to increased pressure with increased attacks. Such a strategy would be consistent with Al Shabaab's previous attack patterns, which involve increasing external attacks in response to increases in support for the Somali government.[12]

But not all Al Shabaab attacks against the United States are explicable by the group's local interests. The group is also motivated by Al Qaeda's ideology of global jihad. The 9/11-style plot against the U.S. homeland was initiated before the Trump administration intensified the U.S. campaign against the group and is better explained by the group's

Figure 4.1

U.S. Airstrikes and UAS Strikes Against Al Shabaab, 2008–2024



Source: New America, "Counterterrorism Wars—Somalia PUBLIC DATA," accessed December 16, 2024, http://newamerica.org/future-security/reports/americas-counterterrorism-wars/.

international jihadist ambitions to attack the United States in line with Al Qaeda's official ideology.[13] The group's decision to brand several high-profile attacks under Al Qaeda's "Jerusalem Will Not Be Judaized" media campaign is also a reminder of Al Shabaab's continuing desire for prominence within the Al Qaeda ecosystem and its alignment with the core group's strategic directives.[14]

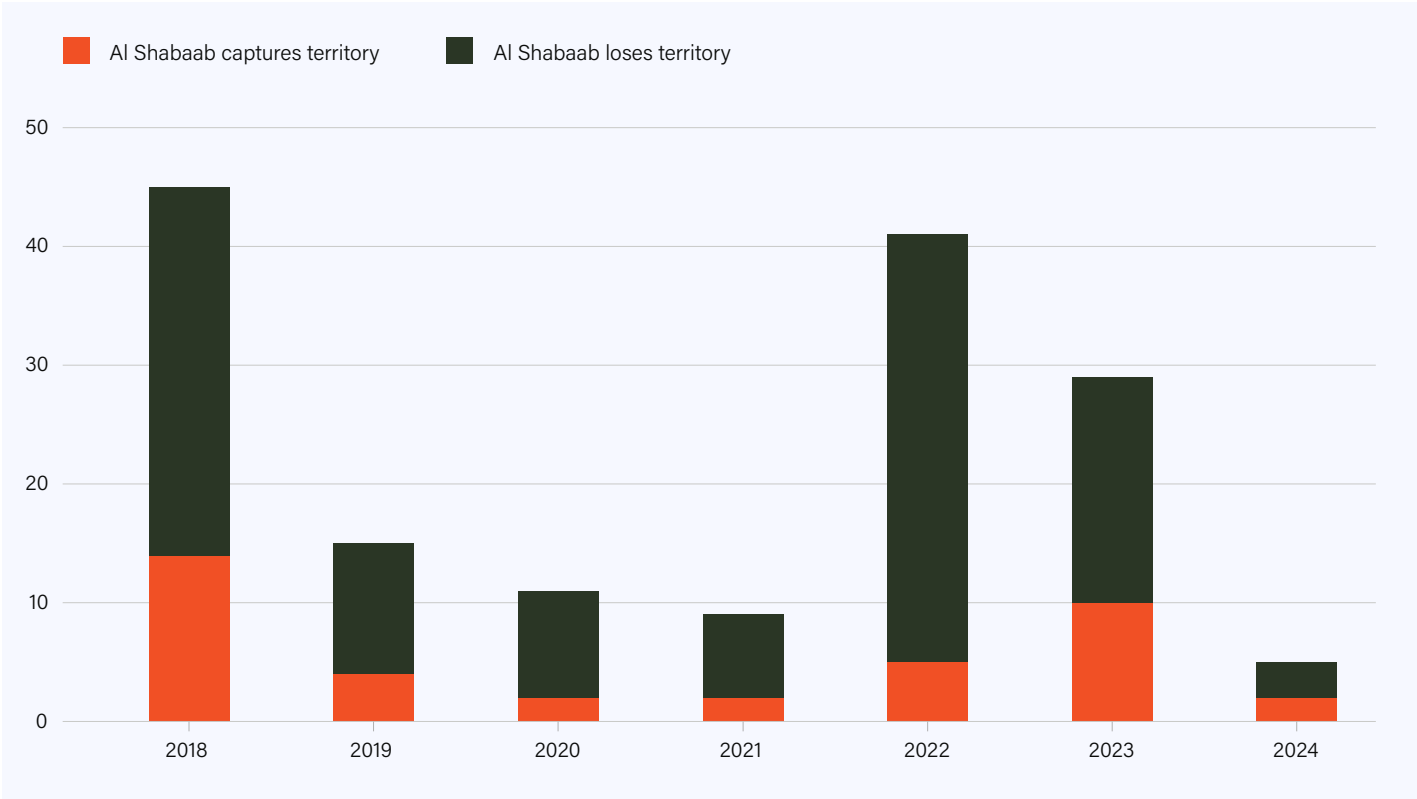
Due to its ideological basis, Al Shabaab's intent to conduct attacks against the United States will persist into 2025, and its hostility will probably increase if President Trump resumes a highly kinetic approach to the group. The campaign of strikes conducted under the first Trump administration did not sufficiently degrade the group to prevent its 2020 attack on a U.S. military facility in Kenya, and there is little reason to believe that such a campaign will dramatically weaken the group in 2025.

Al Shabaab is more likely to grow stronger in 2025. Military pressure on Al Shabaab decreased in 2024 and will almost certainly decrease even further in 2025. The terrorist group spent much of 2022 and 2023 under military pressure from an offensive consisting of clan and federal government forces, but the main sources of its strength remain intact.[15] Consistent with a stabilizing conflict, the number of recorded territorial changes declined dramatically in 2024 (Figure 4.2), although the data appears to understate Al Shabaab's strength relative to U.S. assessments.[16] The result appears to be a new (although probably temporary) stalemate, with the offensive having failed to cut Al Shabaab off from its key sources of support.[17]

International military pressure on Al Shabaab is also likely to decrease in 2025. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) officially ended in December 2024, giving way to a smaller mission known as the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Complicating the AUSSOM mission are political barriers to the inclusion of Ethiopian forces, historically a key backer of the Somali government.[18] The combination of a weaker international force and a stalled government offensive will decrease the pressure on Al Shabaab and allow it to increase its violent activities in 2025.

Figure 4.2

Incidents of Change in Territorial Control in Somalia, 2018–2024



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

The second driver of increasing Al Shabaab's capability is the growing support it receives from Yemen's Ansar Allah movement (better known as the Houthis). This relationship is based on shared financial interests and both groups' alliance with the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The Houthis could provide, and potentially already are providing, Al Shabaab with some of the benefits of state sponsorship, particularly the provision of military training and UAS technology.[19]

An informal alliance with the Houthis could do more than increase Al Shabaab's overall capacity for violence. It could introduce new capabilities that allow the group to conduct novel attacks using UASs or even missiles. No hard evidence yet exists in open sources of significant weapons transfers from the Houthis to Al Shabaab, but the Houthis manufacture more advanced weapons systems—like UASs and missiles—that Al Shabaab cannot readily access in Somalia. A senior aide to the leader of Yemen's National Resistance Front stated that "the Houthis intend to supply al-Shabaab with more advanced weaponry that might enable them to target shipping in the Gulf of Aden."[20] Such weapons transfers could allow Al Shabaab to threaten significantly more destructive attacks and potentially even threaten offshore targets.[21]

Threat Spotlight: Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in West Africa

West Africa is home to three groups that pose a latent threat to the United States. Although weaker than Al Shabaab, JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP are all capable of conducting mass-casualty terrorist attacks in West Africa, have displaced the state in rural areas, and can probably develop at least the limited capabilities needed to conduct external operations. Despite their growing capability, they have not demonstrated a sustained interest in directly targeting U.S. individuals or assets either in Africa or the homeland, although they pose a major threat to regional stability (discussed in this chapter's "Trends to Watch" section) that impacts U.S. interests in Africa.

JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP are transnational insurgencies but vary in size and strength. As of 2024, JNIM commands roughly 5,000–6,000 fighters, ISWAP approximately 4,000–7,000, and ISSP approximately 2,000–3,000. These groups' main objectives are to destabilize regional governments and carve out a so-called Islamic state in their areas of operation.[22] This goal has frequently involved and will continue to involve attacking international military and government personnel in their areas of operation, but their main focus is currently on the regional government's Russian backers since the withdrawal of French, UN, and U.S. forces from Mali, Burkana Faso, and Niger over the past several years.

JNIM is the region's most important group. It was formed through a merger of several Al Qaeda affiliates in the western Sahel and retains al Qaeda's globalist form of Salafi-jihadism.[23] JNIM's official goal, as stated by its emir, is to impose sharia throughout the Sahel.[24] Its more specific objectives are the withdrawal of foreign troops and the establishment of Islamic rule adherent to "a particularly stringent interpretation of Islamic law" in Mali and potentially across Western Africa.[25]

JNIM continues to increase its territorial control and has expanded its areas of operation in western Mali while further consolidating territory in southern Mali and along the Burkina Faso border.[26] The group probably earns revenue in the tens of millions of dollars per year from gold mining, kidnapping for ransom, livestock theft, and taxation.[27] Despite its unique alliance structure, JNIM maintains an organizational hierarchy and demonstrates the ability to conduct complex, coordinated attacks both in the countryside and in the Malian capital.[28] In 2024, JNIM continued to expand, establishing a presence in new areas in central and southern Mali and continuing the expansion of its operational reach into coastal West Africa—most notably Benin and Togo but to a lesser extent Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.[29]

JNIM's capabilities are increasing as its reach expands. U.S. National Counterterrorism Center Acting Director Brett Holmgren stated in late 2024 that Salafi-jihadists in the Sahel were on track to conduct more than 3,000 attacks in 2024, twice the number of attacks recorded in 2021.[30] The group also carried out increasingly brazen attacks against government targets in 2024 while increasing pressure on southern Mali, including by attacking convoys as they entered or left Bamako.[31] In September 2024, JNIM conducted high-profile attacks against two government targets in the Malian capital: the national gendarmerie academy and the international airport, which also houses the Malian armed forces (FAMa) and Russian bases.[32] The group's capability to reach into the heart of Malian state power demonstrates the threat JNIM poses to the region's governments and suggests that it is progressing toward its goal of creating a regional caliphate.

ISSP is JNIM's main jihadist competitor. It is an Islamic State franchise that operates primarily in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area, having functioned as a semi-autonomous wing of ISWAP until about 2019, when it was recog-

nized as an independent province.[33] ISSP's official ideology is more extreme than that of JNIM, espousing a more expansive definition of who constitutes a legitimate target.[34]

ISSP also grew stronger during 2024, although the relative scarcity of reliable information on the group compared to that on JNIM means that assessments of ISSP will be more general and uncertain. The group seems to be undertaking reforms aimed at expanding its control over territory, both an indication and source of increasing capability. Multiple analysts report that ISSP is increasingly trying to win the support of local populations as it seeks to consolidate and expand its control over territory.[35] The group has even begun to highlight state forces' abuses of civilians in an apparent attempt to portray itself as a protective force.[36] These shifts in targeting and propaganda mark a major change in the group's intentions toward civilians over the past year.[37]

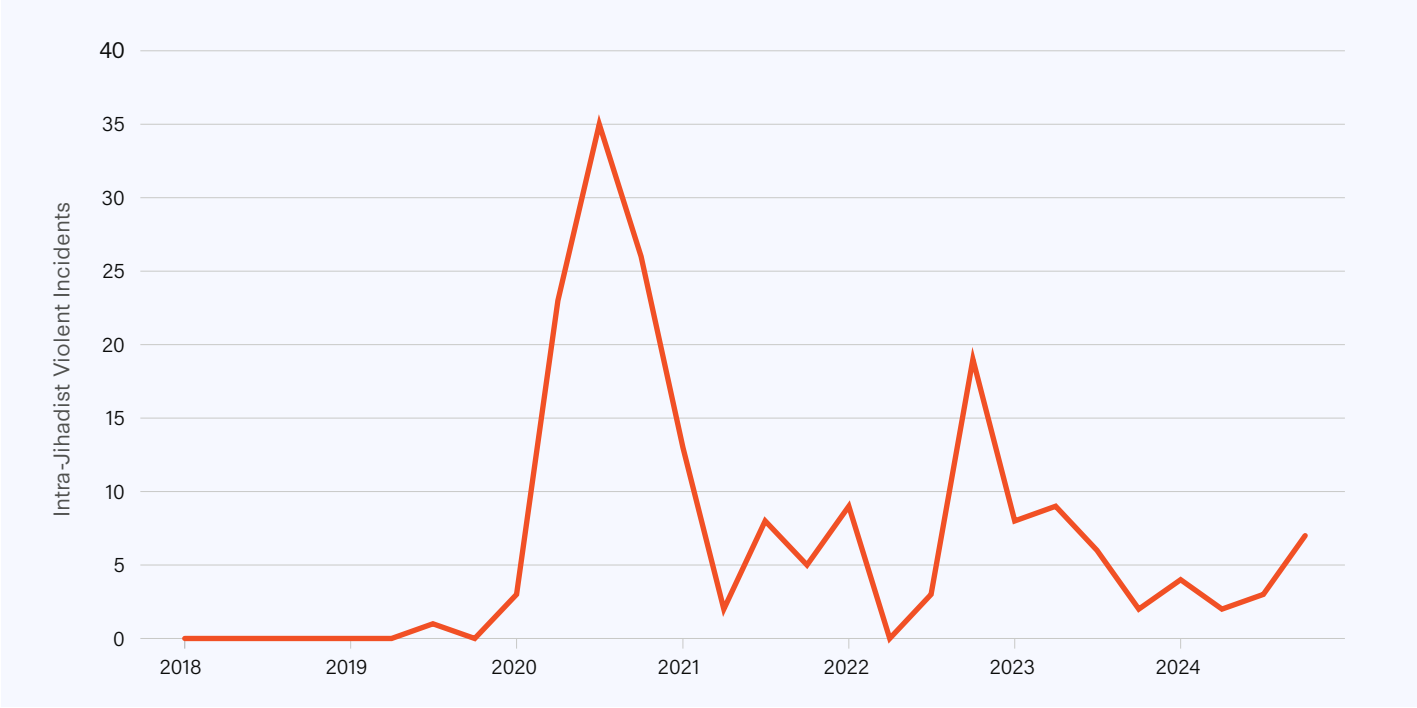
ISSP has also benefitted from increased support from the global IS network as it undertakes this transition. ISWAP has been sending support to ISSP at the direction of the IS core in the form of fighters and materiel.[38] From its inception to 2019, there were no confirmed instances of funding or weapons transfers to ISSP from the IS core, with one set of researchers referring to the lack of financing for ISSP from the Islamic State core as a marker of ISSP being a "profoundly sovereign subordinate" of the Islamic State.[39] But an increasing focus on the Islamic State's African affiliates may have altered that relationship in a way that will build ISSP's power through 2025.

The resurgence of conflict between ISSP and JNIM is likely to arrest or even reverse the former's growth in 2025. The two groups dramatically reduced their attacks on one another in 2024, reaching a truce that tacitly divided the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region between them.[40] Intra-jihadist violence declined accordingly (Figure 4.3), and both groups' capabilities were turned from intra-jihadist conflict to attacks against the government.

But the détente broke down toward the end of 2024. In October, JNIM Deputy Emir Amadou Koufa told a French journalist that "the only option now [for dealing with ISSP] is war."[41] January 2025 featured a variety of JNIM claims of attacks against the Islamic State.[42] The conflict is likely to favor the more capable group—JNIM—meaning that 2025 is likely to see ISSP's ascendance halted,

Figure 4.3

Violent Incidents Involving Intra-Jihadist Conflict in the Western Sahel, 2018–2024



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

even if JNIM is unable to significantly roll back the gains ISSP made in 2024.

West Africa's other Islamic State affiliate is ISWAP, which operates in the Lake Chad region. ISWAP emerged from the terrorist organization most frequently known as Boko Haram in 2016, when the group's leader renounced his pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State.[43] ISWAP's main goal, like that of other global IS affiliates, is to establish a regional caliphate.[44] To that end, ISWAP exhibits an active intent to kill security forces, government personnel, and foreign civilians in its area of operations around Lake Chad. It is also locked in a deadly conflict with Lake Chad's other Boko Haram splinter, JAS.

ISWAP is less powerful than JNIM but more powerful than ISSP, although it is not growing stronger in the way the other Sahelian groups are. (As is the case with ISSP, information on ISWAP is scarcer than information on JNIM, leading to less specificity and certainty in assessments of the group.) ISWAP is a highly organized group with rules governing travel and granular and standardized taxation regulations.[45] ISWAP has also instituted military reforms in line with Islamic State suggestions, adopting trappings and practices resembling those of a professional military.[46] It exercises a degree of formal control over fighters and staff, holds weapons in a central arsenal, and has attempted to pay salaries.[47] Over the course of 2024, ISWAP consolidated its control in areas between Lake Chad and the Sambisa and Alagarno forests in Nigeria's Borno State.[48]

The group's size and organization have allowed ISWAP to conduct complex attacks against hard military targets. For example, at least 20 Nigerian soldiers were killed in an ISWAP attack on a Nigerian base in Borno State in late January 2025. ISWAP was able to overpower the base and kill the commanding officer.[49] In the following month, ISWAP successfully took over a military checkpoint, seizing motorcycles along with ammo, and struck a Nigerian army patrol with an IED, resulting in the killing and wounding of several soldiers.[50]

Despite their regional power, none of these three groups have demonstrated an intent to conduct external operations targeting the United States, although they almost certainly have the capability to direct at least small-scale attacks outside of Africa. In 2023, authorities arrested several IS members they claimed were part of attack cells in Spain and Morocco. Authorities did not publicly clarify whether these attack cells were associated with ISSP, ISWAP, or both.[51] But previous reporting has suggested that IS supporters in Spain have attempted to travel to Mali, where ISSP operates.[52] The presence of ISWAP or ISSP attack cells in these countries suggests that West Africa's IS affiliates have the capability to direct at least small-scale attacks in Europe, and could probably develop the ability to do so in the United States.

Whether these arrests indicate that either ISSP or ISWAP intends to continue such attacks is questionable. Press and UN reporting suggest that the arrested individuals' intent to conduct attacks in Europe and North Africa resulted primarily from their own inability to relocate to Islamic State strongholds in the Sahel.[53] Islamic State groups in Africa may still seek to inspire attacks outside of their main areas of operation, but the group and its members seem to share a preference for violence in the Sahel itself.[54] How this dynamic will influence these groups' intent to conduct attacks abroad as ISSP and ISWAP capabilities shift is a major source of uncertainty.

Threat Spotlight: Islamic State-Somalia

The Islamic State-Somalia Province was formed in 2015 when a group of former Al Shabaab fighters lead by Abdulqadir Mumin pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.[55] The immediate goals of IS-Somalia appear to be consolidating territory in Puntland, where the group mainly operates, and eventually expanding across the region.[56] But unlike most of Africa's terrorist organizations, IS-Somalia has played a greater role in inciting and supporting attacks in the West as a part of its strategy than all other African terrorist groups other than Al Shabaab.[57]

IS-Somalia is among the weakest of Africa's terrorist organizations according to most traditional metrics of terrorist success, but certain aspects of the group allow it to have an outsized international influence. IS-Somalia was estimated to have 300–500 fighters in 2024, but roughly half of the group's fighters are foreign fighters.[58] IS-Somalia has frequently tried and failed to gain significant territorial control in Somalia, but in 2024, it began to assert greater control within Somalia and even emerged victorious from military engagements with Al Shabaab.[59] On December 31, 2024, IS-Somalia conducted its most complex operation yet, with a suicide attack on Puntland security forces resulting in the death of around 20 military personnel.[60]

But IS-Somalia's most important capabilities are not military but rather financial and administrative. Somalia is home to the Islamic State's Al-Karrar Office, which provides funding to the ADF, IS-M, ISKP, and potentially to Islamic State groups in Turkey and Yemen.[61] The United

Nations described it as providing "the connective tissue" for the global Islamic State organization.[62] IS-Somalia raises more than $4 million each year, a significant sum for a group with only a few hundred fighters, and sends much of that funding abroad.[63]

IS-Somalia has demonstrated a limited desire to conduct or incite attacks in the United States. In 2017, IS-Somalia released a video in which it called for fighters to hunt down high-profile targets in places like New York on holidays such as New Years or Christmas Day.[64] In March 2024, a terrorist cell with links to IS-Somalia was discovered in Sweden, a clear demonstration of a limited capability to conduct external operations as well as funding them.[65] Its capability to launch attacks remains extremely limited, however, and it is extremely unlikely to successfully attack U.S. individuals or assets in Africa or the U.S. homeland in 2025.

Trends to Watch

The emergence of a terrorist statelet in the Sahel is growing more likely.

The shift in the FAMa's focus toward fighting northern separatists and several West African states' shifts toward Russia increase the risk of a Salafi-jihadist statelet emerging in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region. These three developments have all reduced military pressure on the terrorist groups, increasing the likelihood that they will achieve their goals of creating a small, transnational proto-state in the area. Although total state collapse is not likely, the strength of the Sahel's terrorist groups and the weakness of the regions' states make it a possibility.[66]

The 2024 collapse of the Algiers Accord that had formally ended Mali's secession conflict has increased demands on the FAMa and created new opportunities for JNIM and ISSP. With the agreement terminated, the government is once again fighting both northern separatists and jihadist insurgents. This division of state resources is decreasing military pressure on JNIM and ISSP and has the potential to partially reproduce the conditions that allowed a coalition of separatists and Salafi-jihadists to take over northern Mali and declare independence in 2012, before being driven out by a joint French-Malian offensive known as Operation Serval. JNIM is already seeking a deconfliction agreement of sorts with separatist forces in order to allow both groups to focus their attention on the FAMa and its supporters, and the United Nations stated in early 2024 that separatists and Salafi-jihadists had once again been observed fighting alongside one another.[67]

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's expulsions of UN, French, and U.S. military forces have further contributed to the increasing likelihood of a Sahelian group sustaining any statelet that they create. The likelihood of a major Russian expedition to destroy a Salafi-jihadist statelet in the manner of Operation Serval or the U.S.-led campaign to defeat the original Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is extremely low. The main demand on its military forces is the ongoing war in Ukraine, and Moscow already tolerated the total collapse of a much more important partner—Syria's Assad regime—in 2024. There is little reason to believe Russia has either the capability or the will to dismantle a terrorist statelet in the Sahel if one emerges.

"Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger's expulsions of UN, French, and U.S. military forces have further contributed to the increasing likelihood of a Sahelian group sustaining any statelet that they create."

ISWAP-JAS conflict is shifting the threat in the Lake Chad Region into Nigeria.

Fighting between ISWAP and JAS in the vicinity of Lake Chad has returned to levels associated with the most intense years of their conflict (2016–2021). Those years saw ISWAP emerge ascendent, yet JAS is currently making up lost ground at ISWAP's expense. But increased competition from JAS may also be increasing the threat from ISWAP by incentivizing expansion into new areas of operation and the use of deadlier tactics. Whatever the subtleties of the relationship, terrorist violence continued to spread further into Nigeria in 2024.

JAS has eroded the foundations of ISWAP capabilities, but the extent to which it has weakened ISWAP is not yet clear. ISWAP has largely been expelled from the Lake Chad islands, which have been taken over by JAS.[68] This loss deprived ISWAP of a major headquarters area.[69] ISWAP has also reportedly lost significant amounts of weaponry to JAS.[70]

Several developments in 2024 suggest that ISWAP may be adopting a more expansive targeting strategy, increasing the risk of terrorist violence to local civilians, especially in Nigeria.[71] ISWAP has claimed bombings of civilian sites

in central and southern Nigeria and has likely conducted more.[72] Anecdotal evidence suggests that ISWAP targeting of civilians is increasing as it comes under greater pressure from JAS and state militaries.[73] In early 2024, ISWAP also appeared to shift the tactics it uses against the military, increasing its use of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices against the Nigerian military.[74]

The ADF and IS-M threaten to resurge amid international distraction.

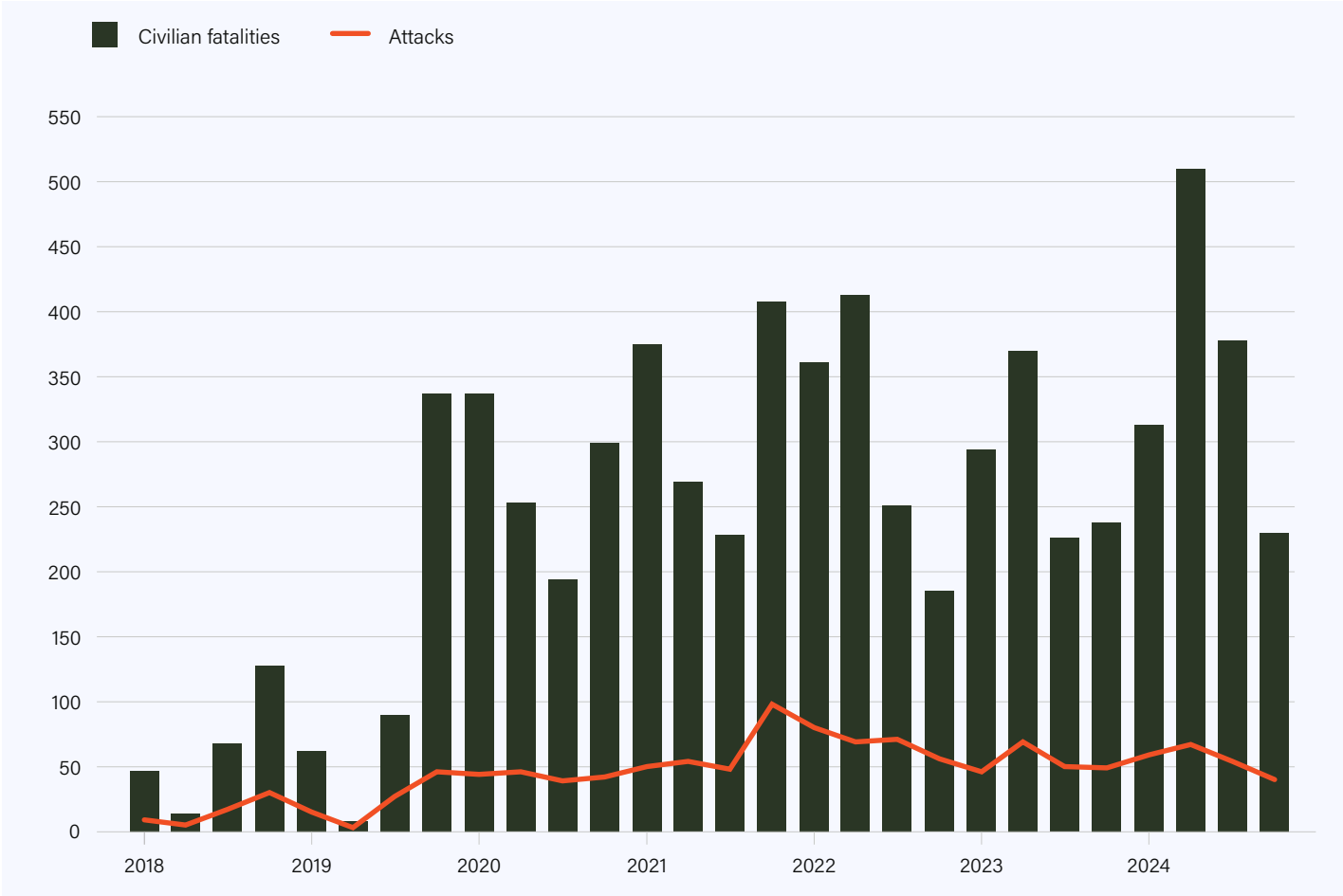
While few realistically expected the Somali government's offensive to defeat Al Shabaab in 2023 and 2024, the international military campaigns against the ADF and IS-M were important tests of those groups' staying powers. Both groups survived and are poised to resurge in 2025, although their limited interest in global Salafi-jihadism and their weakness relative to Al Shabaab and West Africa's strong insurgencies mean that the threat is likely to remain contained to their immediate areas of operation, with the possible exception of ADF attacks in the Ugandan capital of Kampala.

The ADF is a long-time insurgent group operating in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and western Uganda that became an Islamic State affiliate around 2019.[75] The ADF commands approximately 1,000–1,500 adult fighters. Although it experienced significant losses in Operation Shujaa, a joint DRC-Uganda offensive against the group that followed a November 2021 ADF suicide bombing in Kampala, the group survived and appears poised to further increase the threat it poses to local populations.[76]

After a decrease in attacks in early 2024, ADF violence rebounded in the middle of the year.[77] Violence remained high: The rate of ADF attacks against civilians stayed roughly constant in 2024, although lethality increased relative to 2023 (Figure 4.4). ADF propaganda also

Figure 4.4

ADF Attacks Against Civilians, 2018–2024



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

rebounded in 2024 after decreasing due to Operation Shujaa dispersing the group from its base areas.[78]

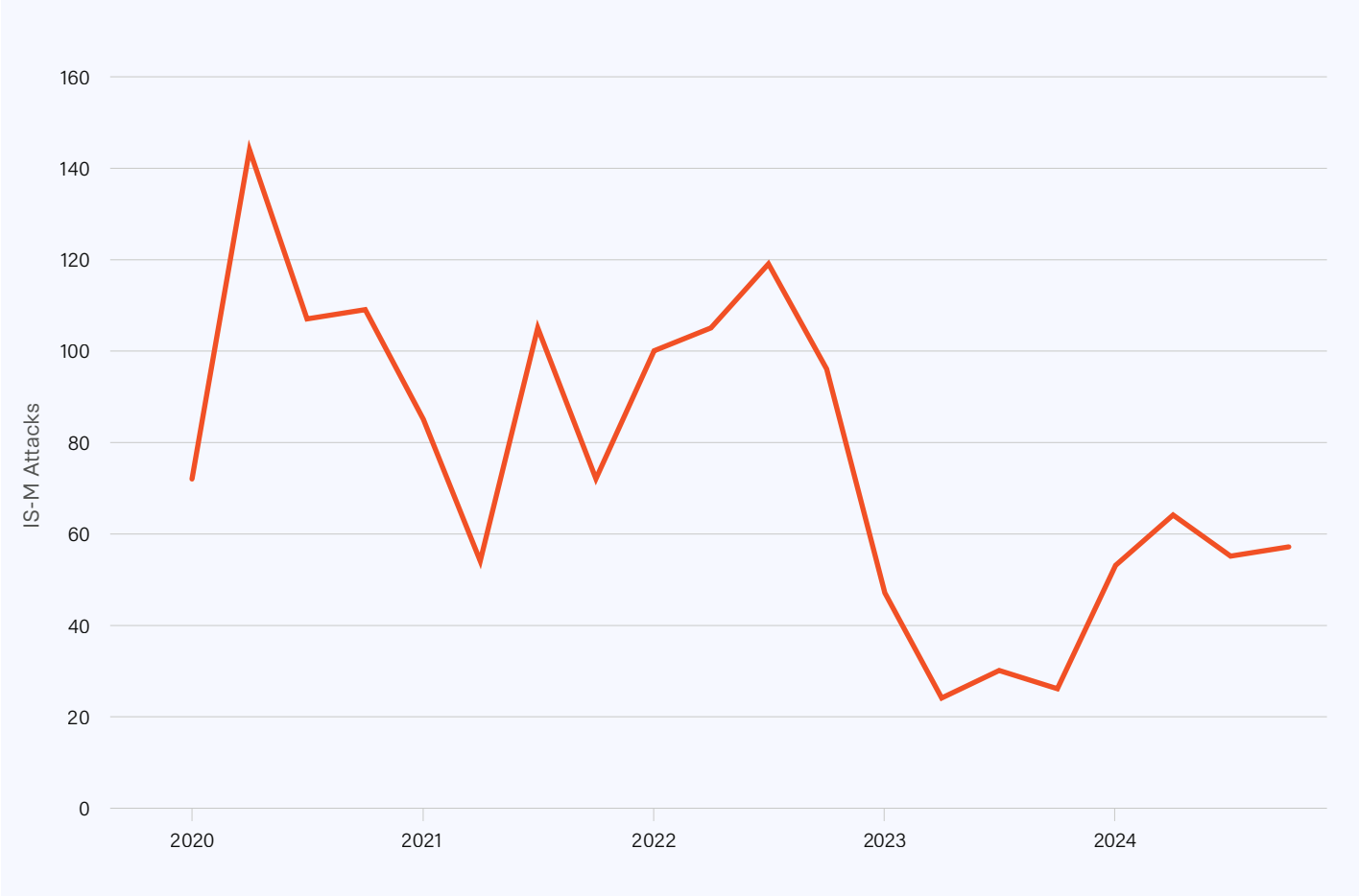
Increases in ADF violence are very likely to continue into 2025. The group benefited from an influx of foreign fighters in 2024, while the internal security situation in the DRC deteriorated.[79] The eastern DRC is home to about 100 armed groups, perhaps the most capable of which is the Rwandan-backed M23.[80] M23 captured Goma in January 2025, a major escalation in the country's long-running conflict that could portend increased instability and a decrease in Congolese and Ugandan focus on combatting the ADF.

In theory, the continent's weakest international terrorist group—IS-M—only commands between 250 and 350 fighters.[81] After a year of falling attack numbers, IS-M activity increased again in 2024 (Figure 4.5). Although violence has not yet returned to the heights it experienced before Rwandan and Southern African Development Community (SADC) troops intervened in 2021, the group has spread its reach into southern Cabo Delgado, which had previously been spared most of the group's violence.[82]

The main driver of IS-M's resurgence is the drawdown of the SADC mission through 2024. The SADC troops have been nominally replaced through an increase in Rwandan troops from 1,000 to 5,000.[83] Although their formal mandate is to restore the rule of the Mozambican state to Cabo Delgado, secrecy has contributed to local distrust of the Rwandan troops' motives. Rwandan forces also expanded their areas of operation from 2021 through 2024, but this appears to have displaced IS-M rather than defeat it.[84] Furthermore, Rwandan forces seem to have adopted a less assertive approach in early 2025, continuing to patrol but conducting fewer attacks against IS-M, an approach that may be related to Rwanda's role in the rapidly escalating conflict in the eastern DRC.[85]

Figure 4.5

IS-M Attacks in Mozambique, 2020–2024



Source: "Dashboard," Cabo Ligado, accessed February 4, 2025, https://www.caboligado.com/dashboard.

The trends in the DRC and Mozambique illustrate both the resilience of Africa's terrorist organizations and the role of international actors in how the threats manifest.[86] Both examples serve as stark reminders that seeking to eliminate the terrorist threat within Africa is extremely unlikely to succeed and that effective regional diplomacy is an important component of an effort to contain or roll terrorist groups back.

Implications for Policy

Priority 1: Resource a multidimensional campaign in the Horn of Africa

A highly kinetic approach will be insufficient to seriously undermine Al Shabaab's capabilities. Years of escalating U.S. military pressure on the group during the first Trump administration failed to prevent—and may have contributed to Al Shabaab's desire to conduct—its deadly attack on U.S. forces in Kenya in January 2020. The drivers of the Somali government's progress against Al Shabaab in 2023 mainly resulted from shifts in clan politics, which an air or special forces campaign is highly unlikely to affect positively. Any effort to reduce the Al Shabaab threat to the United States and the region must include diplomatic, military, legal, and financial support to the Somali government. Underlying these efforts will have to be sustained intelligence operations focused on mapping key linkages for disruption and uncovering plots before they mature.

Somalia is highly dependent on several countries with strong security relationships with the United States and its allies. Not only are Kenya and Turkey both major backers of Somalia, they are also important U.S. security partners that the United States may be able to convince to increase support for the Somali government. Successfully mediating the ongoing dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia over the former's relationship with Somalia's separatist Somaliland would allow Ethiopia to bolster AUSSOM and maintain pressure on Al Shabaab.

The role of international ties in supporting and magnifying the threat from Somalia requires efforts to reduce Al Shabaab's and IS-Somalia's links with their external partners. In practice, this means a combination of physically interdicting the movement of goods between Yemen and Somalia and taking financial measures against the flow of money out of IS-Somalia. It could also mean the targeted killings of key nodes in these groups' international networks, like IS-Somalia's Bilal al-Sudani, who was killed by U.S. forces in 2023.[87] President Trump already appears likely to increase this type of pressure on IS-Somalia at least.[88]

No matter the combination of measures the Trump administration chooses to implement its Somalia policy, Al Shabaab will remain a threat for the foreseeable future. There are no measures any external actor can take to move the group toward strategic defeat. The best one can realistically hope for is that pressure on the group and its international partners can reduce its ability to plot major external operations and contribute to stabilizing Somalia. Fortunately, conducting external operations against U.S. interests remains a secondary priority for Al Shabaab.

Priority 2: Construct a strategic warning regime targeting the Sahel

The second priority for counterterrorism in Africa should be to construct a strategic warning regime focused on the Sahel. A strategic warning regime should prioritize three main threats related to the Sahel's Salafi-jihadist groups: their ability and intent to conduct external operations or target U.S. citizens or facilities in the region; the expansion of their insurgent activities out of their current areas of operation; and the political stability of the region's governments.

Strategic warning is more important than actively targeting Sahelian jihadists for three main reasons. The first is that it is more feasible. The United States lacks significant military access to the main theater. The United States no longer cooperates with Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger on counterterrorism in any significant way, meaning that U.S. counterterrorist operations targeting the groups in their emerging stronghold will be at best politically and logistically difficult.

The second reason is that the groups do not exhibit a major desire to attack the United States. Increasing kinetic action against them might therefore prove counterproductive, transforming them into greater threats by making them more hostile toward the United States.

Third, the rise in the jihadist threat has been heavily influenced by political factors like the revival of the separatist conflict in northern Mali, intra-jihadist conflict or détente, the region's coups d'etat, and the shift of the Sahel's military governments toward Russia. These factors are hard to influence—especially through military action—and resources put toward understanding and anticipating their shifts would be well spent.

Priority 3: Provide diplomatic support to regional conflict-resolution efforts

The impact of non-terrorist conflicts on the politics concerning the terrorist threat suggests that resolving

non-terrorist conflicts will reduce the threat from terrorist organizations on the continent. Although many of these conflicts are complex and will be extremely difficult to resolve, diplomatic efforts to do so offer an opportunity to increase pressure on international terrorist organizations at a fraction of the price of military action.

The Somalia-Ethiopia dispute is probably the most tractable of the relevant conflicts, and the United States could play a role in mediating an end to the conflict that is hampering the international campaign against Al Shabaab. Other conflicts will be more difficult to resolve, but the Trump administration may be particularly well-suited to do so. If the Trump administration seeks to improve the U.S.-Russia relationship, the two countries might be able to find common ground on reducing the violence associated with the separatist conflict in northern Mali. (While such an outcome remains unlikely, President Trump is far better positioned to work with Russia than his predecessor.) President Trump has also demonstrated a greater willingness to work with authoritarian leaders like Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who is key to reducing the violence in eastern Congo and northern Mozambique.

Risks accepted: Emergence of a terrorist state in West Africa

Prioritizing scarce military resources to combat Al Shabaab and prioritizing an intelligence effort against JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP means accepting that one or more of those groups could overthrow a regional government, trigger state collapse, or otherwise carve out some sort of statelet in the region. Such a statelet might serve as a magnet for transnational terrorists or inspire U.S.-based Salafi-jihadist sympathizers. It could also do serious harm to other U.S. interests on the continent, especially its economic and human rights interests. But African jihadists have never inspired international sympathizers the way that their Middle Eastern and Afghan brethren have, and the United States has non-military options for pursuing its interests in such a contingency. A strategic warning regime would continue to function as a guard against international attacks even if a terrorist group carves out a statelet in the region.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Regional Prioritization

The greatest terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland comes from domestic extremists rather than foreign terrorist organizations. The last successful terrorist attack in the United States where the perpetrator had direct contact with a foreign terrorist organization was the 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola, during which three victims were killed. While foreign terrorist organizations continue to inspire attacks and multiple plots, direct involvement from foreign groups has been disrupted since 2019. Since the Pensacola attack, there have been more than 130 domestic terrorist attacks, resulting in 75 victim deaths, without evidence of direct foreign involvement. Unlike foreign terrorist organizations, which are constrained by geographic distance, primarily focused on other strategic priorities, and heavily monitored by the United States and allies, domestic terrorists, including those inspired by foreign actors, can act with little warning, leveraging readily available weapons to strike easily accessible targets in the United States.

In contrast, the greatest terrorist-related threats to U.S. foreign policy interests are groups located in the Middle East. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis remain better resourced and deadlier than any U.S. extremist movement or African terrorist organization. Despite the setbacks they faced in 2024, the Middle Eastern groups maintain the ability to dramatically undermine regional stability via terrorist attacks against key U.S. allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia or—in the case of the Houthis—international shipping and U.S. Navy forces. The October 7, 2023, attacks triggered the greatest changes in the Middle East since the beginning of the Syrian civil war a decade prior and, although Hezbollah and Hamas have been battered by Israeli military might, they remain the dominant political and military forces in Lebanon and Gaza, respectively, and probably maintain the capability to rapidly destabilize the region.

The region's Islamic State and Al Qaeda groups (including both organizations' leadership cores) have been

hollowed out by decades of U.S.-led military pressure, but they remain committed to attacking U.S. interests in the region and potentially the homeland. The groups' hostility means that they merit continued counterterrorist pressure, even if the likelihood of a serious terrorist attack against the United States perpetrated by either the Islamic State or Al Qaeda is low.

Although Africa has emerged as the epicenter of global Salafi-jihadism in recent years, only one of the continent's transnational terrorist organizations poses an active threat to the United States. Al Shabaab is both locally strong and has demonstrated a desire to kill U.S. citizens in the region and the U.S. homeland. The continent's other groups have limited capability and/or intent to conduct attacks against U.S. individuals or assets both in Africa and in the U.S. homeland. Africa's groups continue to grow stronger, however, and face far less counterterrorism pressure than their counterparts in the Middle East.

Types of Domestic Terrorist Movements

Analysis reveals three main types of terrorist movements in the United States. The first is distinguished by a willingness and capability to conduct mass-casualty attacks, and it includes both the white supremacist and Salafi-jihadist movements. These movements both merit proactive attention from domestic law enforcement, although the white supremacist movement is much larger and more active and therefore merits the allocation of greater resources.

The second type of domestic terrorist movement is distinguished by a willingness to conduct targeted violence against U.S. political figures and other government targets rather than public places or random civilians. Most often motivated by partisan extremism, these attacks do not pose much of a direct threat to the average American, but the significance of their targets represents a threat to domestic political stability. Because they are hostile to a relatively small set of targets, the threat can be reduced by hardening government targets and planning for scenarios in which an attack or assassination attempt succeeds.

The third type of domestic terrorist movement is distinguished by a declining capability to conduct attacks and a decreasing commitment to ideological goals, which make serious violence relatively unlikely. Though several terrorist movements in the United States have declined in relevance in recent years, the only such movement examined in this report is the anti-government movement. This movement used to be both capable and willing to conduct attacks—including mass-casualty attacks like the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing—but has declined in its appeal relative to partisan extremism in recent decades. The ability of lone actors to commit deadly violence and the movement's history of doing so suggest that it cannot be totally ignored, but greater attention should be paid to targeting members of the white supremacist, Salafi-jihadist, and partisan extremist movements.

Types of International Terrorist Groups

Analysis of terrorist groups in the Middle East and Africa revealed four different types, each posing a different threat level: direct, indirect, latent, and minor. The first type is the *direct threat*, a highly capable organization that has demonstrated its intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. Africa's Al Shabaab and the Middle East's Houthis are the only international terrorist organizations currently in this category. Al Shabaab's capability and hostility merit a multidimensional U.S. government effort to contain the group over the next few years to minimize the risk of attacks against U.S. interests in Africa as well as plots against the homeland. The resilience of the Houthis suggests that the United States will have to do more than conduct one-off military strikes and must develop a broader strategy with regional allies to address the increasing threat to U.S. military personnel and international shipping.

The second is the *indirect threat*, a relatively low-capability organization that has demonstrated its intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. Over the past 20 years, sustained U.S. military pressure has put most Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates—for example, AQAP, ISIS, ISKP, and IS-Somalia—in this category. These groups still conduct attacks against any U.S. military and diplomatic personnel in their areas of operation and seek to inspire or facilitate attacks by like-minded individuals or groups in the United States and Europe. These groups merit sustained counterterrorist pressure using a relatively narrow set of tools—special operations raids, intelligence actions, counterterrorist finance, limited military strikes, and law enforcement measures.

The third is the *latent threat*, a highly capable organization that has not recently demonstrated its intent to conduct attacks where U.S. personnel and assets are the primary targets. Although these groups are highly unlikely to conduct direct attacks on the U.S. homeland in the next few years, they do indirectly threaten U.S. interests because they have the strength to threaten

regional stability. Hezbollah and Hamas are the most important of these groups, and in the past Hezbollah has made U.S. personnel and assets in the region a primary target, while Hamas's attacks on Israel have also led to the death and seizure of Americans. JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP all threaten the stability of West Africa. The latter set merits close attention to avoid being surprised by a shift toward more hostile intentions or offensives that lead to the emergence of a government or statelet ruled by Salafi-jihadists. These groups are therefore usually more of a problem addressed through sustained intelligence gathering and analysis rather than military action, although military action may be necessary should their intentions change or if the threat to key allies is grave.

The fourth is the *minor threat*, a relatively low-capability organization that has not demonstrated its intent to conduct attacks against U.S. personnel and assets. IS-M, JAS, and the ADF/Islamic State-DRC are all part of the global jihadist movement but for now pose a minimal threat to U.S. interests. These groups should be a lesser priority for U.S. security policymakers.

Conclusion

The United States faces an evolving, growing domestic terrorism problem. Violent white supremacists remain a significant terrorist threat to Americans, and the growing partisan extremist movement increasingly threatens political figures and government targets. U.S. Salafi-jihadist sympathizers also remain a resilient threat, although to a lesser extent than at the peak of international Islamic State power. This shift implies that domestic counterterrorism should receive a greater share of resources as international counterterrorist activities declines.

International terrorism remains a threat to U.S. individuals and interests, but the dangers posed by international Salafi-jihadism have declined relative to domestic extremism. Decades of pressure have weakened the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Middle Eastern affiliates. While they maintain the intent to attack the United States—including the U.S. homeland—the ability of these international groups to do so is mostly limited to inspiring sympathizers to conduct attacks like the Bourbon Street vehicle attack of January 1, 2025. These groups, especially ISKP, are still attempting to conduct such attacks, however, and continued pressure is necessary to prevent their resurgence. Meanwhile, attacking the United States is at most a secondary interest of Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups. Of these groups, only Al Shabaab and IS-Somalia have demonstrated a sustained intent to attack the United States in the region or overseas.

These changes are occurring at a moment of major uncertainty, and policymakers risk being caught unawares by an international terrorist resurgence. Hamas and Hezbollah have been battered but are rebuilding, which means the potential for significant organizational change. The Houthis and HTS have emerged as regional players in the Middle East and, in the Houthis' case, East Africa. West Africa's Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates are threatening to carve out a statelet that could change their role in the international Salafi-jihadist movement and have unpredictable ripple effects. Policymakers should consider investments in longer-term strategic warning analysis to minimize the risk that they are caught off guard.

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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