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Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2026

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Contents

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List of Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
AI	Artificial intelligence
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FLA	Azawad Liberation Front
GDP	General Directorate of Provinces
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
IED	Improvised explosive device
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS-DRC	Islamic State-Democratic Republic of the Congo
IS-M	Islamic State-Mozambique
IS-Somalia	Islamic State-Somalia Province
ISF	International Stabilization Force
ISIS	Islamic State
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISR	Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
ISSP	Islamic State-Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State-West Africa Province
JAS	Independent Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
NSS	National Security Strategy
NVE	Nihilistic violent extremism
PLC	Presidential Leadership Council
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UASs	Unmanned aerial systems

Executive Summary

The United States faces an increasingly complex and unpredictable terrorism landscape. Unlike during the period immediately after 9/11 or the heyday of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, there is no clear paramount threat. Instead, the United States faces a variety of formal groups, loose networks, and lone actors who intend to kill Americans and spread fear in the United States or otherwise threaten important U.S. security interests.

In the Middle East and Africa, al Qaeda affiliates and Islamic State provinces pose the greatest threat. Many formal groups, especially those in Africa, are growing in strength. Even if they do not currently intend to attack the U.S. homeland, there is little guarantee that their intentions will remain the same in the next few years. In the United States itself, the threat arises primarily from lone actors and loose networks, often motivated by niche or blended ideologies that are a poor fit for traditional counterterrorism analysis. At the same time, the United States is reducing its investment in counterterrorism as other priorities come to the fore in U.S. national security thinking.

As a result, the terrorist threat is increasingly unpredictable. The threat environment could deteriorate significantly in the next few years if one or more African groups turn their eyes toward attacks against the United States or if a high-profile partisan assassination occurs in the United States, prompting a cycle of retaliation. Or the situation could improve, especially if more terrorist organizations could follow the example of Syria's new ruler, Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former member of al Qaeda who has renounced international terrorism and garnered significant international acceptance.

Terrorism in the United States remains far less prevalent than in other regions, but the incidents and fatalities recorded by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) increased in 2025 to 40 attacks and 31 deaths. Anti-government extremism is the most common motivation, driven largely by an increase in left-wing incidents targeting immigration enforcement authorities, which has in recent decades been the source of extremely small amounts of violence. Partisan extremism, including the threat of politically motivated assassinations, will likely remain a feature of U.S. politics, with the 2026 midterm cycle likely to intensify that threat. Jihadist attacks remain rare but disproportionately lethal, as demonstrated by the Bourbon Street attack that killed 14 people in New Orleans on New Year's Day 2025. White supremacist terrorism has killed fewer people in the short term, though its underlying capacity remains intact.

Terrorism in the Middle East is less threatening to the U.S. homeland than in recent years, although the ongoing U.S. and Israeli war with Iran has increased Iran's incentives to use terrorism against the United States. Israeli military campaigns have significantly weakened Hamas and Hezbollah, and Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance is in disarray. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain primarily inspirational threats, continuing to inspire attacks in the West despite their organizational degradation. Syria's new government presents both an opportunity and a risk: It has joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS but remains fragile, and the Islamic State has exploited recent instability to free detained fighters and expand its presence. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), long considered diminished, is resurging. It is expanding its capabilities, rebuilding finances, and resuming English-language propaganda targeting Western audiences. Terrorists still pose an important threat to U.S. interests and security partners in the Middle East, and the ongoing war with Iran remains a major engine of uncertainty.

Terrorism in Africa poses the greatest uncertainty. Al Qaeda affiliates al Shabaab and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) are threatening the survival of governments in Somalia and Mali, respectively, and al Shabaab remains the only African group known to have plotted a mass-casualty attack against the U.S. homeland. Meanwhile, the Islamic State West Africa Province is probably the largest and most capable Islamic State province worldwide. Although these groups remain primarily focused on local goals, their growing capabilities—including rapid advances in armed drone use—and increasing integration into international jihadist networks raise the risk of a future shift toward targeting U.S. interests.

This report also analyzes three themes that cut across regions. First, terrorist groups are making increasing use of unmanned aerial systems (UASs) and artificial intelligence, technologies whose full implications for terrorism and counterterrorism remain poorly understood. Second, groups repeatedly thought to be in terminal decline have resurged, underscoring that degradation is not defeat. Third, diplomatic engagement is essential. Proxy conflicts and state weakness in the Sahel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Yemen, and Syria provide terrorists with room to operate and resurge in ways that threaten both local actors and U.S. interests.

Overall, the United States is reducing its counterterrorism investment at a moment of growing uncertainty. Cuts to

the FBI, the CIA, and prevention programs—combined with politicization of both intelligence functions and the definition of terrorism—are increasing the risk of missed warnings and undetected plots. The result is not an inevitable catastrophe but a higher probability of surprise and a reduced capacity to prevent it. Effective prioritization of resources is essential to managing an uncertain threat environment.

The findings of this report are based primarily on analysis of terrorist activity in 2025, although it has been updated in certain areas to include developments in the first three months of 2026.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this assessment is to help U.S. national security officials, intelligence and law enforcement professionals, and military decisionmakers prioritize different terrorist threats. Terrorism is currently declining as a U.S. national security priority, and resources available for counterterrorism are decreasing accordingly.[1]

As resources dedicated to counterterrorism decrease, the likelihood of a surprise attack rises. Fewer resources mean less ability to gather information about terrorists and disrupt their plans through military, covert, or law enforcement action. Lower prioritization means less time for the bureaucracy to question assumptions that, when unexamined, can contribute to deadly surprises. Unfortunately, the national security community cannot assume that warnings against terrorist plots will emerge naturally from the government's normal intelligence functions.[2] Warning intelligence is a specialized discipline requiring specialized training, collection, and analysis—and therefore specific investment.[3] U.S. resources are limited, and the government cannot consider every topic, region, or group a top priority.[4]

Effective prioritization allows decisionmakers to allocate resources across different parts of the national counterterrorism enterprise. Prioritizing threats also means understanding where the United States can take risks. As such, this introductory chapter begins by describing the current state of U.S. counterterrorism policy, strategy, and implementation. It proceeds to a discussion of the methodology behind this analysis. Finally, it concludes with a brief description of the report's overall structure.

THE STATE OF U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM

The U.S. approach to counterterrorism changed significantly in 2025, diverging in many ways from the approach taken by multiple administrations after 9/11 and in the years that followed. Although fighting Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups such as al Qaeda remains an important part of the approach to counterterrorism under the Trump

administration, the administration has broadened the concept of terrorism, designating Latin American drug cartels and largely inactive left-wing organizations in Europe as foreign terrorist organizations (see Table 1.1).[5] Presidential and administration rhetoric in the United States has also used the terrorism label freely, including against anti-administration protesters.[6]

The Trump administration has also reduced the size of counterterrorism-related agencies in the United States, and shifted resources away from counterterrorism functions within these agencies. For example, the Department of Homeland Security decreased the size of the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships and reduced support for state and local law enforcement, while the State Department slashed its counterterrorism office. The CIA and the FBI made large personnel cuts, and the FBI cut back its partnerships with civil society organizations.[7]

Administration leaders have also shifted the focus within organizations such as the FBI, with fewer personnel working on terrorism, especially right-wing terrorism, moving agents' focus to immigration.[8] Finally, counterterrorism intelligence may be ignored, weakened, or politicized because of actions such as the firing of intelligence officials whose assessments do not match administration assertions or requirements that officials support false

Table 1.1

Foreign Terrorist Organizations Designated Between January 21, 2025 and March 16, 2026

Date designated	Name
February 20, 2025	Cártel de Sinaloa
February 20, 2025	Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)
February 20, 2025	Cártel del Noreste
February 20, 2025	La Nueva Familia Michoacana
February 20, 2025	Cártel del Golfo (Gulf Cartel)
February 20, 2025	Cárteles Unidos
February 20, 2025	Tren de Aragua
February 20, 2025	Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)
March 5, 2025	Ansarallah (the Houthis)
May 5, 2025	Viv Ansanm
May 5, 2025	Gran Grif
August 12, 2025	Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)
September 5, 2025	Los Choneros
September 5, 2025	Los Lobos
September 18, 2025	Harakat al Nujaba (HAN)
September 18, 2025	Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS)
September 18, 2025	Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya (HAAA)
September 18, 2025	Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA)
September 24, 2025	Barrio 18
November 20, 2025	Antifa Ost (aka Hammerbande)
November 20, 2025	Informal Anarchist Federation / International Revolutionary Front (FAI/FRI)
November 20, 2025	Armed Proletarian Justice
November 20, 2025	Revolutionary Class Self-Defense
November 24, 2025	Cártel de los Soles
December 17, 2025	Clan del Golfo
January 14, 2026	Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood
March 16, 2026	Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood

Source: "Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations.

conspiracy theories, such as the claim that the January 6, 2021, insurrection was an "inside job."[9]

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. Criminal organizations may use violence to create a broad psychological impact, but they seek to achieve personal or economic goals rather than political ones; therefore, for this analysis, those actions are not considered terrorism.[10]

For similar reasons, this analysis does not consider kidnapping for ransom a terrorist attack, even if the situation ends with the death of the hostage. However, the research team did examine cases of hostage taking as indicators of both capability and intent. Finally, it does not usually consider attacks against U.S. military forces operating alongside local partners to be terrorism, though the research team examined such attacks for evidence of hostile intent directed specifically against the United States and evidence of a desire to create the broad psychological impact that characterizes terrorism.

SCOPE

In general, this report analyzes the threat posed by **terrorist groups**: collections of individuals who see themselves as part of a broader organization or network. In the United States, however, few terrorist attacks are conducted by organized groups. Rather, most attacks are conducted by individuals or small networks aligned with an ideology that is often vague, inconsistent, or otherwise poorly developed. As a result, Chapter 2 on the United States analyzes the threat in terms of ideological movements.

The most important criterion for inclusion in this assessment is the requirement that the group or movement poses a plausible threat to U.S. individuals or assets, especially to civilians in the homeland. This excludes a variety of terrorist groups that threaten U.S. interests but have never displayed evidence of an intent to attack U.S. civilians, such as Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo. It also excludes groups so diminished by counterterrorism pressure that they pose a minimal threat even to soft civilian targets in their traditional areas of strength.

This report conceives of the threat terrorist groups pose as a function of their **intent** to conduct or enable attacks and their **capability** to do so. Capabilities vary in several ways. Groups possess different **types of capabilities**. For example, a group that can execute a suicide vehicle–borne improvised explosive device (IED) attack may lack the skills to inspire a sympathetic individual overseas to conduct an attack in their home country. Groups also differ in the **level of capability** they demonstrate. Some are more effective than others at conducting, facilitating, or inspiring certain types of attacks. In many cases, the scope and magnitude of a group's capabilities are correlated. Groups with higher levels of capability in one area often have high levels in other areas and can effectively undertake a wider range of activities. However, where this correlation breaks down—such as with al Shabaab's relatively low demonstrated capability in UASs—the report highlights those anomalies to provide a more accurate assessment of the group's overall threat profile.

This edition of the report puts a greater focus on capabilities beyond the ability to conduct attacks, especially the ability to facilitate and inspire violence. Terrorist groups can plot attacks against U.S. individuals or assets and carry them out using their own members and weapons; they can also facilitate violence by other actors, often by remotely providing money or training.[11] Finally, they can inspire attackers they may never have contact with except by providing propaganda. Therefore, this report often uses phrases like "facilitative threats" or "inspirational threats" to identify groups that only provide remote facilitation or distribute propaganda in order to inspire attacks.

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 and other violence perpetrated as part of a civil war, which frequently involves killing civilians for a variety of reasons.[12] In most cases, this report does not draw a clear distinction, assuming instead that groups responsible for greater insurgent violence are more capable of conducting terrorist attacks, especially within the group's area of operations.

However, much of the analysis is focused on the world's most capable terrorist organizations, which have been responsible for the majority of terrorist violence and mass-casualty attacks worldwide. Although such attacks are rare, they account for most of the risk associated with terrorism.[13]

DATA SOURCES

This report draws on a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources. Researchers reviewed hundreds of publications on terrorist activity from 2025, extracting themes based on a standard list of indicators. Researchers also examined terrorist propaganda and assessed trends in terrorist activity using quantitative data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project and a dataset of U.S. terrorist attacks and plots maintained by the research team. In some cases, the research team also constructed small custom datasets based on open sources to answer questions associated with a particular group or trend. Although most of the quantitative and qualitative data used in this analysis was drawn from 2025, it was updated in certain areas (especially the Middle East chapter) to reflect new information from the first three months of 2026.

Indicators of intent include a group's rhetoric, stated goals, ideology, and recent history of significant attacks or plots. Indicators of a group's capability include the number of people killed or injured in a single attack, attacks conducted on hard targets, level of coordination exhibited in attacks, possession of specific armaments, demonstration of specific skills, financial resources, control over territory or access to safe haven, access to state support, level of hierarchical organization, links with other terrorist groups, number of attacks conducted, geographic coverage of attacks, and group size.[14]

SYNTHESIS AND CATEGORIZATION

The main analytic method was structured, focused comparison.[15] After gathering data on indicators of capability and intent, researchers compared the groups' capabilities and apparent intent. The previous edition of this report categorized international terrorist organizations into four main categories and domestic terrorist movements into three. This edition adopts a more **multidimensional approach** to better capture the complexity of the threat terrorist groups pose. While it still identifies **active**, **latent**, and **minor threats**, it also highlights **facilitative** and **inspirational** threats as defined below:

- **Direct threats** are highly capable terrorist organizations that have demonstrated an intent to attack U.S. personnel and assets, especially civilian targets. If left unchecked, these groups are more likely than others to plot a terrorist attack against U.S. personnel and assets in the coming years and may even target the U.S. homeland.
- **Latent threats** are highly capable organizations that have not demonstrated an intent to attack U.S. personnel or assets, though they may have done so in the past or may have harmed U.S. citizens indirectly in attacks against other targets. These groups are less likely than direct threats to attempt terrorist attacks against U.S. individuals or assets in the near future and almost certainly will not target the U.S. homeland.
- **Minor threats** are low-capability organizations that have not demonstrated an intent to attack U.S. personnel or assets. These groups are less likely than direct threats to target U.S. assets or individuals in the coming year.
- **Facilitative threats** aim to harm the United States by enabling attacks by others—most often by providing financial support, training, or logistical assistance, typically through digital means (e.g., the internet). In general, facilitative threats have hostile intentions but lack the capabilities necessary to conduct direct attacks.
- **Inspirational threats** intend to harm the United States by inspiring individuals in other countries to conduct attacks, often through the dissemination of propaganda, without direct contact with the perpetrators. Like facilitative threats, inspirational threats have hostile intentions but lack the capabilities necessary to conduct direct attacks.

PROBABILISTIC ASSESSMENTS

This report frequently makes a judgment regarding the likelihood that a particular terrorist group will conduct an attack.[16] To do so, it uses Sherman Kent's "words of estimative probability" throughout (see Table 1.2).[17] For example, the phrase "Al Shabaab will almost certainly conduct an attack in Mogadishu in 2026" should be understood as the researchers estimating a 93 percent chance that an al Shabaab attack will occur in Mogadishu in 2026.

Because international terrorism is so rare, however, this report often deals in conditional probabilities. It frequently makes statements like, "If an attack or plot occurs, al Shabaab will probably be behind it." Such a statement does not imply a 75 percent chance of an al Shabaab attack against the United States in 2026; rather, it implies an approximately 75 percent chance that any terrorist attack plotted by an African group in 2026 will have been plotted by al Shabaab and an approximately 25 percent chance that it will have been plotted by some other group.

Table 1.2

Words of Estimative Probability

Word or phrase	Estimated probability	Margin of error
Almost certain	93%	+ 6%
Probably/likely	75%	+ 12%
Chances about even	50%	+ 10%
Probably not/unlikely	30%	+ 10%
Almost certainly not	7%	+ 5%

Source: Adapted from Sherman Kent, "Words of Estimative Probability," *Studies in Intelligence* 8, no. 4 (1964): 55, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP93T01132R000100020036-3.pdf.

These assessments were reached through a process known as reference class forecasting.[18] First, researchers established the empirical frequency of the event to be forecast using ACLED or CSIS data. Then they adjusted the probability up or down using the other data (usually qualitative) they uncovered in the literature and through their analyses.[19] These adjustments and the decision regarding what constitutes the proper reference class in the case of unprecedented or extremely rare events necessarily involve subjective judgments; however, the research team discussed and debated the forecasts in an effort to reduce the effect of individual biases on the assessments.

LIMITATIONS

Even after defining terrorism—itself a debated category—the process of coding incidents into datasets is inherently subjective and fraught with ambiguity. Coding problems include: deciding what incidents qualify as terrorism (e.g., cases involving mental illness, unclear political intent, property damage, or blurred domestic/international boundaries); classifying incidents that clearly are terrorism but do not fit neatly into categories (e.g., hybrid "salad bar" ideologies or single-issue violence); and analyzing data in ways that produce consistent conclusions despite biases including uneven law enforcement attention or small sample sizes. These challenges mean that terrorism data is shaped as much by interpretive choices as by objective facts, influencing how threats are perceived and prioritized. Coding remains essential for policymaking, provided researchers are transparent about definitions, but it is an exercise in managing ambiguity rather than eliminating it.[20]

In addition, no single framework can accurately and precisely reflect the diversity of real-world terrorist organizations. Structured comparison of groups and movements that operate in different ways across several continents requires ignoring various differences to increase comparability.[21] Since the purpose of this report is to support prioritization, such a comparison and the loss of detail that comes with it are necessary. However, the researchers seek to mitigate the problem by focusing on the particularities of individual groups in each chapter.

In addition, attempting to measure intent is difficult and controversial, whether for states or nonstate groups including terrorist organizations.[22] Experts do not agree on what indicators are appropriate for approximating terrorist intent, and the covert nature of terrorist organizations makes observing specific intentions extremely difficult.[23] Estimating the capabilities of nonstate groups also poses unique problems for analysts. Terrorist capabilities are far less amenable to counting and tracking than are state military capabilities. Researchers cannot exhaustively catalog the location of all terrorists to assess a threat the way they can (or at least can attempt to) North Korean missile batteries or Iranian submarines.[24] Both of these limitations introduce significant uncertainty that can be reduced only with more granular research on priority groups, including using sources not available to the open-source analytic community. Some uncertainty, however, is irreducible.

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 or capability to conduct external operations. Assessing the threat to the United States requires understanding (in most cases) a group's desire and capability to attack targets on a different continent. Terrorist attacks, plots, and propaganda targeting Europe provide important data to assess intentions and capabilities.

Structure

This report consists of three chapters, each of which assesses the threat associated with groups or movements in the United States, the Middle East, and Africa, respectively. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction that outlines its findings. It then proceeds to a comparative assessment of the groups in the region of focus and spotlights several that pose a particularly significant threat or have undergone notable changes in the past year. The chapters then move to a discussion of cross-cutting themes for policymakers and analysts to watch in the next 12 months, and each concludes with a discussion of current U.S. counterterrorism activities in the region and what the analysis implies for future U.S. counterterrorism policy. The report concludes with a brief discussion of the global threat landscape and themes that transcend any one region to affect the world.

Chapter 2

The United States

Introduction

This chapter assesses four terrorist movements in the United States according to their core ideology: anti-government extremism, partisan extremism, jihadism, and white supremacy.[25] Although the United States faces threats from both domestic and international terrorists, this chapter focuses exclusively on the former. The two other regional chapters focus on the international terrorist groups that pose the greatest threat to the United States, including to the U.S. homeland.

Overall, terrorism remains much less prevalent in the United States than in other parts of the world, particularly those examined in other chapters of this report. Anti-government and partisan extremists pose the greatest terrorist threats in the United States, marked by an increase in terrorist attacks, plots, fatalities, and public attention in 2025.[26] That increase was largely driven by left-wing incidents, which had been rare in recent decades and remain low compared to the average number of right-wing attacks in recent years. Jihadist violence remains infrequent but potentially high-impact because of its perpetrators' focus on mass-casualty attacks. White supremacy, which has motivated several lethal attacks in recent years, was responsible for fewer terrorist attacks in the last two years but likely poses a resilient threat. In general, terrorists in the United States have low capabilities, with their capacity for violence determined primarily by their individual abilities, unlike the terrorists examined in other chapters, who draw on the institutional resources of and receive direction from larger groups. As a result, intent plays a particularly important role in U.S. domestic terrorism.

In 2025, the United States experienced 40 terrorist attacks and 31 victim fatalities. This represents an apparent increase in both attacks and fatalities from 2024, when there were 25 attacks and only 3 fatalities. Nearly half of the fatalities in 2025 occurred during the car-ramming attack on Bourbon Street in New Orleans on January 1, 2025, which

killed 14 people and illustrates the disproportionate role that mass-casualty attacks play in terrorism risk. Overall, in 2025, there were 11 lethal terrorist attacks that caused one or more fatalities, up from 3 such attacks in 2024.

This chapter explores the trends related to this increase. Overall, the analysis suggests that terrorism poses a limited threat in the United States. 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 limited, though not completely prevented, the effect of foreign terrorist organizations and the proliferation of homegrown terrorists for several decades. Some of these measures experienced changes in 2025, including personnel and resource cuts in several government organizations responsible for counterterrorism missions. The potential impact of these changes is explored in a later section of this chapter.

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.[27] Although terrorism remains a concern for the United States, its overall prevalence and impact are significantly mitigated by these factors.[28]

In 2025, what constitutes terrorism emerged as a mainstream political issue, particularly following high-profile incidents that triggered public disputes over the motives of the people involved.[29] These debates were frequently divided along partisan political lines and illustrated the growing use of the label "terrorist" as a contested descriptor invoked to frame public understanding of violence and shape policy responses—often without a shared standard for when the term applies. There has also been much violence that resembles terrorism in its violent tactics but lacks a clear political objective or an intent to generate broad psychological effects beyond the immediate target. This includes nihilistic violent extremism (NVE), which underlies many school shootings, and some violent escalations at protests, especially during demonstrations against the Trump administration's immigration policies. This chapter uses the definition of terrorism stated in the introduction of this report, and it relies on data compiled by CSIS to assess recent trends and possible futures.[30]

Because terrorism in the United States is most commonly carried out by individuals or small groups of actors who are radicalized in private, it is difficult to assess when, where, and what type of future threats will be most significant.[31] 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.

Moreover, the relatively low number of terrorist attacks and fatalities in the United States makes the impact of single events far more prominent. It is important not to draw too many firm conclusions from year-to-year changes, given the small number of incidents and the high degree of randomness related to success or failure. For example, the attack on July 4, 2025, at the Prairieland Detention Center in Alvarado, Texas, wounded only one officer, but because an assailant opened fire on responding law enforcement, it could easily have produced fatalities.[32] In some cases, longer-term trends are better guides, such as the overall decline of jihadist incidents in the United States since the territorial collapse of the Islamic State in 2019.[33] Still, other factors, such as the election of a new president with very different policies, may shape the motivations and actions of potential terrorists of different ideological hues. This report highlights year-to-year changes as a way to anticipate longer-term trends, but both short-term changes and the longer-term threat picture must be taken into account.

Similarly, although this chapter uses an ideological framework to organize and compare terrorist threats in the United States, ideology is often difficult to assess in practice and is blurred by perpetrators who hold a mix of political and personal grievances, sometimes including inconsistent or even contradictory beliefs. Many important operational throughlines of terrorism in the United States also cut across ideological categories, including lone-actor mobilization, online radicalization, and the use of readily accessible weapons. Some of the recommendations offered later in this chapter include measures designed to reduce risk regardless of an attacker's ideology. Nonetheless, ideology remains important for understanding how different perpetrators translate grievances into violence, what targets they are most likely to prioritize, and which broader events and narratives may mobilize future attacks and plots.[34]

This chapter begins with an overall assessment of the terrorist threat in the United States. It proceeds to spotlight the terrorist threat posed by anti-government extremists, partisan extremists, jihadists, and white supremacists. It then discusses key trends for U.S. policymakers and intel-

ligence and law enforcement agencies to watch in 2026 and concludes with recommendations for U.S. policy and the prioritization of counterterrorism resources.

Threat Assessment

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

The four movements assessed in this chapter pose different types of threats. In general, however, similar methods are effective against all four terrorist movements surveyed here, and the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise remains extremely effective.

Anti-government extremism is the most active terrorist movement in the United States by number of incidents (see Table 2.1). In 2025, anti-government extremism accounted for 24 terrorist attacks and plots and four victim deaths. This represents a tripling in the number of anti-government incidents from 2024, when there were nine anti-government incidents and one victim fatality. The surge in anti-government activity reflects a mix of familiar and new drivers, including both long-standing anti-state and accelerationist beliefs and extremist reactions to salient mainstream political issues, especially new U.S. immigration policy.

By volume, anti-government extremism was responsible for the most terrorist incidents in the United States in 2025. It also caused the second-highest number of deaths of the four movements, but its fatalities were far less concentrated per incident compared to movements that produced fatalities in fewer events. Like most terrorism in the United States, attacks motivated by anti-government extremism are almost always unsophisticated and involve an individual or a small group of extremists taking violent action using easily accessible resources.

Partisan extremist incidents are less common than anti-government incidents, but targeted political attacks and assassination attempts can produce outsize political effects, even when they occur only sporadically. Partisan terrorism includes attacks motivated by partisan political beliefs, typically directed at government targets—including government leaders and workers—based on political affiliation. Terrorists motivated by partisan extremism do not represent 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 party lines. In 2025, partisan extremism motivated eight attacks and plots and was responsible for three victim deaths, continuing the steady growth in partisan incidents since around 2016.[35]

Jihadist terrorism remains a rare but deadly threat. Jihadism inspired seven attacks and plots in 2025, and it was the most lethal extremist movement by far across all ideologies due to the car-ramming attack on Bourbon Street on January 1, 2025, that killed 14. No other jihadist incident in 2025 resulted in fatalities. Jihadist ideologies (primarily Salafi-jihadism) continue to inspire a small number of extremists in the United States to conduct occasional mass-casualty attacks, but overall trends suggest it is not resurgent. The number of terrorist attacks and plots coordinated or inspired by foreign jihadist groups has declined since the Islamic State's territorial defeat in 2019 and remains low, despite the considerable media attention jihadist plots and attacks typically receive.[36]

Finally, white supremacist terrorism remains a resilient threat in the United States despite a recent decline in lethality. White supremacist terrorism accounted for three attacks and plots in 2025 and produced no deaths;

Table 2.1

Terrorist Incidents in the United States, 2025

Terrorist movement	Attacks and plots	Victims killed	Victims killed in deadliest attack
Jihadist	7	14	14
Anti-government	24	4	2
Partisan extremist	8	3	2
White supremacist	3	0	0
Other	22	10	4

Source: CSIS.

it was the second year in a row with zero fatalities due to white supremacist terrorism, a sharp decline from the decade prior, when white supremacists carried out some of the deadliest mass-casualty terrorist attacks in the United States.[37] It is too early to say whether this decline represents a long-term trend, and explanations for the decline are speculative. Increased pressure on white supremacist groups under the Biden administration in the form of more prosecutions, investigations, and greater intelligence and law enforcement focus on their activities in general and approval of the Trump administration's immigration policies may play a role in reducing the mobilization and motivation of white supremacists to conduct terrorist attacks.[38] For example, Enrique Tarrio, the former Proud Boys leader and a convicted seditionist whom President Donald Trump pardoned, summed up the president's potential psychological effect on the violent far right: "Honestly, what do we have to complain about these days?"[39] Importantly, the recent decline in lethality does not eliminate the potential for sudden highly deadly events.

All domestic terrorist movements in the United States lack significant capabilities to carry out attacks due to a combination of structural and operational factors. Unlike many foreign terrorist organizations with centralized leadership, funding, and training infrastructures, most domestic terrorist actors are forced to operate as loosely affiliated networks or as lone individuals due to the high capability of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies. This means they usually lack the resources, expertise, or coordination needed for the types of sophisticated attacks associated with formal groups such as al Qaeda or the Islamic State. However, as demonstrated by many examples of domestic terrorism in the United States—most notably the Oklahoma City bombing and most recently the Bourbon Street attack—radicalized individuals can still be extremely lethal. The overall increase in terrorist incidents in the United States in 2025 compared to previous years reflects changes in mobilization and intent more than changes in capability, since most perpetrators still rely on readily available weapons and simple tactics.

Table 2.2

Comparative assessment of U.S. terrorist movements

Name	Capability	Intent	Threat assessment
Anti-government extremism	Extremist movement of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Undermine, overthrow, or violently resist government authority and government policies	Active threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against hard and soft targets
Partisan extremism	Extremist movement of small-group or lone-actor attackers with access to firearms and basic weapons	Intimidate, eliminate, or punish perceived political opponents	Growing threat of small-group or lone-actor attacks with easily accessible weapons against hard and soft targets
Jihadism	Extremist movement 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
White supremacy	Extremist movement 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

Source: CSIS.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM

Anti-government extremism is the most active terrorist movement in the United States today. Anti-government terrorists in the United States exhibit an intent to coerce, punish, or undermine government authority by attacking government-related targets. In 2025, anti-government terrorists were responsible for 24 attacks and plots and caused four fatalities, a rise from nine incidents and one fatality in 2024. Anti-government terrorist mobilization is driven both by enduring anti-state worldviews and by issue-specific grievances that intensify around mainstream political debates. Targets of anti-government attacks often include federal employees, police officers, and immigration enforcement personnel. Although anti-government ideology encompasses extremists from across a wide political spectrum, its common denominator is violence framed as retaliation against government actions or as an attempt to weaken or undermine government legitimacy.

In 2025, left-wing anti-government extremism accounted for more attacks and plots in the United States than any other ideological category in this report, though it produced fewer fatalities than jihadism. CSIS defines left-wing anti-government extremism as opposition to government authority because it is a tool of oppression responsible for war and social injustices. This differs from right-wing anti-government extremism, which CSIS defines as opposition to government authority because it is tyrannical and illegitimate and it infringes on individual liberties.

From 2024 to 2025, the number of anti-government incidents associated with the extreme left increased from 3 to 15, and victim fatalities rose from 0 to 3. While the small number of incidents prevents drawing firm conclusions about this rise, disagreements with the Trump administration's immigration policy appear to have been a driver of left-wing anti-government violence. In 2025, there were seven terrorist attacks and one disrupted plot against immigration enforcement authorities. The only lethal attack among incidents targeting immigration authorities occurred on September 24, 2025, in Dallas, when Joshua Jahn opened fire at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility from a nearby rooftop. Jahn intended to target ICE agents and law enforcement, but he did not strike any government personnel and instead killed two detainees.[40] Other extreme-left anti-government incidents in 2025 focused largely on police officers, such as Gad Black's deadly car ramming of an officer in Baton Rouge on June 16. Despite the recent increase in the number of incidents, left-wing anti-government extremists have not been nearly as lethal as have been those espousing other ideologies, such as white supremacist and jihadist extremists. This was the case both in 2025 and the thirty years covered by CSIS data.

Some extreme-left anti-government incidents featured coordination among a small group of actors. For example, authorities allege that members of the Turtle Island Liberation Front used encrypted group chats to plan pipe bomb attacks and discuss targeting federal immigration agents.[41] Authorities in California arrested multiple coconspirators who were beginning to assemble and test IEDs, alongside a fifth associate in Louisiana tied to the planning network and a related plan to attack Border Patrol agents.[42] Turtle Island Liberation Front members promoted the group online and discussed obtaining shooting training, but the group appears to have been small, loosely structured, and easily penetrated by authorities.[43]

Right-wing anti-government terrorism remained a substantial threat in 2025. From 2024 to 2025, the number of anti-government incidents associated with the extreme right stayed roughly level: six incidents with one fatality in 2024 and eight incidents with one fatality in 2025. Given the small annual counts on both sides, the 2025 gap between left-wing and right-wing incidents should be interpreted cautiously. The right-wing incidents in 2025

Table 2.3

Anti-Government Attacks by Perpetrator Orientation, 2025

	Plots and attacks	Victims killed
Anti-government extreme left	15	3
Anti-government extreme right	8	1

Source: CSIS.

were not driven by a single organizing grievance but rather by a mix of narratives framing the federal government as unlawful and issue-specific resentments that translated into threats and violence against government institutions and public officials.

A subset of extreme-right anti-government incidents also reflected explicit accelerationist logic, in which perpetrators described violence as a way to trigger systemic collapse or a reset of the U.S. government, including Nikita Casap's plot to assassinate President Trump to "foment a political revolution."[44] Other extreme-right anti-government incidents included plots and attacks on government institutions and personnel, such as Patrick Joseph White's August 8, 2025, shooting at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, which killed a police officer, and the arrest of Kevin O'Neal in Tennessee, after authorities discovered 14 IEDs and threats against public officials and law enforcement.[45]

The operational profile of anti-government attackers in 2025 is consistent with that of prior years and remains dominated by low-sophistication tactics, frequent lone-actor activity, and readily accessible weapons directed at government, law enforcement, immigration enforcement, and military-linked targets across a wide geographic footprint. A meaningful share of the incidents consists of plots and disrupted activity rather than completed attacks, including four disrupted plots to use explosives. Perpetrators who successfully carried out attacks relied primarily on firearms, incendiaries such as Molotov cocktails, and vehicles, with occasional use of melee weapons. Targets included government buildings, law enforcement facilities, residences of government-affiliated personnel, and public spaces linked to demonstrations. What changed in 2025 was not the modus operandi but the tempo, as the same basic tactics and target sets appeared in a larger number of attacks and plots than in 2024.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: PARTISAN EXTREMISM

Partisan extremist terrorists in the United States exhibit an intent to intimidate, punish, or kill political and government targets, including elected officials, political candidates, political influencers, and political staff, based on opposing partisan views. These extremists are not representative of 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 party lines. What unifies these threats is that they are driven by actors who treat political opponents as targets for attacks rather than fellow participants in a democracy with legitimate disagreements. Overall, the partisan terrorist threat has been elevated since 2016.[46]

Partisan extremist attacks remained at a similar level between 2024 and 2025. In 2025, partisan extremists were responsible for eight attacks and plots and three victim deaths, compared with six incidents and zero deaths in 2024. The 2025 incidents included two high-profile attacks: Tyler Robinson, who shot conservative activist Charlie Kirk on September 10 at a public speaking event in Orem, Utah, and Vance Boelter, who attacked the homes of multiple elected Democratic officials on June 14 in Champlin and Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, killing two people and wounding two others.

In 2025, six of the eight partisan incidents were attributed to extreme-left perpetrators, though the small total makes this distribution highly sensitive to a small number of cases. The left-wing incidents included Robinson's assassination of Kirk, as well as nonlethal attacks targeting partisan political offices, such as arson attacks against Republican Party offices in New Mexico and Michigan. There were also multiple disrupted plots targeting high-profile political figures and symbolic sites, such as the incident involving Riley Jane English, who traveled to Washington, D.C., armed with knives and Molotov cocktails and said she intended to kill senior U.S. officials: initially Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, whom she described as a Nazi, and then House Speaker Mike Johnson and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent.[47]

In contrast, Boelter's attack targeting Democratic politicians in Minnesota was the only right-wing partisan extremist incident in 2025, though it was also the deadliest of all partisan extremist attacks.[48] The limited number of right-wing partisan incidents in 2025 may be an outlier, since in recent years right-wing partisan extremists have carried out multiple attacks, including the 2022–23 shootings targeting Democratic officials' homes in Albuquerque orchestrated by failed Republican candidate Solomon Peña and the 2022 attack on Paul Pelosi in California. It remains too early to tell whether the apparent increase in left-wing partisan extremism represents an ongoing trend. Even so, partisan violence remains a threat to a variety of political figures.

The overall lethality of partisan extremist incidents remains low. Partisan extremist attacks kill small numbers of people for several reasons. Most attackers use

unsophisticated tactics in attempts at government buildings or offices, where security measures reduce the chances of fatalities. Most incidents also seem designed to intimidate rather than kill, with arson attacks against political offices the most frequent form of partisan violence.[49] Even when partisan attackers do kill, they rarely conduct indiscriminate mass killings but instead target one or more high-profile individuals. Robinson killed Kirk by firing a single shot from a rooftop beyond the security perimeter of an outdoor event at Utah Valley University.[50] Likewise, Boelter disguised himself as a police officer and attacked elected officials at their private residences in Minnesota as part of a calculated plan supported by target lists and home addresses.[51]

Despite their low lethality, partisan terrorist attacks can have a significant political impact. Attacks targeting political leaders, government workers, or political influencers can have a direct and destabilizing effect on governance and political activity more broadly.[52] 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 and inspire retaliatory violence. Even when attacks are unsuccessful, the broader chilling effect of partisan extremism can deter participation in democratic processes and discourage open political discourse.[53]

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: JIHADISM

Jihadist terrorists in the United States continue to aspire to conduct mass-casualty attacks, often inspired by foreign terrorist organizations including the Islamic State and the broader ecosystem of jihadist propaganda. Although the number of jihadist incidents has declined dramatically since the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in 2019, the threat remains consequential because the jihadist attacks and plots that materialize typically involve the intent to kill large numbers of people. The January 1 car-ramming attack on Bourbon Street that killed 14 people was by far the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States in 2025 and the deadliest jihadist attack since 2016, when a shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killed 49 people.

In 2025, jihadists were responsible for seven attacks and plots and 14 victim deaths, all of which occurred in the attack on Bourbon Street, the only jihadist attack that succeeded in 2025. The other six incidents involved disrupted plots to conduct mass shootings, bombings, or stabbings, typically against civilians in public spaces. In October and November 2025, three individuals were arrested for allegedly planning a Halloween mass shooting at LGBTQ+ bars in Michigan.[54] On December 31, 2025, Christian Sturdivant was arrested while allegedly in the late stages of plotting a mass-casualty attack to stab victims and attack responding police at a grocery store.[55] On May 14, 2025, Ammar Abdulmajid-Mohamed Said was arrested for allegedly plotting to carry out a mass shooting at a U.S. Army facility in Warren, Michigan.[56]

Today, most jihadist terrorists in the United States are radicalized domestically, often online through engagement with jihadist propaganda, instead of arriving from abroad or traveling overseas to train with foreign terrorist organizations before returning to carry out attacks.[57] In some cases, individuals attempt to contact members of foreign terrorist organizations abroad, though these attempts rarely result in the individual receiving direct operational guidance from members of foreign terrorist organizations, and they frequently expose perpetrators to detection and infiltration by undercover authorities.

The 2025 Bourbon Street attack and the disruption of multiple plots designed to cause mass casualties are stark reminders of the threat of jihadist terrorism and the potential for a radicalized lone actor or small group to carry out deadly attacks. Nevertheless, jihadist violence appears to carry less political and social salience in the United States today than terrorism tied to domestic issues, as reflected in the level of public attention and political reaction to high-profile domestic incidents such as the killing of Kirk compared to the response to the Bourbon Street attack, even though the latter killed far more people. This may be partly because jihadist attacks typically target ordinary civilians rather than prominent political figures. This disparity reflects a tension in how threats against different types of targets are perceived. These perceptions matter because public attitudes and political reactions shape which forms of violence are treated as the most urgent threats and influence how resources are prioritized.

The decline in public attention to the jihadist threat is also likely due to the success of sustained counterterrorism pressure. The number of jihadist incidents in the United States has fallen sharply since the late 2010s in parallel with the degradation of major foreign terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State. Intelligence and law enforcement efforts disrupt many plots before they reach execution; if those efforts decline, a higher share of plots will likely progress to completed attacks.

Overall, jihadist terrorism in 2026 will likely be a rare but resilient threat marked by disrupted plots and a small number of domestic attacks directed at soft targets, seeking to inflict mass casualties. The need to maintain law enforcement attention on would-be jihadists remains key to keeping mass-casualty attacks rare.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: WHITE SUPREMACY

White supremacist terrorists in the United States exhibit an intent to intimidate and kill racial, ethnic, and religious minorities and, in some cases, damage critical infrastructure in service of an extremist vision of racial hierarchy. In 2025, white supremacist incidents were relatively rare and produced no fatalities, but this stands in contrast to longer-term trends. There were three white supremacist attacks and plots in 2025 with zero fatalities, continuing the decline in lethality observed in 2024. Nonetheless, the short-term decline in white supremacist terrorist incidents and lethality does not necessarily imply a reduced underlying capacity or intent to attack.

Authorities disrupted several plots that indicated lethal aspirations in 2025. For example, Nathan James Henderson was arrested and found in possession of weapons and explosive precursors in Timberwood Park, Texas, after making online threats against Black people, Jewish people, and unnamed government officials. Jeremy Wayne Shoemaker was arrested in Needham, Alabama, after making threats against local rabbis and imams. He was found to possess an assault rifle, ammunition, and a list of targets.[58]

It is too early to say whether the recent decline in the number of white supremacist incidents represents a long-term trend. Any explanations of the near-term change are highly speculative. One possibility is that President Trump and his administration now embrace many traditional grievances that violent white supremacists have espoused in the past, such as hostility to immigration and suspicions of government agencies. At the same time, it is important to stress that correlation does not mean direct causation. Extremist actors may perceive mainstream political validation of their grievances as reducing the need for independent mobilization or, more concerningly, as tacit endorsement of their worldview, even if the mainstream actors do not in fact pursue the policies an extremist might desire. Such interpretations by extremists do not imply that those more mainstream political figures actually endorse their worldview.

In 2025, white supremacists did not conduct any attacks or plots directed at critical infrastructure. This contrasts with prior years when white supremacist and accelerationist actors attempted to target energy facilities or other infrastructure to hasten societal collapse and radical social transformation.[59] White supremacist terrorism in 2025 instead centered on violence against individuals. However, there is little reason to believe that critical infrastructure is no longer part of the white supremacist target set, given the historical and continued role such attacks play in white supremacists' desire to put an end to U.S. liberal democracy and pluralist society.[60]

White supremacist ideology is also relevant to attacks that fall outside this report's definition of terrorism. Many incidents of mass-casualty violence in the United States are committed by perpetrators who draw eclectically from extremist heroes and iconography, including well-known white supremacist terrorists, even when their primary motive appears closer to misanthropy, notoriety seeking, or a generalized desire for societal collapse than to a political ideology.[61] For example, in early 2025, U.S. authorities introduced the term "nihilistic violent extremism," defined as a subculture driven primarily by hatred of society and a desire to sow indiscriminate chaos and instability.[62] The FBI has publicly stated that it has hundreds of open NVE investigations, underscoring the growth of this form of violence, which sits adjacent to terrorism.[63] Several of the online ecosystems associated with NVE include white supremacist content, including networks such as 764 that blend white supremacy with other violent subcultures (e.g., groups that glorify mass killers and recycle their symbols and aesthetics).[64] Although these incidents do not meet this report's definition of terrorism, they show that the decline in white supremacist terrorism fatalities in 2024 and 2025 does not mean white supremacist ideas are absent from or can no longer drive serious violence in the United States.

Trends to Watch

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT TARGETING

Anti-government terrorist violence in 2026 is likely to remain closely tied to the visibility of Trump administration policies, especially immigration enforcement. In 2025, the increase in anti-government terrorist incidents was driven largely by extreme-left attacks and plots targeting immigration authorities, including several attempts to strike ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) targets. The pattern suggests that immigration enforcement has become a mobilizing grievance that can

generate sustained targeting even if overall coordination or organization of such activity is loose or nonexistent.

The operational logic of this trend is straightforward: Immigration enforcement operations create visible and widespread targets that are both symbolically charged and often easily accessible. ICE and CBP facilities, temporary lodging, and personnel can become focal points, especially during periods of heightened protest activity. In 2025, most terrorist incidents targeting immigration enforcement authorities were nonlethal and relied on tactics such as arson or Molotov cocktails. However, Jahn's shooting in Dallas on September 24, 2025, which killed two detainees, underscores that relatively simple methods can still yield fatalities when attackers plan deliberately.

Looking ahead, the risk in 2026 has two distinct dimensions if it follows 2025 patterns. The overall volume of attacks and plots against immigration enforcement authorities will likely rise or fall with the salience of immigration as a political issue, particularly if high-visibility raids or detention activity generate recurring protest cycles and sustained media attention. At the same time, the risk of lethal violence is likely to remain persistent even in quieter periods because determined lone actors or small groups can still plan and execute serious attacks against accessible ICE and CBP targets without needing broad mobilization or a news-driven trigger.

PARTISAN EXTREMISM AND THE 2026 MIDTERMS

Partisan extremist terrorism is becoming a durable feature of the domestic threat landscape, with elections serving as predictable accelerants. The partisan threat is unlikely to subside in 2026 because it is rooted in drivers such as polarization, demonization of political opponents, and recurring claims that political outcomes are illegitimate. Election cycles can intensify these dynamics by raising perceived stakes and multiplying potential targets, but recent incidents also show that partisan violence does not require an election trigger.

Partisan extremist cases in recent years underscore both dimensions of the risk. On the one hand, the midterm environment is likely to increase opportunities for attacks by expanding the number of campaign events, party offices, and public-facing political figures. Recent election-related violence also includes multiple attacks shortly following elections as extremists seek revenge or to correct undesirable outcomes, demonstrating that the risk does not end when the election is over. These include the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, when some perpetrators used premeditated violence to try to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's presidential election, and the 2022–23 Albuquerque shootings at the homes of various Democratic politicians, orchestrated by Peña, a failed Republican candidate, after he denied that he lost his race in the November 2022 New Mexico state elections.[65]

The threat of election violence is already shaping security measures in ways that matter for 2026.

The threat of election violence is already shaping security measures in ways that matter for 2026. Surveys of local election officials indicate widespread adoption of enhanced security measures since 2020, including increased coordination with law enforcement and new steps to protect election workers and facilities in the 2024 cycle, which will likely carry over into 2026.[66] Growing skepticism about the legitimacy of elections may further amplify this threat environment by providing a ready-made justification for intimidation and violence against election administrators and officials viewed as responsible for voting processes and outcomes.

On the other hand, consequential incidents in 2025, including the killings of Kirk and Minnesota state legislator Melissa Hortman and her husband, demonstrate that lethal partisan violence can occur regardless of election timing. Although the number of partisan incidents may rise or fall in response to the election cycle, the risk of high-impact violence will remain persistent because lone actors and small groups remain motivated by broader political conditions that will not resolve in one election cycle.

LUIGI MANGIONE COPYCATS

Luigi Mangione's December 2024 killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson has increased the risk of copycat attacks. Mangione's attack was explicitly framed as a message against the health insurance industry.[67] In 2025, two incidents echoed similar anti-healthcare themes and targeting patterns. On January 8, 2025, Andre Uche Obua drove from Miami to Indiana and shot and injured a prominent dialysis doctor. Obua explicitly referenced Mangione's shooting in letters he wrote in prison and described his own grievances in comparable terms.[68] On March 4, 2025, an unidentified assailant set fire to the home of a Bayer executive in Madison, New

Jersey, again directing violence at a senior figure in the healthcare sector.[69]

These cases suggest the potential for a growing terrorist threat motivated by grievances targeted against individuals perceived to be responsible for exploitation or unfair practices within the healthcare industry. High-profile attacks like Mangione's can create a copycat effect by signaling that targeted violence is feasible and attention-grabbing, inspiring other aggrieved individuals to adopt a similar narrative and select comparable targets.[70] The core risk is sporadic incidents by lone actors using accessible methods against soft targets.

VIOLENCE INSPIRED BY MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS

A notable ongoing risk is the continued spillover of Middle East conflict dynamics into U.S.-based terrorism, including the targeting of Jewish and Israel-linked people, places, and events. Anti-Semitic violence has a long history in the United States, but the 2025 caseload includes a set of incidents in which perpetrators explicitly cited the war in Gaza, U.S. support for Israel, or Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel as motivations. In Washington, D.C., on May 21, 2025, Elias Rodriguez allegedly shot and killed two Israeli embassy staff members and stated afterward, "I did it for Palestine. I did it for Gaza."[71] On June 1, 2025, in Boulder, Colorado, Mohamed Sabry Soliman allegedly used Molotov cocktails to attack demonstrators gathered to call attention to Israeli hostages held by Hamas, killing one person and wounding seven others. He was in possession of handwritten documents and statements indicating an anti-Zionist motive and premeditation.[72] On April 13, 2025, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Cody Balmer allegedly attacked Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro's government residence with Molotov cocktails and called 911 to say he targeted Shapiro because of "his plans for what he wants to do to the Palestinian people."[73] These and other incidents show a recurring pattern of violence directed at both government targets and ordinary citizens, including Jewish targets not directly tied to Israel, perceived as related to the conflicts in the Middle East.

Continued conflict in Gaza and related regional developments, including U.S. and Israeli strikes against Iran, may elevate risk along three channels: (1) anti-Israel violence aimed at Israeli-linked people and events, (2) anti-Semitic and anti-Israel violence that targets Jewish communities more broadly, and (3) indiscriminate violence in the name of revenge for U.S. or Israeli actions in the Middle East. Although details are still emerging, several attacks already in 2026 may fall into these categories, including the March 1 shooting at a bar in Austin, Texas; the March 12 car-ramming attack at a synagogue in Detroit, Michigan; and the March 12 shooting at Old Dominion University.

It is possible that Iran might try to use its own operatives or work with others to conduct terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. Tehran has mostly avoided such attacks despite its support for terrorism in other countries around the world, but there are exceptions, notably the 2011 plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States at a Washington, D.C., restaurant and at least initial efforts to kill senior U.S. government officials involved in the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani. Although such an attack would be highly escalatory and has a considerable likelihood of disruption, the U.S. and Israeli war on Iran that began on February 28, 2026, is an existential threat to the Iranian regime, and past limits may no longer apply.

THE RISE OF NIHILISTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Although it does not fall under this report's definition of terrorism, NVE remains a deadly and perhaps growing threat. By definition, NVE seeks destruction for its own sake and is not usually tied to a specific political agenda, but it is often adjacent to different ideologies. Attackers with an NVE mindset have been tied to around two dozen attacks in recent years.[74] NVE complicates the coding of terrorism since some attacks with white supremacist, incel, anti-government, or partisan symbols and language may simply be nihilistic, with the individual concerned less with any political agenda than destruction for its own sake.

FIREARMS REMAIN THE MOST FREQUENT WEAPON CHOICE

Firearms are the most common weapon terrorists use in the United States, due to their widespread availability, relatively low cost, and ease of use. In 2025, 17 attacks involved firearms, 18 involved incendiaries, 3 involved explosives, and 5 involved motor vehicles. Among the 31 fatalities in terrorist attacks in the United States in 2025, 14 were caused by firearms, and 15 were caused by motor vehicles. The single deadliest terrorist attack was the Bourbon Street car ramming on January 1, which killed 14 people.

Nevertheless, firearms are by far the weapon responsible

for the most fatalities in terrorist attacks in the United States over the past decade, accounting for 193 fatalities compared to 24 by vehicles and even fewer by other weapons such as explosives and knives. The prevalence of firearms in the United States, 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 rapidly inflicting significant casualties, and they require less technical expertise compared to other methods such as 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 2026 will limit the appeal of firearms to those seeking to conduct terrorism in the United States.

Policy Implications

CURRENT POLICY

For decades, the United States has limited, but not eliminated, terrorism through strong intelligence and law enforcement capabilities and a robust counterterrorism legal framework. Under the Trump administration, several agencies responsible for counterterrorism missions have experienced their most significant changes in years.

The Trump administration has made significant cuts to the government's counterterrorism infrastructure focused on domestic terrorism, shifted the priorities of many counterterrorism-related agencies, and politicized various entities. All of these actions raise the risk of terrorism in the United States. Among many examples of cuts in 2025, the Department of Homeland Security dismantled its Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, while the State Department eliminated its Office of Countering Violent Extremism and significantly reorganized its Bureau of Counterterrorism, with some functions absorbed into other parts of the department.[75] The administration also cut back federal support for counterterrorism-related training for state and local law enforcement.[76] Key counterterrorism agencies were also broadly slashed: The CIA fired an undisclosed number of probationary employees including recent hires across analytical and operational roles, the FBI fired hundreds of employees, and both entities gave buyouts to many other employees.[77] The Department of Justice's National Security Division, which oversees terrorism investigations and prosecutions, lost roughly 38 percent of its staff, including senior-career prosecutors with decades of terrorism-related experience.[78]

In addition to reductions in size, the administration has shifted resources away from counterterrorism, in most instances to focus on immigration enforcement. The scale of these reassignments is substantial. As of late summer 2025, roughly one in five FBI agents, about half of Drug Enforcement Administration agents, roughly 70 percent of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives personnel, and nearly 90 percent of Homeland Security Investigations personnel had been redirected to assist ICE.[79]

Counterterrorism prevention and grant programs supporting state-, local-, and community-level capacity have also been targets for funding cuts and freezes. Reimbursements under the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which funds security improvements at synagogues, mosques, churches, and other nonprofits at heightened risk, were frozen for roughly two months in the spring of 2025 and resumed only after bipartisan congressional pressure.[80] Annual appropriations also fell from $454 million in fiscal year 2024 to $274 million in fiscal year 2025. DHS separately withheld Securing the Cities funding from major urban jurisdictions, with some restored only after litigation.[81]

Some counterterrorism agencies are also more politicized. Employees at some agencies are screened to ensure support for false conspiracies, particularly the idea of a stolen election in 2020 and that the January 6, 2021, attempted insurrection was really an "inside job."[82] More broadly, employees have been fired when intelligence assessments have not matched administration statements, sending a clear message that loyalty is more important than accuracy.[83]

Alongside these reductions and shifts in mission focus, the Trump administration has pursued operational reforms intended to increase speed and decentralize execution. At the FBI, this has included moving resources and decisionmaking away from headquarters and toward field offices.[84] The administration has also pushed faster and more widespread adoption of new technology and analytic tools across the counterterrorism enterprise. Although such changes may make the FBI more agile and bolster local investigative and intelligence capacity, they may also hinder counterterrorism. Part of the reason for greater centralization at the FBI after 9/11 was to increase data collection and integration, strengthen coordination with other national security agencies, and better allocate counterterrorism resources—reducing centralization may set back some of these efforts.

The United States still does not have a standalone federal criminal statute for domestic terrorism, which shapes

how extremists are investigated and prosecuted. Federal authorities must rely on other charges, such as firearms and explosives offenses, to intervene early and secure convictions. In practice, felony firearm possession and related prohibitions often serve as practical tools for disrupting extremists before an attack occurs.

PRIORITIZATION

U.S. terrorism is overwhelmingly a lone-actor and small-cell problem, and the operationalization of most attacks is similar regardless of ideology. Effective countermeasures should therefore prioritize mechanisms that allow threat information to flow upward from families, schools, workplaces, and local communities, who often detect the first signs of radicalization or attack planning, to trained professionals and law enforcement. This includes strengthening community-based reporting and behavioral intervention pathways, improving the investigation of credible threats, and focusing prevention resources on common throughlines such as online radicalization, mental health crises, and easy access to firearms.

Effective counterterrorism in the United States also requires continued and expanded government engagement with social media and online service providers to enforce existing rules against terrorist propaganda, reduce the algorithmic amplification of violent material, and disrupt networks plotting violence. In practice, this means improving information sharing for imminent threats and working with both large and small platforms and providers that host extremist content and communications. These efforts are complicated by First Amendment constraints, encryption and private channels that limit visibility, and cross-border jurisdiction barriers. Nevertheless, these partnerships matter for classic terrorism threats and adjacent violence, such as NVE, in which an online ecosystem that glorifies mass killers, circulates gore, and encourages self-harm and attacks is often the primary driver of mobilization.

Another priority should be increasing protective security measures for the targets that repeatedly attract terrorist attention. Today, that includes, but is not limited to, immigration enforcement personnel, Jewish and Israeli-linked targets, election-related sites and personnel ahead of the 2026 midterms, healthcare executives, and political figures. In practice, this means expanding protective security measures including perimeter security and access control at vulnerable sites and events, as well as strengthening protective intelligence processes so credible threats translate quickly into security responses. It also requires closer coordination with state and local law enforcement and targeted use of security grants to support site-specific measures for soft targets that cannot be comprehensively protected but can be made harder to attack.

The rise in terrorism targeting government officials and political leaders underscores the need for strong protective security measures for elected officials, political candidates, political staff, government personnel, and other political figures. Several close-call incidents at the highest levels of government, including multiple assassination attempts against President Trump, 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 against the U.S. government. Developing protocols and planning for such events can disincentivize attacks on government targets, maintain stability in governance, and build public trust in democratic institutions.

Finally, political leaders should use the "terrorism" label more carefully and consistently and align resources accordingly. Disputes over whether high-profile violence counts as terrorism are now a mainstream political issue, and opportunistic or inconsistent labeling risks distorting threat perceptions, duplicating effort, and diluting finite counterterrorism resources. Overextension also carries operational and civil liberties costs. For example, branding drug cartels as terrorists and applying counterterrorism techniques to them is largely unnecessary given already-robust authorities for transnational criminal organizations, and labeling domestic protesters as terrorists is inaccurate and can invite surveillance and enforcement approaches that chill lawful speech and assembly.[85] A disciplined approach means reserving the term for cases that meet clear analytic criteria, being transparent about uncertainty when motive is unclear, and recognizing that the historically low level of terrorism in the United States reflects the sustained value of targeted prevention, disruption, and protective security rather than a reason to deprioritize these efforts.

Chapter 3

The Middle East

Introduction

This chapter assesses the terrorism threat from six groups and states active in the greater Middle East: al Qaeda, the Islamic State (often referred to as ISIS), Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran-linked militant groups in Iraq. Although Salafi-jihadist groups including the Islamic State and al Qaeda retain inspirational power, their ability to strike the U.S. homeland is far lower than in the past, and most of their regional affiliates and provinces indicate little desire to do so. Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, and the Iranian network remain a threat to regional stability and U.S. partners in the region, but they are all diminished compared with their strength in 2023 and 2024. Much of the U.S. effort against these groups will therefore involve bolstering partners' counterterrorism efforts. In general, the Middle East terrorism landscape is less immediately threatening to the U.S. homeland than in the past but no less strategically consequential for U.S. interests, especially the security of U.S. allies. The region, however, is in flux, and there is considerable potential for surprises and significant change for both terrorism and counterterrorism. This risk is particularly high given the U.S. and Israeli war against Iran that began on February 28, 2026, which increases Iran's incentives to conduct regional and international terrorism.

The year 2025 saw—by recent Middle East standards—a reduction in regional tension, though many parts of the area remain volatile, and the 2026 war with Iran has increased regional tension. The Hamas-Israel war, which began after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, ended on October 10, 2025, with a U.S.-orchestrated agreement, though lower-level violence continues. Israel attacked Iran's nuclear program in 2025, with the United States joining in, but Iran did not resort to international terrorism in response to the Israeli and U.S. attacks, though this remains a possibility going forward. Hezbollah, after suffering devastating attacks from Israel in 2024, was far quieter in 2025, avoiding war even when

the United States and Israel attacked its Iranian patron, though Hezbollah has conducted attacks on Israel in 2026. The Houthis remain unbowed, and they may again pose a risk to international shipping and U.S. allies. Israel's continued lower-level strikes in Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, and Syria keep its enemies weaker and off-balance but also raise the risk of broader instability and renewed conflict. On the positive side, the new government in Damascus, despite being led by a former jihadist, appears committed to fighting groups such as the Islamic State and Hezbollah on Syrian soil.

This chapter begins with a review of groups in the Middle East that pose a terrorist threat to the United States and its interests, especially the security of regional partners. It spotlights long-standing concerns including the Islamic State and al Qaeda, as well as powerful regional groups including Hamas and the Houthis. The chapter further highlights the decline in Iranian influence and the status of Iranian-backed groups, the inspirational threat of terrorism that jihadist groups pose, how Syria is becoming a U.S. counterterrorism partner, the changing role of Israel, and the reduced U.S. role in the Middle East. It concludes by assessing how these developments in the region should shape U.S. priorities and other policy implications.

Threat Assessment

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

The Middle East remains a hotbed of terrorism, but the most capable groups have been locally and regionally focused. The Middle East is home to important U.S. allies including Israel and Saudi Arabia, and their security remains a U.S. concern. Thus, while some threat to the U.S. homeland emanates from the Middle East, the most immediate concerns for U.S. policymakers are regional. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are primarily inspirational threats, though both seek the capability to do more direct operations. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran's proxies, in contrast, are latent threats to the U.S. homeland and especially U.S. personnel and interests in the Middle East, but they also are active antagonists of U.S. regional partners, notably Israel. It is also possible that the 2026 war may lead Iran to attempt terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland or on U.S. facilities and personnel around the globe.

The most capable terrorist groups in the region are Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen, though the former is weakened due to the losses it suffered in the conflict with Israel that followed the October 7 Hamas attacks against Israel. Iran remains a terrorism concern, through both its use of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its sponsorship of Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraqi militant groups, and others.

In contrast, al Qaeda and the Islamic State are far weaker than any of Iran's proxies and partners. Although the Islamic State still functions as a regional insurgency in Iraq and Syria, both jihadist groups have far less influence than they did during their peak years and have significantly less ability to orchestrate attacks on the U.S. homeland.

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State both seek to strike the U.S. homeland despite their apparently limited capabilities.

Yet this picture changes when the groups and Iran are ranked by their probable intent. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State both seek to strike the U.S. homeland despite their apparently limited capabilities. Through propaganda, however, they regularly succeed in inspiring attacks. By contrast, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis in 2025 did not appear to be planning attacks on the U.S. homeland, though Iran has attempted attacks on U.S. soil in the past and the 2026 war increases Iran's incentives to attack the U.S. homeland.

A key difference between the Middle East and Africa is that the former is home to strong regional U.S. allies and partners that are often aggressive against terrorist groups. Notably, Israel has greatly weakened Hamas and Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have at times supported operations against the Houthis in Yemen (Israel and the United States also bombed the Houthis). Because of the role of these allies, much of U.S. counterterrorism in the region is indirect, helping partners with intelligence, military assistance, and other means to make them more effective counterterrorism actors.

Table 3.1

Comparative Assessment of Middle East International Terrorist Groups

Name	Area of operations	Capability	Intent	Threat assessment
Houthis	Yemen	State-like entity with access to state-like military capabilities	Seize national power and exert greater influence over the region	Active threat to regional stability and U.S. allies; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets in the region; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
Hezbollah	Lebanon	State-like entity with access to rudimentary state-like military capabilities	Advance national political and military power; advance Iranian interests	Latent threat to regional stability, U.S. individuals, assets, and allies in the region; latent threat to the U.S. homeland, depending on Iranian decisions and threat perceptions
Hamas	Gaza and the West Bank	State-like entity with access to some rudimentary state-like military capabilities	Advance national and political power; gain control of the Palestinian national movement; long-term intent to create a new state that would eliminate Israel, a U.S. partner	Indirect threat to regional stability and U.S. allies in the region; indirect threat to U.S. individuals and allies in Europe
Islamic State Core	Iraq and Syria	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but maintains the power to inspire attacks	Conduct and inspire attacks in the region, Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world; control and expand territory under its interpretation of Islamic law	Indirect threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals, assets, and allies outside the region; indirect threat to U.S. interests in the region
Al Qaeda Core and AQAP	Al Qaeda Core: Afghanistan and Pakistan; AQAP: Yemen	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but maintains the power to inspire attacks	Promote anti-regime movements in the Middle East and conduct and inspire attacks in Europe and the United States	Indirect threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals, assets, and allies outside the region; minimal threat to U.S. interests in the region
Islamic State Khorasan Province	Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but maintains the power to direct and facilitate attacks	Conduct and inspire attacks in the region, 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 the region; minimal threat to U.S. interests in the region

Source: CSIS.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Islamic State exerts influence in the Middle East primarily through its core in Syria and Iraq and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the group's main "province" in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. While capable of conducting small-scale insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, Syria, and (to a lesser extent) Iraq, the Islamic State poses a significant inspirational threat to the West via its propaganda activities. ISKP is also unique among Islamic State provinces in that it still regularly attempts attacks in Europe and the United States, suggesting a continued direct threat from the group despite the significant pressure it faces. Although the Islamic State's presence is weakening in Iraq, it retains a presence there and in Syria and Afghanistan. The Syrian government, after the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, and the Taliban have so far carried out effective counterterrorist campaigns against their Islamic State adversaries, but both the Islamic State core and ISKP may become stronger and reemerge as terrorist groups capable of regularly directing external attacks if counterterrorism pressure falters for any reason.

The Islamic State core, which once controlled territory in Iraq and Syria roughly the size of Great Britain and had 80,000 fighters under arms, is, like al Qaeda, far less powerful than it was at its peak. Its regional provinces are also weak. According to UN reporting, the Islamic State's core currently comprises around 3,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria and carries out frequent hit-and-run attacks, primarily in northeastern Syria.[86] During the chaos of Assad's fall, it regained some strength in Syria, seizing some Assad-era weapons stockpiles and breaking hundreds of detained fighters out of prison.[87] The group has probably further exploited the conflict between the transitional government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from late 2025 to early 2026, with the hostilities allowing more previously detained fighters to escape and alleviating some counterterrorism pressure on the Islamic State.[88]

Despite some resurgence in Syria amid recent political turmoil, the core remains weak. In Iraq, for example, the group's capabilities have been significantly degraded due to an effective counterterrorism campaign conducted by the Iraqi government. The Islamic State carried out only 16 claimed attacks in Iraq in 2025 and is usually forced to operate in small cells of only five to seven members.[89] The core also seems to be facing financial difficulties, with monthly payments to fighters and families dropping to record lows and being paid inconsistently.[90]

Despite the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham–led government's Salafi-jihadist origins, Syrian leadership appears committed to fighting the Islamic State. Syria joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in November 2025 and foiled several plots in 2025 intended to target places of worship or to assassinate President Ahmed al-Sharaa.[91] However, it is not clear that the Syrian government will be as effective as the SDF was in fighting the Islamic State.[92]

Even in its current degraded state, however, the Islamic State core is still attempting to expand. The United Nations reported in July 2025 that the Lebanese government had foiled an attempt to set up a new Islamic State province in Lebanon.[93] If the core takes advantage of political instability in the region to successfully create new provinces, it could disrupt the fragile political situations in Lebanon and other countries.

Two of 2025's most significant terrorist attacks in the West—the New Year's Day attack in New Orleans and the December Bondi Beach shooting in Sydney, Australia—were inspired by the Islamic State.

The Islamic State core retains considerable ability to inspire extremists to act on their own all over the world. The group continues to spread propaganda on the internet with a particular push to target young, susceptible populations.[94] Two of 2025's most significant terrorist attacks in the West—the New Year's Day attack in New Orleans and the December Bondi Beach shooting in Sydney, Australia—were inspired by the Islamic State.

Due to counterterrorism pressure, the Islamic State has shifted its focus largely toward Africa.[95] Even the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP), a vital Islamic State governing body that historically operated out of Syria, is rumored to have relocated partially or totally to Somalia.[96] If the GDP remains mostly in Syria, the Islamic State core will retain significant influence over the provinces due to its administrative influence. The GDP's relocation to Somalia, however, would lessen the operational importance of the Islamic State's branch in Syria and Iraq, which in this case would retain leadership only symbolically, with the heart of the group's activities and operations located in Africa.[97]

The success of regional and state-level counterterrorism efforts will be critical in further weakening the Islamic

State.[98] The year 2025 has demonstrated that certain Middle Eastern governments, including Iraq and the Taliban, can lead effective counterterrorism campaigns against the Islamic State that have reduced the frequency and overall number of attacks, even though the groups themselves endure.[99] If these governments continue to place significant pressure on the Islamic State, the Islamic State will likely remain at its current weakened status or grow even weaker.

The greatest uncertainty about the group's strength in 2026 surrounds its operations in Syria. The new Syrian government has proved reasonably effective in countering Islamic State attacks, with 244 attacks in 2025 as of mid-October, compared to more than 700 attacks in 2024.[100] Its new membership in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS may allow it to form new counterterrorism partnerships and access greater counterterrorism resources, which could further strengthen its counterterrorism efforts. However, the regime remains weak and distracted, and Syria's future is still in flux.

Perhaps the most potent Islamic State province in the region is its branch in Afghanistan: ISKP.[101] The group comprises around 2,000 fighters, who mostly fight as an insurgency in Afghanistan while also conducting attacks in Pakistan. In 2024, the group conducted terrorist attacks in Iran and Russia and attempted operations in Europe.[102] However, ISKP did not successfully conduct similar extraregional attacks in 2025, though it is regularly described by European governments as the most threatening Islamic State province.[103] ISKP has a steady financial base, as it conducts kidnapping-for-ransom operations in Afghanistan and receives funds from the Islamic State's regional office in East Africa, though that province has been battered over the course of 2025 and is probably less able to provide funds. According to the United Nations, ISKP has around $10 million in savings.[104] Although the disruption of attacks suggests impressive counterterrorism, the repeated attempts reveal a continued desire to conduct external attacks.

Taliban counterterrorism has weakened ISKP and likely explains why ISKP conducted fewer attacks in Afghanistan in 2025 than in 2024.[105] ISKP is also attempting, largely unsuccessfully, to spread its operations to Pakistan and India.[106] ISKP remains one of the most active Islamic State provinces in online radicalization efforts and continues to attempt to conduct international attacks, such as in Iran, Russia, and other parts of Europe. It likely poses a greater threat to targets in Europe than those in the United States simply because of proximity and the ethnic composition of Muslim diaspora communities in Europe.[107] However, it is likely to continue to face effective counterterrorism pressure from Europe, the Taliban, and Pakistan.[108]

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: AL QAEDA

Al Qaeda retains a presence in the Middle East through its core in Afghanistan and AQAP in Yemen. It seeks to rebuild itself and regain the ability to direct attacks against the United States and Europe and also endeavors to become the dominant Salafi-jihadist movement directing and supporting jihadist causes across the Muslim world. While retaining some power to inspire attacks outside the region, it is far weaker than at its peak, and its affiliates are more powerful in Africa than in the Middle East.

The al Qaeda core was weakened by U.S.-led counterterrorism pressure, such as intelligence cooperation to detain and arrest members and on-the-ground strikes from local forces aligned with U.S. partners. These actions devastated the group's leadership, killed or led to the arrest of many rank-and-file members, hindered financing, and otherwise made it harder for the organization to function. Since the United States killed al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022, the group has not publicly announced a new leader. Saif al-Adel, a longtime jihadist living in Iran, is often described as the group's de facto leader, but his location in Iran, which many al Qaeda supporters see as an enemy, and his general isolation probably limits his effectiveness as a leader.[109] Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the core has faced less counterterrorism due to its positive relationship with the Taliban, which it has used to rebuild some of its capabilities.

The al Qaeda core retains a presence in Afghanistan under the de facto protection of the Taliban.[110] There are reports of training camps in Afghanistan, and the group's fighters are present in at least six Afghan provinces.[111] Before the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda used the Taliban-provided haven to target the United States and other ideological but distant enemies as well as train and organize thousands of jihadists to fight more local foes. However, the Taliban claims it will not allow al Qaeda to use the country as a base for international terrorism, and it does not appear to allow al Qaeda the freedom to operate that the group enjoyed in the 1990s, when it ran large training camps and plotted major operations from Afghanistan. However, extreme uncertainty characterizes any judgment about the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda.[112]

The core certainly takes advantage of the Taliban's protection to reconstitute itself, and although its ability to do so is currently limited, there are signs that al Qaeda intends to reassert itself on the global stage.[113] In 2024, two top lieutenants were sent to reestablish cells in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.[114] Additionally, while most of al Qaeda's propaganda remains regionally focused, it tried to exploit the war in Gaza to call for lone-actor attacks globally.[115] However, the group continues to face U.S.-led counterterrorism pressure, and its failure to rally terrorists in the name of the war in Gaza is another indication of its limited power to mobilize. Although the Taliban's haven in Afghanistan is real, the group's leadership does not appear to be running training camps of the same size as it did in the 1990s or otherwise operating on a comparable scale.

In 2026, it is unlikely the Taliban will increase counterterrorism efforts against the al Qaeda core, meaning the core will likely continue to grow stronger or at least not weaken. However, recruitment appears limited, and any attempt at external action in 2026 will depend on the effectiveness of the core's online presence, the level of freedom granted by the Taliban with regard to external plotting, and whether the core has been able to reestablish networks in Europe or the United States.

The core likely has different levels of control over its affiliates across the globe, though groups in these areas have sworn loyalty to al Qaeda's leadership. The United Nations reported in July 2025 that the group had attempted to provide guidance to its affiliates, but its direction had been largely ineffective due to "increasing dissent and dissatisfaction" with al-Adel's leadership.[116] The report also states that al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb still exerts some influence over JNIM, while AQAP may be trying to distance itself from central leadership.[117] Limited control at times affects the core's ability to shift groups from local to more global targeting. Al Qaeda's affiliates sometimes use tactics, such as the wanton killing of Muslim civilians, that al Qaeda opposes and ultimately backfire on the group.[118]

Al Qaeda's most effective affiliate in the Middle East is AQAP, its branch in Yemen. AQAP has historically been al Qaeda's most internationally oriented affiliate. AQAP has long possessed an active and powerful media arm, Al-Malahem, which, through its *Inspire* magazine, inspired the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.[119] *Inspire*, which is once again being published as of December 2025 after a break for several years, seeks to radicalize Westerners and provide both targets and instructions for lone-wolf terror attacks.[120] AQAP has also conducted attacks against the United States at different times in its history, and it is responsible for the only al Qaeda–directed attack on U.S. soil since 9/11: the shooting of three men at the Naval Air Station Pensacola by a terrorist linked to AQAP.[121]

AQAP remains resilient and active in Yemen's ongoing civil war. Although its strength has degraded from its peak, its position improved in 2025. The group has several thousand fighters under arms in Yemen; early 2025 UN estimates were between 2,000 and 3,000.[122] According to independent journalist Abdual Majeed, AQAP still has a presence in rural parts of Yemen, but Houthi forces have pushed it out of al-Bayda and al-Mudiyah.[123] In the east, AQAP's forces have historically fought with the Southern Transitional Council (STC). However, the STC's collapse in January 2026 after a brief clash with the internationally recognized government and Saudi Arabia has created a power vacuum in its previous territory in the south, which will probably decrease counterterrorism pressure on AQAP.[124] AQAP celebrated this collapse and reportedly captured some STC arms depots and land in the province of Hadramawt.[125] Although AQAP seemed to be struggling financially in early 2025, the United Nations reported at the end of the year that AQAP's financial situation had improved, primarily due to trade with al Shabaab in Somalia and receiving a portion of the fees paid to Somali pirates for safe passage.[126]

AQAP is growing stronger and taking a more important role in al Qaeda's global operations. The United Nations found that AQAP's attacks grew in both number and complexity in the latter half of 2025, notably including a suicide attack against a government compound.[127] AQAP's leadership also remains interested in external operations, particularly maritime operations, which include the use of uncrewed boats.[128] The weakness of al Qaeda's central leadership has reportedly allowed AQAP leader Sa'ad bin Atef al-Awlaki, who has publicly called for more attacks on the United States, to become more influential in al Qaeda's global leadership structure.[129] Despite these ambitions, the group's weakness is likely to reduce the risk of directed (as opposed to inspired) global attacks.

Although AQAP and the Houthis have historically clashed over territory and ideological differences, since 2022 the groups have also cooperated when it suits both their interests. They currently seem to have a loose cease-

fire agreement, which has included weapons transfers and prisoner exchanges.[130] This relationship has largely evolved from the two groups' shared interest in fighting the internationally recognized government of Yemen. This relationship benefits AQAP, as it previously faced heavy counterterrorism efforts from the Houthis.[131] If the agreement lasts, AQAP will likely continue to solidify its position in Yemen, but if the agreement falls apart, AQAP will likely face highly effective Houthi counterterrorist pressure. The two groups' short-term tactical interests reportedly remain largely similar; therefore the partnership is likely to continue or even strengthen in 2026.[132]

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: HAMAS

Hamas does not pose a threat to the U.S. homeland, but it currently poses a real but limited threat to Israel even after Israel decimated it in the two-year war. Although Hamas has strengthened after the October 2025 cease-fire, its current capabilities are nowhere near what they were. Hamas's future strength largely depends on the state of its cease-fire with Israel. If the cease-fire holds, Hamas can likely continue to regain influence, but if war with Israel restarts, its military capabilities will likely weaken significantly.

After two years of desperate fighting against Israel following Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attack, Israel and Hamas agreed to a cease-fire under U.S. pressure. Israel significantly degraded Hamas's capabilities during the fighting, so its current strength is difficult to determine. Hamas had an estimated 25,000–30,000 fighters before the war, and Israel claims to have killed between 17,000 and 23,000 fighters.[133] But the real number of Hamas's military casualties is likely lower, with an Israeli internal database in May 2025 listing the number of named fighters killed at 8,900, though this number includes almost all of Hamas's pre–October 7 senior leadership.[134] Hamas has recruited thousands of new fighters to replace its losses, but its new recruits lack military training and expertise.[135]

Hamas's civil governance structure almost completely crumbled in the post–October 7 fighting, though it has reasserted some of its control in the last three months. According to the BBC, as of July 2025, Hamas had lost "80% of its control over the Gaza Strip," which limited its ability to pay its government employees and regulate the Gazan economy.[136] Since the cease-fire, however, Hamas has started to regain control over Gaza, which has included a wide-scale crackdown on several gangs, some of whom Israel actively supported to undermine Hamas's control of the strip.[137]

In the past, Hamas has not conducted attacks outside Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. However, there are indications that it is considering external operations—a potentially transformative development given the group's strength and the support it enjoys in many countries.[138] Hamas has long had logistics networks in Europe, but in 2019 it created several small weapons caches in European countries, seemingly as a contingency plan to attack the European Jewish community. Under this directive, Hamas operatives worked to obtain European residence permits, place small weapons caches in several countries, and create connections with existing European organized crime networks.[139] Since then, European authorities have disrupted several Hamas plots, including, most notably, a plan to attack the Israeli embassy in Sweden with weaponized drones.[140] Hamas's investment in Europe is a departure from its traditional focus on Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, and is raising significant concern among Israeli and European officials.

Both Hamas's future and the future of the cease-fire are unclear. Hamas is focused on survival and wants some role in any future government of Gaza and in the broader Palestinian national movement.[141] In January 2026, Hamas claimed it would accept the technocratic leadership committee called for in the cease-fire, but it did so with several conditions, especially with regard to disarmament.[142] But so far, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been relatively unwilling to negotiate and has threatened to resume large-scale military action if Hamas does not unconditionally agree to Israel's demands.[143] After various small-scale attacks, both Israel and Hamas have claimed that they remain committed to the implementation of the cease-fire plan. But continued disagreements and fighting have delayed the start of the second phase, which would include Hamas's disarmament and political dissolution, the deployment of international peacekeepers, Israeli withdrawals from more of Gaza, and the beginning of Gaza's reconstruction.[144]

The cease-fire's implementation in its planned form will depend on Hamas's willingness to disarm, Israel's willingness to make concessions to preserve peace, and the international community's commitment to the International Stabilization Force (ISF)—the latter of which has not materialized. External actors may hesitate to commit forces to the ISF because its mandate will likely include the difficult and politically undesirable task of enforcing Hamas's disarmament, and many Arab and Muslim states are particularly reluctant to commit forces if there is no clear path to a Palestinian state.[145] If the ISF is unsuc-

cessful, some version of the status quo will most likely remain in Israel, such that Israel conducts regular attacks on Hamas fighters and leaders while Hamas undermines alternative Palestinian leaders in Gaza.

The resumption of full-scale war, however, would likely have deleterious effects for regional stability, as the Houthis would likely resume attacks both on Israel itself and on Red Sea shipping, which are discussed in more detail below. The utter shattering of Hamas also makes international terrorism more likely, both due to Hamas's desire for revenge and because the group's leadership would not be able to direct and restrain all the cells around the world.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: THE HOUTHIS

As of 2025, the Ansar Allah movement, better known as the Houthis, served as an important part of Iran's Axis of Resistance and as a threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, especially freedom of navigation and the security of Israel. However, unlike the Islamic State and al Qaeda, the Houthis have little to no interest in conducting attacks on the U.S. homeland or conducting other extraregional terrorist attacks. Instead, they are coming into conflict with the United States either in response to U.S. strikes or through their on-and-off war with Israel. In March 2026, the Houthis launched an attack on Israel in response to Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iran, but it has not tried to block regional shipping.

The Houthis operate a statelet from the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. The group likely has around 25,000 regular troops (though estimates vary). It can also call upon tens of thousands of additional fighters, as it maintains a large military reserve and has tribal allies that are willing to fight if their region is threatened.[146] The Houthis possess a large and varied arsenal that includes antiship ballistic and cruise missiles, one-way attack drones, and unmanned surface vehicles, many of which are based on Iranian designs.[147] The number of weapons the Houthis have stockpiled is largely unknown, but the group has demonstrated the ability to conduct strikes against Israel, international shipping, and the U.S. Navy for months at a time. From October 2023 to April 2024, the Houthis deployed an average of 40 one-way attack and surveillance drones and 36 missiles with ranges greater than 250 kilometers each month.[148] In August 2025, the Houthis launched a missile at Israel, which, according to the Israeli government, used a warhead with cluster munitions.[149] Although cluster munitions are not useful against ships and are therefore not relevant to Red Sea attacks against U.S. warships, their existence in the Houthis' arsenal suggests the possibility that the Houthis possess or may soon possess other advanced weapons technology that could directly threaten maritime targets.

Although the Houthis have impressive military capabilities, they do not appear to have developed global networks to conduct more traditional terrorist attacks and have not indicated a desire to do so. The Houthis do not pose much of a global threat in the same manner as the Islamic State or al Qaeda but are instead focused on consolidating and expanding their power in Yemen. Therefore, they behave far more like a traditional state that is hostile to Western regional interests than a transnational terrorist group.

Although the Houthis' ambitions are primarily national, the group emerged as a regional actor after the October 7, 2023, attacks. The Houthis present themselves as Yemen's protection from foreign influence, especially from the United States and Saudi Arabia, and they frame their attacks as part of the country's defense, which is easier to use as justification for attacks near Yemen than for international terrorist attacks.[150] Since October 7, the Houthis have attacked international shipping and Israel in support of Hamas and the Palestinian cause more broadly. One expert alleges, however, that Houthi attacks against Israel had far more practical goals, as the group intended to use the Palestinian cause to shield itself from criticism over its poor domestic administration and to increase recruitment.[151]

After October 7, Houthi leaders claimed that their pressure campaign in the Red Sea would end when the "siege on Gaza ends."[152] They have largely followed this commitment: Since the October 2025 cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, the group has not claimed any attacks in the Red Sea.[153] If the peace in Gaza falls apart in a highly visible way, however, the Houthis may resume strikes, as they have after previous cease-fires have lapsed. Similarly, it is possible that the Houthis may join in on Iran's side of the war with a greater commitment than they currently have shown.

The Houthis have long been a member of Iran's Axis of Resistance. Iran was supporting the Houthis by at least 2014, though some experts claim they were collaborating as early as 2009.[154] The Houthis look to Iran for advanced weapons systems, including missiles and drones; in exchange, the Houthis put pressure on Iranian adversaries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.[155] Iran, however, faces tremendous economic pressure at

home, and Washington is pressing Tehran to end support for various proxies, including as part of its 2026 war with Iran. Although the Houthis benefit from their relationship with Iran, they would be extremely unlikely to collapse if Iran's government either falls or decides to reduce support.[156] Iran does not provide the bulk of the Houthis' funding, and the group has relied on its own resources and fighters for many years. In addition, the Houthis may be able to reach out to Russia if Iranian support declines.[157] However, a loss of Iranian support would reduce the ability of the Houthis to target Saudi Arabia and international shipping and would decrease the Houthis' resources vis-à-vis its Yemeni enemies, likely leading to territorial losses.

The Houthis will therefore likely retain their current strength in 2026 or grow even stronger absent the complete collapse of Iranian support. The three-month U.S. strike campaign against the group in 2025, which ended when both sides agreed to a cease-fire in May, did not prevent the group from threatening commercial ships in the Red Sea: The Houthis sank two commercial vessels in July 2025.[158] These most recent attacks were also the most complex the Houthis had ever carried out against shipping in the Red Sea, including the coordination of manned and unmanned surface vessels with antiship missiles.[159] The Houthis' resilience and increasing attack complexity suggest that they will be able to continue to threaten shipping through the Red Sea in 2026 if they so desire, potentially forcing the United States or its allies to commit significant naval resources to the region to defend commercial vessels.[160]

The recent conflict between the STC and the internationally recognized Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) will likely decrease counterterrorism pressure on the Houthis, though it also introduces significant uncertainty into the region. In December 2025, the STC launched an offensive into Hadramawt governorate, which makes up a significant part of the PLC.[161] In response, Saudi Arabia, the PLC's main benefactor, helped it launch a counteroffensive that led to the STC's collapse.[162] The ensuing power vacuum in southern Yemen will probably allow the Houthis to consolidate or even increase their level of capability because they will not, at least in the short term, have to combat much counterterrorism pressure in the south.

However, in the long term, the counterterrorism situation in Yemen depends heavily on the course of the Yemeni civil war, which has been fought at various levels of intensity for over a decade, with the power balance regularly changing. Saudi Arabia is now the dominant influence over the internationally recognized government of Yemen, as previously the United Arab Emirates had significant influence over southern Yemen through its partnership with the STC.[163] If Saudi Arabia can take advantage of its newfound influence in Yemen to fully unite the previously fragmented anti-Houthi coalition, it may be able to increase the counterterrorism pressure the Houthis and other terrorist groups in Yemen, including AQAP, face. However, if Saudi Arabia is unable to effectively assert its power over southern Yemen, the short-term decline in counterterrorism pressure created by the fall of the STC may become permanent.

The Houthis have cultivated an increasingly strong partnership with al Shabaab in Somalia in the last few years, through which they may be able to further project their power. Al Shabaab has helped the Houthis secure weapons shipments from Iran by providing a less-risky land route through Somalia, minimizing the amount of time the weapons spend on ships in the Gulf of Aden, where they could be interdicted.[164] The Houthis likely intend to use their relationship with al Shabaab to exert more political influence in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.[165] Weapons sales to al Shabaab also represent a potential new line of funding for the Houthis.[166] The relationship between the Houthis and al Shabaab has survived despite sectarian differences, and will likely either endure or strengthen further in 2026.

Trends to Watch

IRAN AND ITS PARTNERS ON THE BACK FOOT

On the positive side, from a counterterrorism perspective, Iran is far weaker than it was a year ago. The United States and Israel's 2025 and 2026 military campaigns killed many Iranian leaders, destroyed much of its nuclear and missile programs, and undermined Iran's long-standing deterrence posture based around a strong response from its proxies. In addition to the military pressure, Iran was facing significant domestic challenges before the 2026 war: water shortages, high inflation, and other economic problems. These issues led to large demonstrations throughout the country that the regime brutally suppressed, further decreasing its popularity.

Iran's regional partners have also been battered, and the Axis of Resistance is in disarray. Israel's wars against Hamas and Hezbollah have weakened both groups, while the collapse of the Assad regime removed a criti-

cal node from Iran's political and logistics network. The main exceptions are the Houthis (as discussed) and Iran's partners in Iraq.

Iran likely decided not to involve the Axis of Resistance in its 12-day war with Israel in 2025 because several of its proxies were in difficult political situations and militarily weakened, which made intervention untenable. Lebanese Hezbollah, for example, is weaker than it has been in years due to the 2024 Israeli military campaign, and its political position in Lebanon is more precarious. The Israeli military claims that Hezbollah lost roughly 70 percent of its rocket and missile arsenal and that Israeli forces killed or wounded around 15,000 fighters—between one-third and one-half of Hezbollah's prewar army.[167] Hezbollah lost almost all its most senior commanders, as well as the charismatic and formidable Hassan Nasrallah, the group's secretary general. Hezbollah has military reserves and a strong training program, but experienced fighters are hard to replace. So far, no leader has emerged with Nasrallah's stature and influence. The group's finances are also in disarray, and media reports indicate it has frozen some payments to supporters because of an ongoing liquidity crisis.[168] Amplifying these concerns, U.S. officials stressed to Iran and Hezbollah that if Hezbollah joined the war, it would be a "very bad decision."[169] In 2026, when the war became existential for Iran, Hezbollah did conduct attacks on Israel. These were of limited effectiveness, demonstrating the group's weakness, and Israel conducted large-scale attacks on Hezbollah positions and leadership in Lebanon, including creating a de facto buffer area on the Lebanese side of the Israel-Lebanon border.

Partly as a result, Hezbollah has faced unprecedented internal political pressure. The election of anti-Hezbollah politicians Joseph Aoun and Nawaf Salam as president and prime minister of Lebanon, respectively, represents a departure from Hezbollah's previous ability to veto any political candidate it did not support and suggests that Hezbollah is either more willing to compromise than in the past or no longer has the political clout to manipulate the government.[170]

Compounding Hezbollah's problems, the collapse of the Assad regime not only deprived Hezbollah of one of its most important allies but also cut Hezbollah off from direct Iranian support by land. Before Assad fell, the group received much of its arsenal on an overland route that passed from Iran through Iraq and Syria.[171] Although Israel claims Iran is still helping the group rearm and the group is focused on rebuilding its weapons stockpiles, the lack of open access to Syria will hinder Iranian resupply of weapons.[172]

Unlike Hezbollah, Iran's Iraqi proxies did not suffer any degradation of their capabilities in 2025. Iran invested heavily in Iraq for decades, working with a wide range of actors, including the government and various Kurdish groups, but with a particular focus on different Shia paramilitary actors. Notable groups include Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, among others. Many of these operate under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a paramilitary group backed by Iran that the Iraqi government legitimized as part of the state security forces during its effort to fight against the Islamic State.[173] The PMF's fighters number around 200,000 (though the degree of loyalty to Iran varies considerably), and they receive a budget from the Iraqi government of $3.6 billion. Despite receiving Iraqi government funding, some PMF factions openly pledge allegiance to Iran and work with the IRGC.[174]

Even though its capabilities remained intact, the PMF restrained its activity during the 2025 Israel-Iran war. After its legalization, the PMF integrated itself into the Iraqi government, building a political power base through considerable patronage networks. In the war, the PMF remained neutral, likely assessing that involvement would threaten its political power and its smuggling and other financial activities for little perceivable gain. In addition, U.S. strikes on the most pro-Iran parts of the PMF, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, after the January 2024 attack on the U.S. Tower 22 facility in Jordan, further contributed to deterrence.[175] However, Iraqi militias kidnapped an American journalist during the 2026 war, a reminder that they are still willing to target U.S. civilians.[176]

Additionally, the PMF does not control territory in Iraq, as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis do in their respective regions. The PMF exerts significant influence over the Iraqi government, sometimes violently, assassinating journalists, protesters, and minority members who oppose Iran and PMF-backed Iraqi leaders.[177] This status also gives the group freedom of movement and the ability to train and plot with considerable impunity. But many Iraqis, including Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani and other leaders, see Iran as having too much influence in the country and want to carefully reduce Iranian influence to make the PMF more subordinate to Iraqi leaders.[178]

Institutionalizing the PMF in a manner that completely dismantles the PMF's current structure and culture is

likely impossible in the short term, as the PMF is powerful enough to forcefully resist any decision it disagrees with.[179] As a result, compromises will need to be made with the PMF to eventually lure it away from Iran.

The PMF seeks to avoid an unrestricted conflict with the United States—a view that Iran appeared to support in 2025. According to Elizabeth Tsurkov, who was held hostage by Kata'ib Hezbollah during the Tower 22 attacks and the subsequent assassination of several of the group's leaders by the United States, members of Kata'ib Hezbollah became increasingly paranoid in the months after the attack out of fear that U.S. intelligence had completely penetrated their organization.[180] In July 2025, the PMF was likely wary of provoking a similar or more severe response from either the United States or Israel, which made it less likely to get involved, even if Iran had called on it to do so.

Before the 2026 war began, Iran had already demonstrated an interest in rebuilding its proxies, with the U.S. government reporting in November 2025 that Iran had funneled about $1 billion to Hezbollah despite a heavy international sanctions regime and the country's severe financial difficulties.[181] Such payments suggest Iran remains committed to using proxies for deterrence and power projection, meaning that in the long term it will probably focus on regaining its pre-2025 levels of influence.

THE INSPIRATIONAL THREAT TO THE WEST

Terrorist attacks in the West by al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their various associated groups have declined from their peak a decade ago, but they remain a consistent lower-level threat.[182] Although both the Islamic State and al Qaeda core organizations are far weaker than they were at their peaks, the terrorism risk they pose in the United States, Europe, and other countries far from jihadist hubs remains because of their power to inspire or facilitate attacks through their propaganda or online communications with radicalized or radicalizing individuals. Although attacks have decreased since their peak in the mid-2010s, the Islamic State still has enough influence to inspire multiple attacks in the West each year. ISKP is the most active threat to the West within the Islamic State through its attempts to radicalize younger people on the internet, which has resulted in several disrupted plots in Europe, including the 2024 plot to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Austria.[183]

ISKP is the most active threat to the West within the Islamic State through its attempts to radicalize younger people on the internet.

Even if the Islamic State core remains weak, the organization's message continues to inspire attacks all over the world. Despite its senior leadership releasing only four propaganda messages in 2025, the group still inspired two mass-casualty events, which happened on New Year's Day in New Orleans and in December on Bondi Beach in Sydney.[184]

In recent years, al Qaeda has inspired fewer attacks than the Islamic State but still seeks to convince followers to commit terror attacks against the United States and its allies around the world. The al Qaeda core has tried to co-opt the Palestinian cause during the war in Gaza to inspire lone-actor attacks in the United States.[185] As such, AQAP restarted its *Inspire* publication in 2023 and added video-based propaganda for the first time.[186]

Both the Islamic State and al Qaeda have begun using new platforms and emerging technology to further their propaganda goals. The Islamic State, for example, has started using TikTok to try to appeal to younger audiences.[187] The Islamic State has also begun issuing instructions on how to use widely available generative AI platforms to assist in terrorist plots without alerting government officials or setting off safeguards in the AI systems.[188]

Although inspired attacks tend to be more likely to fail and less lethal than directed attacks, they are difficult to prevent completely because authorities need to identify, track, and shut down radicalization pipelines, which are constantly changing.[189] Even if individuals are identified as sympathetic to a terrorist group, law enforcement also must determine the extent to which someone intends to commit an attack, and misjudgment of the extent of radicalization can lead to an attack succeeding or diversion of law enforcement and intelligence resources away from other potentially radical individuals.[190]

Inspired attacks also require a different counterterrorism response than attacks directed by Islamic State or al Qaeda leadership. Fighting directed attacks involves denying safe havens, targeting leadership, securing international intelligence cooperation, and other means to disrupt an organized group. For inspired attacks, the focus should be on working with communities and technology

companies to gain advance knowledge of potential violent threats and reduce the impact of jihadist propaganda.[191]

While lone-wolf attacks are harder to detect than those planned and directed by a terrorist group, they are typically more likely to fail, and when they do succeed, they cause fewer casualties per attack on average.[192] Without contact with a group such as the Islamic State, a would-be terrorist is less likely to identify a significant target or know the basics of operational security to circumvent discovery by law enforcement.

SIGNS OF PROMISE IN SYRIA

For many decades, Syria was a source of terrorism. Both al-Assad regimes embraced radical Palestinian nationalism and hosted an array of secular and religious Palestinian terrorist groups, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, and Palestine Islamic Jihad.[193] Syria also worked closely with the Kurdistan Workers' Party to undermine Turkey, aided Hezbollah against Israel, and allowed jihadists to transit its territory to fight U.S. forces in Iraq.[194] Although Syria often placed limits on these groups to control escalation—at times even killing and arresting faction leaders—the Assad regimes' support for terrorism was long-standing.

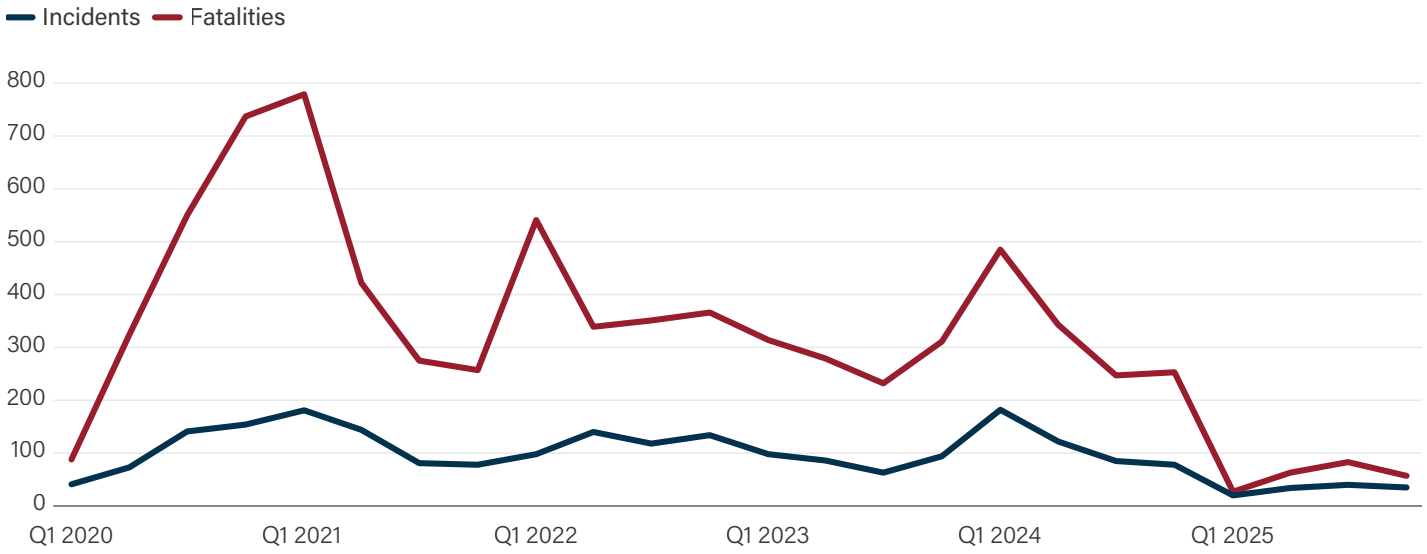
After the collapse of Syria into civil war in 2011, Syria went from sponsor of terrorist groups to a theater of jihad. Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran became important backers of the regime, fighting alongside government forces, while jihadist groups set up shop, most notably the group that in 2014 declared itself to be the Islamic State.

After a coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham toppled the Assad regime in December 2024, fears grew that the Islamic State would exploit any power vacuum and that Turkey and Israel would meddle, among other potential dangers.[195] Some of these fears have come true, and several thousand Syrians have died in clashes between government-aligned militias and Syria's minority communities, particularly the Druze and the once-dominant Alawite community.[196] At the same time, the new leader of Syria, President al-Sharaa, has proved pragmatic, fighting the Islamic State, rejecting Hezbollah and Iran, and seeking to work with the United States and its Gulf allies to rebuild Syria.[197] The number and lethality of violent incidents involving the Islamic State in the country declined throughout 2025 (see Figure 3.1).

Despite an encouraging start, Syria remains an area of significant concern. The regime is weak, ruling a society devastated by over a decade of war and economic isolation. Its efforts to reunite the country may prevent it from focusing on combating remaining terrorist cells. This phenomenon is most notable in the conflict between the transitional government and the SDF, which was formerly the closest U.S. ally in Syria and controlled large parts of northeast Syria.

Figure 3.1

Violent Incidents Involving the Islamic State in Syria



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), accessed March 18, 2026, https://acleddata.com.

A January 2026 government offensive took the vast majority of the SDF's territory, which forced the SDF to acquiesce to the government's terms. But the fighting has led to hundreds of Islamic State detainees escaping and may allow the Islamic State to take further advantage of the distraction on both sides.[198] Renewed conflict between the SDF and the Syrian government could weaken their counterterrorism efforts, which is significant because most of the Islamic State's attacks in Syria are in SDF-governed regions.[199]

Israeli leaders see the new government as a security risk, believing it remains sympathetic to jihadism and otherwise hostile to Israel. Israel therefore seeks to keep Syria weak. The Israeli military has repeatedly struck Syria, carrying out hundreds of air strikes on Syrian military targets; provided military support for Syria's Druze community in its efforts to maintain its autonomy; and expanded its occupation of Syrian territory beyond what it captured in 1967.[200] Although Israel claims that its forces remain in Syria because the government is not conducting effective counterterrorism, Syrian officials argue that Israel's presence prevents them from exerting control over their entire territory.[201] In January 2026, Syria and Israel agreed to a dedicated communication mechanism that allows them to share intelligence, improve military cooperation, and quickly resolve disputes.[202] This agreement is a positive first step toward improved counterterrorism efforts in southern Syria, but it requires both countries to cooperate in good faith, which is by no means guaranteed.

Israel's and Turkey's involvement in Syria also exacerbates existing tension between these states.[203] The two countries have different goals in Syria, with Israel seeking to keep Syria weak and Turkey wanting a strong, stable Syrian state to which it can repatriate its more than two million Syrian refugees.[204] Syria is just one piece of an increasing regional rivalry between the two countries that also includes disagreements over Gaza and Somalia, as well as Israel's relationship with Cyprus.[205] If this competition continues to affect Syria's ability to effectively control its territory, Syria's government will likely remain weak, which could provide the Islamic State with an opportunity to become stronger.

Syria's future will most likely follow one of three paths. The first is that the transitional government could gain something approaching full control of the country either through conquest or a deal with the SDF. If the Syrian government accomplishes this admittedly difficult feat, its counterterrorism efforts could mirror those of Iraq, which suffered fewer than 20 Islamic State attacks in 2025. The Islamic State core is weak enough that full Syrian reunification and a unified counterterrorism effort could further hinder Islamic State activity. Greater unification is likely, but the extent of regime control over more remote parts of Syria will probably be uneven.

Second, the country could fall back into civil war, perhaps as part of a proxy conflict between outsiders (e.g., Israel and Turkey). This potential outcome is the worst for effective counterterrorism, as civil war and broad political chaos make a comprehensive campaign against terrorist groups, particularly the Islamic State, difficult if not completely impossible.

The last possible outcome is a balkanization of Syria, where Syria would be split into multiple statelets that would be controlled by (1) the government, (2) Druze communities near the Israeli border, or the (3) SDF or a successor group in Kurdish areas. This outcome is worse for counterterrorism efforts than the first scenario but better than the second. Although the state is not unified in this situation, which could make counterterrorism cooperation between the various statelets difficult, the Syrian government, Druze organizations, and Kurdish groups would have far more energy to devote to combating the Islamic State than they would if they were at war with each other.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF ISRAEL

Israel has greatly weakened Hamas and Hezbollah in the last two years. As a result, both groups pose far less of a threat to U.S. nationals and U.S. interests in the Middle East than they did two years ago, and their weaknesses have forced them to accept cease-fire agreements that are beneficial to U.S. and Israeli interests. In addition, Israel's attacks on Iran's nuclear program and military leadership have diminished Iranian power and prestige. Israel's actions have harmed its reputation, increased regional tensions, and strengthened anti-Israel sentiments among affected populations. Moreover, Israel may not be able to sustain its efforts, and Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran could recover, at least relative to 2025, if they face less pressure. As a result, Israeli policy poses significant uncertainties for the stability of the Middle East in 2026.

Israel's successes, however, may prove short-lived, creating uncertainty over the ultimate strength and intentions of Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups, as well as Iran. Long-term success for Israel requires either (1) governments in

Lebanon and Gaza that are not linked to Hezbollah and Hamas, respectively, or (2) regular military attacks to keep these groups at their current weak state or even more debilitated. Unfortunately, the prospect of strong independent governments in these areas is low because Lebanon's government still has not completely vanquished Hezbollah, and there is no clear Palestinian alternative to Hamas in Gaza. As a result, Israel appears committed to continued campaigns in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, having carried out hundreds of strikes in Lebanon and Gaza since the cease-fires with Hezbollah and Hamas, respectively, as well as in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime.[206]

However, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is exhausted, with certain reserve brigades reportedly at only 40–50 percent of their full strength.[207] Although the IDF is still militarily dominant vis-à-vis Hamas and Hezbollah, it is politically harder for the Israeli government to keep up a high pace of operations, which strains the Israeli economy and society.[208]

Although Israeli pressure is keeping Hezbollah weak and creating incentives for the Lebanese government to press the group to disarm, Israel's presence in Lebanon also may have a deleterious effect on a fragile political situation. Lebanon's government is attempting to fully implement the terms of the 2024 cease-fire, which includes Hezbollah's total disarmament, an outcome that Hezbollah categorically rejects.[209] The Lebanese government has made some progress on disarmament, but President Aoun has expressed a concern that any attempt to push Hezbollah to disarm by force could lead to a civil war, which could reverse the significant progress made against Hezbollah in the last two years and give the group more freedom to operate in Lebanon.[210] Israel's continued strikes in Lebanon could also decrease the current government's legitimacy, which may allow Hezbollah to regroup and rearm.[211]

Much as in Lebanon, Israel has continued military operations in Gaza after the cease-fire. The Israeli government says it is responding to Hamas violations of the "yellow line," the temporary border marked by the cease-fire.[212] Some Israeli officials have claimed that the line will be the new permanent border. Some Palestinian civilians have also alleged that Israel has been reducing Palestinian land by moving the yellow bricks that demarcate the border, which Israel denies.[213] Regardless, violence has continued in Gaza, and Hamas may embrace terrorist attacks on Israel should it have the capability to do so.[214]

Much depends on Israel's ability to sustain various campaigns, particularly those in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestinian areas. Israel is relying on military pressure to keep groups in these countries off balance and put pressure on area governments; if Israel cannot sustain this pressure, there is a risk that the groups will grow stronger and the governments may be less likely to confront them. These campaigns, however, are demanding for Israel's military, often hurt Israel's reputation internationally, create friction with regional powers such as Turkey, and can increase anger against Israel among affected populations.

Terrorists have increasingly used Israel's actions since October 7, 2023, to justify their actions, suggesting that perceptions of Israel's behavior play a significant role in international terrorism. Anti-Semitic attacks worldwide have skyrocketed since October 7.[215] According to Anti-Defamation League data, more than 3,000 anti-Semitic incidents were reported in the United States between October and December 2023, a 360 percent increase from the same period in 2022.[216] In 2024, 58 percent of all reported incidents "contained elements related to Israel or Zionism," marking the first time Israel-related incidents made up a majority of U.S. anti-Semitic activity.[217] Similar patterns emerged in other countries, with France experiencing a 384 percent increase in anti-Semitic incidents in 2023 compared to 2022, and Australia experiencing a 316 percent increase in incidents from October 2023 to September 2024 compared to the previous year.[218] It is unclear if global anti-Semitic events will decrease from these elevated levels if there is a lasting cease-fire in Gaza. Still, the increase in attacks strongly suggests that Israeli policy and the global discourse surrounding Israel's actions have influenced the frequency and composition of global terrorist violence.

Policy Implications

CURRENT POLICY

The Middle East remains an important U.S. foreign policy priority, though there is debate over if it occupies center stage or is a sideshow. The 2026 U.S. war with Iran is a strong indicator of the centrality of the Middle East in U.S. foreign policy, requiring huge resources and risk to U.S. soldiers and other personnel. However, the Middle East is not directly tied to the administration's priorities outlined in the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), and the region does not receive the same attention in the document as the Western Hemisphere and East Asia. Indeed, the NSS notes, "The days in which the Middle East dominated American foreign policy in both long-term planning and day-to-day execution are thankfully over."[219]

Nevertheless, even beyond the 2026 Iran war, if the administration's policies since taking office are a guide, the region will remain a priority, especially regarding counterterrorism. The Trump administration successfully led negotiations that created a cease-fire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, but maintaining peace there will be difficult. Hamas is reconstituting its power while Israel regularly conducts limited strikes in Gaza on Hamas-linked targets. The Trump administration also embraced the al-Sharaa regime in Syria despite its past ties to terrorism, even inviting al-Sharaa to the White House.[220] The administration briefly attacked the Houthis in Yemen in response to their attacks on U.S. targets and international shipping but also agreed to a cease-fire as long as the group refrained from attacking U.S. targets. Regardless of the long-term success or failure of any of these policies, the Middle East has repeatedly demanded high-level, including presidential, attention and the deployment and use of the U.S. military.

Important questions remain about several counterterrorism-related aspects of the administration's policies, in addition to uncertainties about Gaza's cease-fire and Iran. It is not clear how many diplomatic and other resources the administration will expend to push the government of Lebanon to crack down on Hezbollah. President Trump is also considering removing U.S. forces from Syria, which have long been part of the U.S. effort to fight the Islamic State.[221] In short, the region is likely to consume both time and resources from the Trump administration, and its broader instability makes it difficult to implement policies in the long term.

PRIORITIZATION

The top U.S. counterterrorism priority in the Middle East should be to guard against the risk of Iranian terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland while containing or further degrading the Islamic State and, to a lesser extent, al Qaeda. To truly degrade the Islamic State's capabilities in the Middle East, the United States needs to focus on stabilizing the Syrian regime and bolstering its counterterrorism capabilities. While the Islamic State is still present in Iraq, its attacks are less frequent, and the Iraqi government will likely be able to continue its successful counterterrorism operations, though U.S. intelligence and other assistance are helpful.

The Middle East has myriad counterterrorism challenges, and the rapid ups and downs of numerous groups mean prioritization must shift quickly in response. Many terrorism problems in the Middle East are related to state weakness, with substate groups taking advantage of weak (or nonexistent) governments to augment their power. Managing counterterrorism amid pervasive state weakness is a top challenge and is complicated by shifting alliances.

However, Syria is a different story. The Islamic State has taken advantage of the chaos surrounding the fall of the Assad regime to improve its position in terms of weapons and personnel. In addition, the abrupt transition from SDF to government control in some eastern provinces has allowed Islamic State detainees to flee.[222] The Trump administration seems committed to supporting the Syrian government, which will likely increase the effectiveness of the regime's counterterrorism. However, the abrupt shift from supporting the SDF to solely backing the Syrian government removes a key pillar of past U.S. counterterrorism efforts.[223] The United States should work to keep Syria stable, as the government will be able to devote more resources to combating the Islamic State if it does not have to worry about internal armed groups or threats to its sovereignty.

Despite its weakness, al Qaeda needs to remain a U.S. priority. Both the core in Afghanistan and AQAP in Yemen still intend to attack the U.S. homeland. Even if al Qaeda remains weak, underestimating it would be a mistake. The group still has ambitions to attack the United States, which have reportedly increased over the last year.[224] The United States should continue to closely assess al Qaeda's strength to ensure that it is prepared if it tries to conduct external operations against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests.

Despite its weakness, al Qaeda needs to remain a U.S. priority.

Iran and the Axis of Resistance remain a threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, and due to the 2026 war, Iran has greater incentives to attack the U.S. homeland. The Houthis remain strong but have engaged directly with U.S. forces only in the region and only in response to the Israel-Hamas war. This pattern extends to the other axis members, as Hamas and Hezbollah are currently trying to survive differing levels of Israeli and international pressure. Meanwhile, Iran-backed Iraqi militias risk losing their hard-won political influence and control over illicit networks by committing large-scale attacks, and also face pressure from Iran to control escalation.

Israel remains an essential U.S. ally both in counterterrorism efforts and in broader regional security matters.

The United States should continue to work with Israel on sharing intelligence and with all its regional partners to deter Iran. However, terrorists have used Israel's actions to justify violence, including attacks in and on the United States. This is in addition to the human cost. The United States should continue its aggressive diplomatic efforts to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from flaring up and move forward with plans to rebuild Gaza and support eventual Palestinian statehood.

With the exception of Iran, most of the terrorism problems faced by countries in the Middle East are related not to traditional state sponsorship but rather to state weakness. In Syria, the new government lacks the strength to fully crush the Islamic State; Iraq also can contain but not fully defeat the group. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is weakened, but the Lebanese Armed Forces has neither the will nor the ability to defeat the group completely. The PMF in Iraq is funded by the government, and efforts to reduce Iran's influence in the country have met with only limited success. Yemen is in a state of civil war, and in Gaza, Israel and its allies are struggling to find an alternative to Hamas to rule the strip, while the West Bank also faces governance challenges. In all of these cases, U.S. efforts to bolster governance through intelligence cooperation, military training, and aid to state institutions will make them stronger counterterrorism partners.

Furthermore, unlike in other regions, certain U.S. counterterrorism goals in the Middle East align with the U.S. desire to compete with great power adversaries. Continued counterterrorism pressure against regional groups therefore gives the United States ways to weaken Iran and also opens the door to new partnerships with countries such as Syria, which may give the United States an advantage in regional competition with China and Russia. Despite the long-standing interest in leaving the Middle East to focus on great power competition with China, the United States serves these interests by operating in the region, and it should continue to do so.

Taken together, the evidence in this chapter points to a Middle Eastern terrorism landscape that is less immediately threatening to the U.S. homeland than in the past but no less strategically consequential for U.S. interests. Salafi-jihadist organizations such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State are diminished, fragmented, and largely incapable of executing complex directed attacks against the United States, yet their persistent ability to inspire violence abroad ensures they remain a core counterterrorism concern.

The most powerful armed actors in the region—Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iran-linked militias—are primarily regional threats whose actions shape the security of U.S. allies, global commerce, and regional stability rather than directly target the U.S. homeland. Their relative weakness compared to their 2023–24 peak creates opportunities for containment and de-escalation but also incentives for asymmetric disruption, particularly in maritime domains and fragile political environments. At the same time, the 2026 Iran war, because of its existential nature for the regime in Tehran, increases the risk that Iran will act on its own to conduct terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland or U.S. facilities and personnel around the world or will work with proxies, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah. The war greatly increases uncertainty, decreasing confidence levels in many judgments on related terrorism risk.

For U.S. policymakers, the central challenge is managing terrorism amid pervasive state weakness and shifting alliance dynamics rather than confronting a single dominant terrorist adversary. Counterterrorism success will depend less on large-scale U.S. military deployments than on sustained intelligence cooperation, partner capacity building, and diplomatic coordination among often-divided allies. The region's volatility—evident in the 2026 Iran war, Syria's uncertain transition, Yemen's fragmentation, Iraq's contested sovereignty, and Israel's increasingly costly military posture—means today's gains may prove temporary without parallel efforts to stabilize governance and reduce conflict drivers. In this environment, U.S. priorities should focus on preventing jihadist resurgence, constraining Iran's ability to regenerate its proxy network, protecting global commons such as the Red Sea, and aligning counterterrorism objectives with longer-term political strategies. The terrorism threat in the Middle East is lower than in past decades, but the margin for complacency remains thin. Mismanagement could quickly reverse recent progress.

Chapter 4

Africa

Introduction

This chapter assesses the terrorism threat from eight groups active in Africa: al Qaeda affiliates al Shabaab and JNIM; Islamic State provinces including Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP), Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State-Somalia Province (IS-Somalia), Islamic State-Democratic Republic of the Congo (also known as the Allied Democratic Forces, IS-DRC/ADF), and Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M); and the independent Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS).[225] This list does not represent all of the continent's terrorist groups or even all of its Salafi-jihadist groups, but because Africa's non-jihadist terrorist organizations are overwhelmingly focused on local issues, they are excluded from this analysis.[226]

The eight groups assessed in this chapter now account for most global jihadist violence. Nearly 80 percent of global Islamic State activity recorded by ACLED in the first 11 months of 2025, for example, took place in Africa—a massive increase from the nearly 50 percent recorded in 2024.[227] These groups also account for a growing share of propaganda activity, especially for the Islamic State. In 2025, the Islamic State's weekly *al-Naba* magazine placed an enormous emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa, particularly attacks against Christian communities there.[228]

Even so, most African jihadist groups remain focused on their local or regional goals.[229] Although they pose an acute threat to people and even the survival of several governments in their areas of operation, they have demonstrated limited (if any) interest in striking further afield. Only al Shabaab and IS-Somalia have previously plotted or played a major role in facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals or assets outside Africa. Given al Shabaab's level of capability and the blow dealt to IS-Somalia by counterterrorist forces in 2025, al Shabaab remains the African terrorist group that poses the greatest threat to the United States both in Africa and beyond.

Still, al Shabaab seems focused on its regional objectives, meaning the probability that an African terrorist group attempts a mass-casualty attack against the U.S. homeland remains low. Nevertheless, most African terrorist organizations are extremely likely to continue growing stronger in 2026 and beyond. As their capabilities increase, the potential impact of a shift in intentions toward attacking U.S. interests—including, in rare cases, the homeland—would rise, increasing uncertainty and risk.

North African governments have effectively suppressed the continent's remaining Salafi-jihadist groups.[230] While these groups still exist in various attenuated forms, none of the Islamic State's North African affiliates has claimed an attack in years.[231] However, some of these suppressed groups support their more powerful counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa by facilitating the movement of arms, money, and people southward.[232]

Al Shabaab and JNIM are closer to achieving key regional goals than they have been in more than a decade.

Despite these trends, terrorism in Africa may be approaching a tipping point. Al Shabaab and JNIM are closer to achieving key regional goals than they have been in more than a decade. The conquest of either Mogadishu or Bamako by an al Qaeda affiliate could change the international jihadist landscape in unpredictable ways, potentially increasing the intent and capability of Africa's jihadist groups to plot or inspire external operations against the United States. U.S. strikes in Nigeria and Somalia could also incentivize such plotting, especially if the administration's strikes in Nigeria expand to a broader campaign.[233]

That said, these developments could also reduce the threat. A takeover of a West African state could bog JNIM or al Shabaab down in administration. An increased tempo of U.S. counterterrorist operations could degrade West Africa's terrorist groups, even while incentivizing plotting against the United States. The result is that policymakers face an increasingly uncertain environment on the continent.

This chapter begins with a review of groups in Africa that potentially pose a terrorist threat to the United States and its important interests in 2026. It spotlights groups that are a significant threat or have undergone particularly dramatic changes in 2025. It then examines four trends visible across multiple groups: the growing risk of state collapse, the increasing threat to the West African littorals, the growing use of UASs by Africa's terrorist organizations, and the resilience and continued lethality of Africa's smallest terrorist groups. It ends by examining the implications of this analysis for U.S. counterterrorism policy in Africa.

Threat Assessment

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

Al Shabaab remains the greatest terrorist threat to U.S. interests in Africa and beyond, but the gap between it and West Africa's terrorist groups is narrowing. Al Shabaab is Africa's most capable—and likely largest—terrorist group, as well as the group with the most clearly demonstrated intent to attack U.S. interests.[234] It is also the terrorist organization involved in the most violence on the continent (see Figure 4.1).

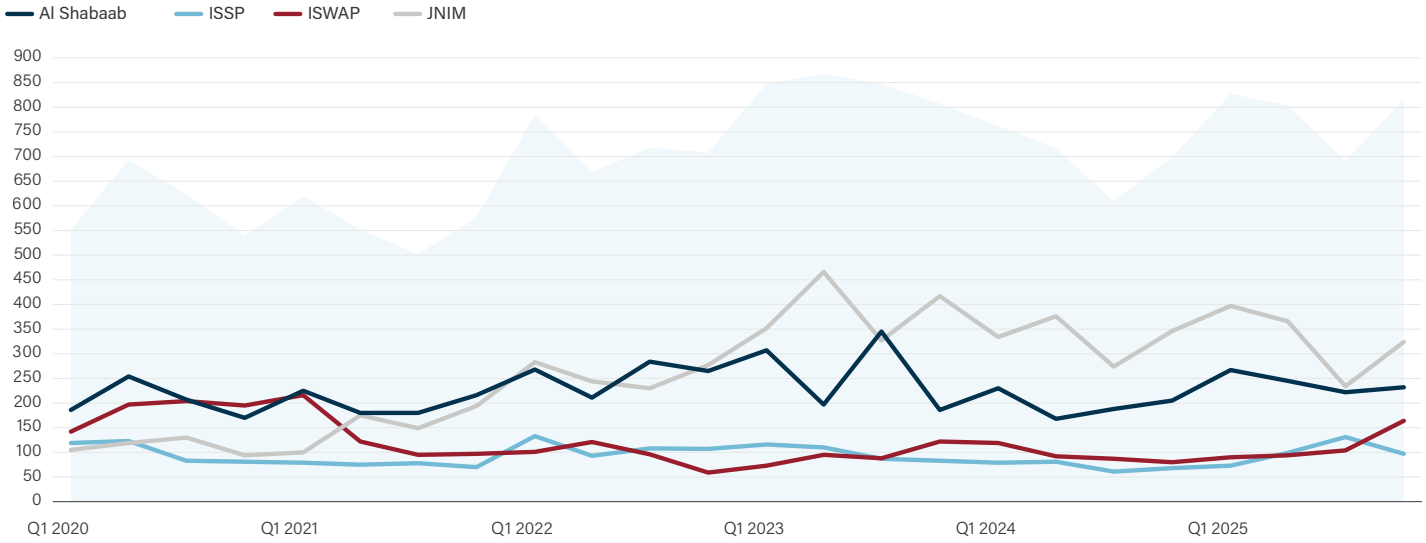
Further, al Shabaab is the only African terrorist organization known to have plotted a mass-casualty attack against the U.S. homeland: a 9/11-style attack disrupted by U.S., Philippine, and Kenyan authorities in 2019.[235] Although some sources allege that al Shabaab's propaganda has recently shifted away from global jihad toward local narratives, the group has not eliminated international issues from its messaging.[236] The fact that the al Shabaab leaders responsible for that plot remain at large also suggests a continued desire to attack U.S. interests in Africa and the U.S. homeland in the longer term.[237]

Al Shabaab also poses a broader threat to U.S. interests than other African terrorists. It increasingly enables piracy off the coast of Somalia and could develop both the capability and intent to conduct its own attacks against international shipping with the support of the Houthis.[238] It also exports capabilities to AQAP in the form of financial support, though the flow of money may have decreased in 2025.[239] In contrast, none of West Africa's terrorist organizations has geographic access to shipping lanes (though the threat they pose to West Africa's littoral states is increasing), and IS-Somalia's ability to fund affiliates farther afield has been significantly degraded by counterterrorist pressure.[240]

Complicating any assessment of al Shabaab's international threat is the fact that the Trump administration increased counterterrorist action against al Shabaab in 2025.[241] Counterterrorist strikes against the group have killed national and regional commanders and have forced al Shabaab members to avoid gathering in large groups.[242] At the same time, al Shabaab has attacked foreign backers of the Somali government in pursuit of its local goals, and attacks against U.S. interests or even the U.S. homeland could serve a similar logic in the context of increased U.S. counterterrorist activity against the group.[243]

Figure 4.1

Violent Incidents Involving the Four Most Active Terrorist Groups in Africa, 2020–2025



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), accessed March 18, 2026, https://acleddata.com.

Despite increasing uncertainty, al Shabaab's capabilities and intentions suggest it remains the greatest threat to U.S. interests among African terrorist groups, as well as the most likely to attempt an attack on the U.S. homeland. While African groups conduct terrorist attacks against U.S. individuals or assets only rarely, if such an attack or plot occurs in 2026, al Shabaab's level of capability and hostility toward the United States suggests that it will probably be responsible.

JNIM, Africa's other al Qaeda affiliate, poses a serious latent threat to the United States. Unlike ISWAP and ISSP, JNIM has not behaved in a way that suggests an intent to conduct external operations or specifically target the United States. JNIM is smaller than al Shabaab and ISWAP and probably generates less revenue than either group.[244] What it lacks in resources, however, it makes up for in operational reach and fighting power. It operates across a massive area, conducting attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Togo, and Nigeria while maintaining a presence in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, and Guinea.[245] It has also enforced a fuel blockade across much of southern Mali since September 2025 in direct confrontation with the government.[246] JNIM operations associated with the blockade span hundreds of kilometers and have had serious economic effects on Mali's capital city of Bamako.[247]

Although JNIM probably does not intend to overrun Bamako, a government collapse could lead to a change in both its intentions and its capabilities.[248] If it conquers Bamako, its intentions could shift toward external operations, it could harbor more internationally minded terrorists, or its achievements could inspire would-be terrorists overseas in ways more characteristic of the Middle East's al Qaeda and Islamic State groups. The most likely outcome, however, is that JNIM maintains its regional focus, prioritizing expansion into African countries on the Gulf of Guinea: Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.[249] A shift to external operations or mass-casualty attacks against U.S. targets in the region would mark a major change from its current trajectory.

Despite al Shabaab's and JNIM's fearsome reputations, ISWAP is catching up. The group is already almost as large as al Shabaab, according to UN estimates. It may also be as wealthy. The New Humanitarian calculated in mid-2025 that ISWAP earned more than $171 million a year, while the United Nations estimated that al Shabaab earned annual revenues of $100–$200 million (though these estimates are not directly comparable due to likely definitional and methodological differences).[250] Like al Shabaab, ISWAP also enhances the capabilities of other groups: The Islamic State's West Africa office has urged greater collaboration between ISWAP and ISSP, and the two groups were "sharing intelligence and coordinating logistics" as of early 2026.[251] ISWAP has also recently benefited from external support in the form of trainers deployed by the international Islamic State organiza-

tion to increase ISWAP capabilities in UAS operations, advanced explosive assembly, and military tactics.[252]

ISWAP's junior regional affiliate, ISSP, is smaller and less capable than al Shabaab, ISWAP, or JNIM. It commands only a few thousand fighters; the United Nations assessed it had 2,000–3,000 members in 2024.[253] The United Nations described its attacks as "smaller in scale and asymmetrical" in early 2026.[254] JNIM has also historically contained ISSP's efforts to expand, even if ISSP can win tactical victories.[255] In the words of the United Nations, ISSP lacks "the means to project force outside the region."[256] As a result, its ability to conduct mass-casualty attacks outside West Africa or against Western government targets in the region during 2026 is significantly less than that of al Shabaab, ISWAP, or JNIM.

Both of West Africa's Islamic State provinces, however, have demonstrated some interest in external operations and limited intent to target U.S. interests, suggesting the potential for plotting against the United States beyond the region. In 2024, authorities in Spain and Morocco disrupted an ISSP plot that posed a "direct threat to the Western populations and the Jewish community" in both countries, though other analysts suggest that plots in Morocco have been mainly inspired rather than directed by Islamic State affiliates.[257] Islamic State militants also allegedly plotted an attack against the U.S. and UK embassies in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2017.[258]

In addition, ISWAP and ISSP have taken on a greater role in the international Islamic State organization. Some governments assess that the head of the Islamic State's West Africa office may have become head of the Islamic State's GDP.[259] Because the GDP plays a central role in plotting external operations, the shift could presage greater ISWAP and ISSP involvement in external plotting.[260] Alternatively, the shift could decrease the Islamic State's focus on global jihad, allowing for greater provincial autonomy, which the group's West African affiliates have used to prioritize local conflicts.[261]

Like al Shabaab, both Islamic State organizations could face increased incentives to target the United States in 2026. On Christmas Day 2025, the United States struck alleged Islamic State camps in northwest Nigeria, claiming systematic persecution of Christians in the country.[262] Although the United States has not yet conducted more strikes, Secretary Hegseth wrote afterward that there were "more to come."[263] Such strikes may push West Africa's Islamic State groups to directly target U.S. interests to demonstrate their strength and resolve in the face of U.S. pressure, though they are far from certain to have such an effect.[264]

While these threats remain latent due to the groups' lack of demonstrated interest in conducting mass-casualty attacks against the United States, multiple factors suggest ISWAP and ISSP may be moving closer to actively and directly threatening U.S. personnel or assets beyond West Africa. ISWAP is therefore a plausible but still unlikely candidate to conduct or plot a terrorist attack against U.S. personnel or assets in 2026. ISSP is a distant third due to its relatively limited capabilities.

IS-Somalia represents a much-reduced threat in 2026 following an 11-month internationally backed offensive by Puntland security forces.[265] IS-Somalia is locally weak, commanding only 200–300 fighters.[266] However, it has long played an outsize role in the Islamic State's international activities as a "key coordination, management and financial hub," in the words of the UN Panel of Experts on al Shabaab.[267] The group is not yet defeated, however, and could resurge in Somalia's complex security and political environment if local security forces and their international backers fail to consolidate gains and maintain pressure on the group. With the pressure still on, however, IS-Somalia will probably not conduct or direct a terrorist attack against U.S. interests in 2026.

Africa's remaining international terrorist organizations pose a minimal threat to the United States and countries outside the region. JAS, IS-DRC/ADF, and IS-M (also frequently referred to as Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a or al Shabaab) remain extremely dangerous to local populations and continue to commit atrocities and drive mass displacement.[268] JAS, in particular, is ascendant, commanding fighters in the low thousands and making gains against its jihadist rival, ISWAP, in limited areas.[269] IS-DRC/ADF and IS-M are much smaller, commanding hundreds rather than thousands of fighters.[270] In addition, all three groups maintain fragmented organizational structures, which limits their capability for violence compared to their more organized counterparts.[271] IS-DRC/ADF and IS-M were also responsible for hundreds of civilian deaths in 2025.[272] All three operate in relatively small areas within national borders, and none has demonstrated a capability for or an interest in conducting or inspiring attacks further afield, with the exception of occasional IS-DRC/ADF attacks in Uganda.[273] These groups will almost certainly not directly attack U.S. individuals or assets in 2026.

Table 4.1

Comparative Assessment of African International Terrorist Groups

Name	Area of operations	Capability	Intent	Threat assessment
Al Shabaab	Horn of Africa	State-like entity with access to rudimentary state-like military capabilities	Demonstrated intent to attack 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 in the Horn of Africa; latent and enabling threat to freedom of navigation off the coast of Somalia; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
JNIM	Western Sahel	Strong insurgency that has displaced the state from significant territory	Regional intent to create a new state crossing international borders; acute intent to bring down the Malian government	Active threat to regional stability; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
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, facilitate, or inspire attacks in Europe or the United States	Active threat to regional stability; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
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, facilitate, or inspire attacks in Europe or the United States	Active threat to regional stability; latent threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
JAS	Lake Chad region	Moderately strong insurgency that has displaced the state from small amounts of territory	Official goals involve seizing national power; actual goals more related to local-level power and wealth	Active threat to regional stability; minor threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the region
IS-Somalia	Somalia	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but retains the ability to inspire and facilitate attacks	Demonstrated intent to inspire and facilitate attacks against U.S. targets as part of a transnational network	Active (but weakened) threat of inspiring or facilitating attacks against U.S. individuals outside the region; minor threat to populations in the region
IS-DRC/ ADF	Eastern DRC	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but retains the ability to inspire and facilitate attacks	Vague, but likely to include the creation of a state crossing international borders	Active threat to local populations; minor threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside the eastern DRC
IS-M	Northern Mozambique	Weak insurgency that no longer controls territory but retains the ability to inspire and facilitate attacks	Vague, but likely to include the creation of a state crossing international borders	Active threat to local populations; minor threat to U.S. individuals and assets outside northern Mozambique

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: AL SHABAAB

Throughout 2025, al Shabaab demonstrated increased desire and ability to seize territory from the Somali National Army and local forces, bitterly contest counter-offensives by international troops, and conduct complex attacks in Mogadishu.[274] Although al Shabaab has conducted occasional attacks affecting U.S. forces in the Horn of Africa in recent years, it is extremely unlikely to conduct external operations against the United States in 2026 due to its focus on regional goals.[275] In addition to its activities in Somalia, it maintains a low level of activity and presence in Kenya and Ethiopia.[276]

Al Shabaab also poses other threats to U.S. interests. The group's increasing strength, territorial control, and relationship with the Houthis represent a latent threat to U.S. interests in freedom of navigation and the movement of shipping through the Gulf of Aden.[277] Al Shabaab could also use the territory and resources it controls to plot external operations against the U.S. homeland if its intentions change. Although it does not currently seem interested in doing so, it has attacked U.S. forces in Kenya and plotted against the U.S. homeland in the past.[278]

By the end of 2025, al Shabaab was stronger than it had been since at least 2022. The group began 2025 with a major offensive involving the deployment of more than 3,000 fighters in the Middle Shabelle, Lower Shabelle, and Hiran regions.[279] By mid-year, it had largely reversed the gains made by the Somali government in its 2022–23 offensive and had even surpassed those gains in several areas, though the government has successfully counterattacked in multiple areas and the situation remains unstable.[280] The group also repeatedly demonstrated its ability to conduct complex and suicide attacks against hard targets in Mogadishu.[281]

The group is poised to continue its expansion in 2026. Reports of forced recruitment "for the Ethiopian front," expedited training, and mobilization of retired fighters all suggest an attempt to surge fighting power.[282] The group has also deployed fighters to northeastern Somalia in an attempt to take advantage of IS-Somalia's weakness.[283] Its financial resources are also likely to expand in 2026 because its offensive has allowed the group to expand informal taxation.[284] Its access to Mogadishu also helps fill its war chest, with extortion of Mogadishu businesses remaining an important source of income despite government efforts.[285]

Al Shabaab will also benefit from its deepening ties to the Houthis, though the extent of that benefit is probably limited. According to the United Nations, al Shabaab allocated "about a quarter of its operational funds to acquiring arms from the Houthis and AQAP in Yemen" in the first half of 2025.[286] These arms almost certainly include more advanced capabilities such as UASs, but there is little evidence that they have had a significant impact on al Shabaab's capabilities.[287] In the absence of such evidence, the most plausible outcome is that Houthi support increases al Shabaab's operational and tactical prowess without unlocking fundamentally new capabilities or causing a strategic shift in the Somali conflict.

For now, those attacks will probably remain isolated to the Horn of Africa. U.S. government assessments from early and mid-2025 imply that al Shabaab is focused on its local goal of establishing an al Shabaab–run government in Somalia and parts of Kenya and Ethiopia.[288] Furthermore, some analysts observed changes in the group's propaganda output in 2025, "signalling a distinct shift away from the jihadists' previous Al-Qaeda-centered narratives" toward local themes, which could suggest decreasing intent to strike U.S. interests outside the region.[289]

However, al Shabaab still has both strategic and ideological reasons to attack U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa and farther afield. The United States has increased its strikes against al Shabaab under the second Trump administration, which could incentivize external plotting.[290] There is some circumstantial evidence that President Trump's past escalation against the group spurred greater external plotting; al Shabaab's plots against the United States were at their height during the first Trump administration, when the United States was conducting counterterrorism operations against the group at a high tempo.[291] While correlation does not imply causation, al Shabaab has conducted attacks against the Somali government's international backers before in an effort to reduce their involvement in Somalia.[292] An attempt to attack the United States based on the same logic is at least plausible.

Al Shabaab also remains ideologically hostile to the United States.[293] The most recent evidence of intent to target the U.S. homeland comes from the 2019 incident in which U.S. and Philippine authorities arrested an al Shabaab operative who was preparing for a 9/11-style plot against the United States.[294] Because the leaders who directed the plot remain at large, they may still want to target the U.S. homeland.[295] As a result, authorities should remain vigilant and not dismiss the possibility

of al Shabaab terrorist attacks against U.S. interests in Africa or even the U.S. homeland.

Finally, al Shabaab's growing strength represents an enabling and latent threat to maritime traffic near Somalia. The Houthis have allegedly prioritized building up al Shabaab and IS-Somalia's maritime capabilities and have allegedly offered more advanced weapons and training to al Shabaab in exchange for increased targeting of commercial vessels.[296] However, Houthi-style attacks against international shipping have not been conducted from Somalia, suggesting either that al Shabaab lacks the necessary capability and intent or that reports of Houthi motivations are incorrect.

Even if al Shabaab does not pose a direct threat to shipping, it enables piracy near the coast of Somalia. During the height of Somali pirate activity between 2008 and 2013, pirates conducted up to 200 attacks and held hundreds of seafarers for ransom each year.[297] Al Shabaab did not conduct much piracy itself but enabled pirates by providing them with safe haven in exchange for payment.[298] Redirection of shipping to avoid the Houthi threat in the Gulf of Aden has been associated with increased piracy off the coast of Somalia.[299] Given al Shabaab's financial interest in such piracy, it will probably enable (or at least tolerate) further piracy in 2026, even if the risk to shipping does not reach the levels it did between 2008 and 2012 and al Shabaab does not itself engage in maritime terrorism.[300]

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: JAMA'AT NUSRAT AL-ISLAM WAL-MUSLIMIN

At the end of 2025, JNIM was probably the strongest it had been in its 13-year existence. It enters 2026 as a serious threat to the survival of Mali's military government and the populations of multiple West African countries. Although JNIM has demonstrated little interest in external operations, its intentions may change, and the group remains the greatest latent threat to the international community in Africa.

JNIM remains focused on establishing an Islamic State within West Africa and currently poses little threat to the U.S. homeland. Although one of the group's founding purposes was to attack and expel foreign forces, especially French military and UN peacekeeping personnel, it did not seek new ways to target Westerners following the withdrawal of France and the United Nations from their areas of operation.[301] Rather, it quickly shifted its rhetoric toward targeting Russia, which replaced France and the United States as the main international backers of the governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[302] It has also repeatedly demonstrated small signs of potential moderation, especially its focus on avoiding civilian casualties in the urban areas where it operates and its apparent openness to negotiations.[303]

The organization continued to grow more capable throughout 2025 and shows no signs of stopping. In 2025, JNIM was assessed to command 5,000–6,000 fighters, an increase from around 2,000–3,000 in 2022. It temporarily overran multiple cities and increased both its operational tempo and geographic reach.[304] In Mali, it imposed a blockade across the country's south, demonstrating the ability to coerce on a larger scale.[305] In Burkina Faso, it temporarily seized control of two provincial capitals.[306] It also stepped up attacks at the edges of its operational area—in Niger, Benin, and Togo—and conducted its first attack in Nigeria.[307]

The organization's demonstrated capabilities also continued to increase in 2025. Throughout 2025, JNIM exhibited significant coordination in its attacks, with multiple subgroups cooperating to carry out simultaneous attacks.[308] Because JNIM was founded as a loose alliance rather than a hierarchical group and because JNIM subgroups have historically operated with a high degree of autonomy, the ability to coordinate operations by multiple factions is particularly important for the organization.[309] JNIM also conducted an increasing number of mass-casualty attacks against government-controlled areas in Mali and Burkina Faso and reached what the United Nations called "a new level of operational capability to conduct complex attacks" in 2025.[310]

JNIM began 2026 richer and larger. As it has taken control of more territory, it has increased its profit from illicit gold mining, cattle farming, logging, and kidnapping, with some analysts pointing to increasing reliance on informal taxation.[311] The most notable change in the group's finances probably comes from the November 2025 ransom of approximately $50 million paid by the United Arab Emirates for two of its citizens.[312] The windfall represents a significant infusion of cash for the group on top of its usual sources of income. The United Nations also noted an increase in kidnapping for ransom during 2025, especially abductions targeting foreigners, increasing the risk that foreigners face in areas where JNIM operates.[313]

The most notable demonstration of JNIM's power last year was its months-long siege of Mali's capital of Bamako. The group has been blocking major highways that transport fuel

and oil to the capital since September 2025.[314] This type of economic warfare is not new for JNIM,[315] but it is the largest economic blockade the group has ever enacted.[316] The scale of the blockade therefore demonstrates an increase in JNIM's organizational capability compared to its previous experiments in besieging cities, posing an arguably unprecedented threat (discussed further in the section "Governments Under Pressure").

Despite the threat it poses to regional stability, JNIM has yet to demonstrate the intent or capability to extend beyond Africa's borders to attack the United States or Europe. It remains unlikely to target U.S. individuals or assets in the region, except for ransom. JNIM kidnaps Americans and other Western citizens, as in October 2025, when it kidnapped an American missionary in Niger. But these kidnappings seem intended to raise money, not instill terror.[317] Rather, JNIM's propaganda increasingly focuses on positioning the group as a legitimate political actor and viable alternative to the region's military regimes.[318]

JNIM's potential for coordination with the broader al Qaeda movement is also probably low. Although al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb retains influence over JNIM, the United Nations reported internal debates over whether to break ties with al Qaeda as recently as July 2025.[319] The same UN report stated that JNIM was "observing developments in the Syrian Arab Republic closely," suggesting that the group was weighing the advantages and disadvantages of breaking with al Qaeda.[320] Such a break seems unlikely in the short term, however, and no substantial signs of a fissure between al Qaeda and its Africa affiliates have yet emerged—though different analysts assess the group's propensity to break with al Qaeda differently.[321]

Taken together, JNIM's focus on the Sahel in its propaganda, low level of coordination with the global al Qaeda movement, and lack of history conducting external operations suggest that it poses little direct threat to populations outside West Africa. Intentions, however, can change—sometimes quickly.[322] The declaration of a JNIM-run state or caliphate in West Africa is one potential trigger for a shift in the threat the group poses. Such a declaration could shift JNIM elites' strategic assessments or inspire international attacks, even if JNIM remains focused on West Africa. The result is that the group could become a direct or enabling threat in 2026, though the most likely scenario remains a continuation of its local focus.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: ISLAMIC STATE-WEST AFRICA PROVINCE

ISWAP is the largest and most powerful Islamic State affiliate in Africa. Although it has demonstrated limited interest in external operations, its increasing prominence within the international Islamic State movement could serve as a leading indicator of a growing desire to attack U.S. individuals or assets in the region or beyond.

ISWAP is highly capable. As of mid-2025, it probably commanded between 8,000 and 12,000 members, making it Africa's second- or third-largest terrorist group, depending on how membership is defined.[323] It also has exhibited high levels of capability across other indicators. Between July 2024 and July 2025, it claimed more attacks than any other Islamic State province.[324] The United Nations also noted in mid-2025 that its "operational capacity improved, with several attacks targeting security installations in Borno State being reinforced with improvised explosive devices and vehicle borne improvised explosive devices and supported by reconnaissance drones."[325] ISWAP has also expanded its operational reach farther west into Nigeria while conducting attacks in Cameroon and Chad.[326] Moreover, the group has been bolstered by foreign fighters in recent years. At least some of these foreign fighters appear to be trainers deployed by the international Islamic State organization to increase ISWAP's capabilities in UAS operations, advanced explosive assembly, and tactics, including coordinated assaults on military bases.[327]

In a demonstration of its strength, ISWAP escalated its campaign against the Nigerian state in 2025. Between March and June 2025, ISWAP launched a series of coordinated attacks against Nigerian military installations known as super camps.[328] ISWAP also temporarily seized the town of Baga, which houses the headquarters of the Multinational Joint Task Force, an African military force established to combat terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin.[329] Given that the super camp strategy was devised as a way to prevent ISWAP from overrunning isolated military positions, ISWAP's brazen attacks against these facilities indicate the group's growing power relative to the Nigerian armed forces.[330]

Despite its increasing prominence within Islamic State propaganda, ISWAP still seems focused on its regional activities and has built governance infrastructure consistent with a local insurgency.[331] At the same time, it is

increasingly integrated into the global Islamic State organization. Some governments assess that the head of the Islamic State's West Africa office may have become head of the GDP, which bears responsibility for external operations within the broader Islamic State organization.[332] The shift could presage greater involvement in external operations, even if ISWAP as a whole continues to prioritize its fight in the Sahel. The group may also have been involved in the external operations plot in Spain in 2024 and the plot against the U.S. and UK embassies in Abuja in 2017, though information clearly linking those plots to ISWAP is not available in open sources.[333]

ISWAP may also take on a greater inspirational role as the Islamic State continues to face significant pressure in the Middle East. In 2025, ISWAP became what the United Nations referred to as "the most prolific propaganda producer" for the Islamic State.[334] It also enables other African Islamic State groups through its leading role in the Islamic State's West African office. In 2024, ISWAP received instructions from the Islamic State core to prepare fighters to deploy to other theaters.[335] These activities suggest that ISWAP might face more pressure to support operations abroad (to take the place of the Islamic State's partially suppressed Middle Eastern provinces), or it might choose to do so due to its leaders' increasing exposure to the international jihadist scene.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: ISLAMIC STATE-SAHEL PROVINCE

ISSP remained a serious threat to populations in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area in 2025 while expanding its activities into Nigeria. The group has also demonstrated both a limited interest in conducting external operations and a desire to attack U.S. individuals and assets in West Africa, suggesting that ISSP merits continued counterterrorist attention despite the extremely low likelihood that it will conduct external operations in 2026.

ISSP is much less capable than JNIM, its main regional rival, and ISWAP, its fellow Islamic State province. ISSP commands a few thousand fighters and operates mainly in the tri-border area.[336] The United Nations assesses that ISSP, unlike its larger counterparts, relies on smaller-scale asymmetrical attacks against security forces—a demonstration of its relative weakness—and lacks "the means to project force outside the region."[337] JNIM has effectively contained ISSP when it has attempted to expand into JNIM's areas of operation.[338] Nevertheless, ISSP demonstrated increasing strength in 2025, though renewed JNIM pressure in 2026 is likely to decrease the group's activities and push it further into Niger and Nigeria, where it faces less competition.[339] ISSP probably commands fewer than 5,000 fighters, with the most recent clear public estimate being a 2024 UN estimate that it commanded 2,000–3,000 fighters.[340] Even if the group has expanded, changes in its attacks do not suggest a near doubling in size.

In 2025, the group nevertheless demonstrated increasing capability. Although its attacks grew less frequent along the Mali-Niger border, they grew more lethal.[341] In May and June, ISSP carried out a series of four large-scale attacks, including two of its deadliest-ever attacks in Mali and Niger, killing at least 42 Malian soldiers and 34 Nigerien soldiers.[342] In early 2026, the group conducted an unprecedented attack on Diori Hamani International Airport and the adjoining Air Base 101 in Niamey, Niger.[343] The group's increased willingness and ability to strike military targets strongly suggest increasing capabilities that could be used to conduct mass-casualty terrorist attacks against civilian targets.

ISSP faces a more complex strategic landscape than either JNIM or ISWAP. The end of the 2025 détente between the latter two groups will probably have a greater negative effect on ISSP because it is the smallest and weakest of the three. At the same time, ISSP may benefit from increasing support from regional allies. The group known as Lakurawa was key to ISSP expansion in Nigeria in 2025.[344] Lakurawa is a loose constellation of militants aligned with international Salafi-jihadist groups—primarily the Islamic State—in northwestern Nigeria.[345] Although the line between Lakurawa and ISSP is not a sharp one, there is little doubt that ISSP-aligned militants in Nigeria (whichever name they go by) were increasingly active in 2025.[346]

The United Nations also reported in mid-2025 that closer ties between ISSP and ISWAP have been encouraged by the international Islamic State's organization.[347] U.S. and Nigerian officials told reporters in early 2026 that ISSP and ISWAP are "sharing intelligence and coordinating logistics."[348] With ISSP and ISWAP's expansion into Nigeria, the potential for direct coordination and intergroup logistics activity is growing.[349]

Taken together, the conflict between JNIM and ISSP, increasing Lakurawa activity, and reports of growing ISWAP ties with ISSP suggest that ISSP will continue to expand east into Niger and Nigeria rather than seek to push JNIM out of the areas it controls in northern Mali

and Burkina Faso. But the extent to which JNIM's manpower is occupied by its blockade of southern Mali will matter to the shape of ISSP activity: ISSP may seek to expand into a vacuum left by changes in JNIM's distribution of forces, if such a vacuum exists.[350]

ISSP has also demonstrated limited interest in external operations. In early 2025, Moroccan authorities disrupted what they called an "imminent dangerous terrorist plot" directed by ISSP commanders, with a series of arrests across nine cities.[351] The 2025 arrests followed a similar series in 2024 in Spain and Morocco, which disrupted an apparent ISSP plot targeting both countries.[352]

A significant wild card in 2026 will be U.S. policy toward Nigeria. On Christmas Day 2025, the United States struck alleged Islamic State camps in northwest Nigeria, claiming systematic persecution of Christians in the country.[353] Although Secretary Hegseth implied that the strikes would not be the last, the country's Salafi-jihadists have been neither deterred nor significantly degraded as a result.[354] ISSP remains on the offensive, and Lakurawa conducted two massacres that killed at least 162 people in early February 2026.[355] In contrast, ISSP may be more motivated to demonstrate its strength and resolve in the face of novel U.S. pressure.[356]

The upshot is that increasing ISSP capability, combined with limited indicators of an interest in external operations, suggests that ISSP merits attention from counterterrorist practitioners. The group is still extremely unlikely to conduct an attack outside Africa, but the risk is growing.

THREAT SPOTLIGHT: ISLAMIC STATE-SOMALIA

IS-Somalia ends 2025 diminished but not defeated. An 11-month offensive led by Puntland security forces and supported by allies including the United States deprived the group of its base areas, killed important figures, and limited its ability to raise and distribute funds.[357] But if counterterrorist forces are unable to consolidate their gains and maintain pressure on IS-Somalia, it may be able to regroup and reconstitute its ability to conduct attacks in the Horn of Africa and support other Islamic State provinces.

IS-Somalia's impact on U.S. interests mostly arises from its role in the international Islamic State movement. The U.S. military has assessed that the Islamic State "controls [its] global network from Somalia."[358] Some governments even believe that IS-Somalia leader Abdul Qadir Mumin leads the global Islamic State organization.[359] Even before these more recent judgments, the group was important to the Islamic State's international activities, serving as "connective tissue for a dispersed organization."[360]

However, there was also evidence that the group was growing as a local force before 2025. During 2024, the size of the group roughly doubled from the 300–500 fighters it commanded in 2023.[361] IS-Somalia also reportedly pushed al Shabaab out of some parts of the Al Miskaad mountains after years of conflict.[362]

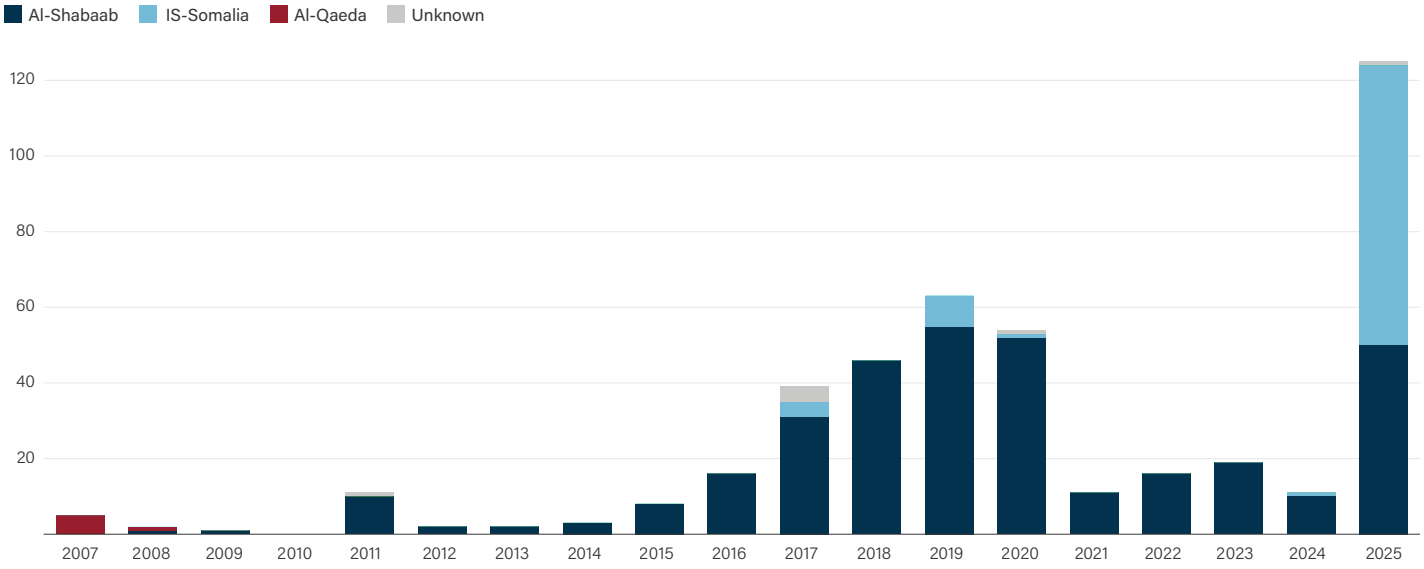
IS-Somalia's local gains were reversed in 2025. The11-month offensive by Puntland security forces backed by the United States, Ethiopia, Kenya, United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom seriously degraded the group, killing more than 100 fighters and pushing IS-Somalia out of its bases in the Al Miskaad mountains.[363] Although IS-Somalia members probably remain scattered throughout the mountains, the group is unlikely to benefit from the same level of safe haven as it did before 2025. In addition, Arab militants likely associated with IS-Somalia have been leaving Somalia since the offensive, and the entry of foreign fighters has been curtailed by security force activities.[364]

A significant increase in U.S. counterterrorist operations has also taken a toll (see Figure 4.2). In February 2025, U.S. air strikes killed Ahmed Maeleninine, whom U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) described as a "key [Islamic State] recruiter, financier, and external operations leader."[365] Two days later, Abdirahman Shirwac Aw-Saciid, a key member of IS-Somalia's local extortion infrastructure, surrendered to Puntland security forces.[366] In July 2025, a rare ground raid by U.S. forces captured Abdiweli Mohamed Yusuf, IS-Somalia's head of finance.[367] The result has been a significant disruption of the group's financial machinery, which constitutes its most important capability.[368] As a result, IS-Somalia poses less of a threat, both in Somalia and in the organization's global role. It may even be the case that the Islamic State's regional office was moved to Mozambique in the wake of the campaign.[369]

The battle against IS-Somalia, however, is not over. Mumin remains at large. Puntland's ability to prevent IS-Somalia from extorting businesses in the port of Bosaso is still unclear.[370] In general, campaigns of targeted killings may take years to have a strategic effect on the targeted group, and it can take a long time to finally destroy nonstate groups, even after they pass the tipping point toward defeat.[371] Even if IS-Somalia never regains the strength it achieved at the end of 2024, it will probably remain a lesser threat for years.

Figure 4.2

U.S. Air and UAS Strikes in Somalia by Target, 2007–2025



Source: David Sterman, Melissa Salyk-Virk, and Peter Bergen, "America's Counterterrorism Wars," New America, June 17, 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/insights/americas-counterterrorism-wars/.

Even so, IS-Somalia has multiple paths to resurgence. Shifts in clan politics could suddenly strengthen the group.[372] Aid from the Houthis, who appear to have supported both IS-Somalia and al Shabaab despite the rivalry between the two Somali groups, could also give IS-Somalia the tools it needs to pose a novel threat within the region.[373] Although the group poses a severely diminished threat in 2026, IS-Somalia's potential to resurge means that counterterrorist officials should not consider the battle against the group won despite the significant progress made in 2025.[374]

Trends to Watch

GOVERNMENTS UNDER PRESSURE

Terrorist gains in Mali, Somalia, and Burkina Faso have left those countries' governments teetering. Any of the three could experience a form of collapse in 2026, ranging from a Salafi-jihadist takeover of urban centers, even a capital, to total state collapse. While still unlikely, as state collapses and insurgent victories are rare, the fall of any of these three governments would worsen the regional and international threat picture.

The greatest danger exists in Mali. Since the fall of 2025, JNIM has been pressuring the Malian government in Bamako by blockading the movement of goods (especially fuel) within southern Mali.[375] JNIM has attacked fuel trucks across the country, creating fuel shortages, driving up prices, and crippling Bamako's economy.[376] During the blockade, schools and universities in Bamako have closed, hospitals are working under power cut constraints, and prices have skyrocketed.[377] The United States, France, and the United Kingdom have all urged their citizens to leave the country, and the United States authorized nonessential government personnel to evacuate in October.[378]

The blockade has left the Malian regime weakened and vulnerable. Unlike Somalia (discussed below), Mali lacks an external backer capable of preventing its collapse. The Malian government's main backer since coming to power in a coup d'état has been Russia, which has deployed Wagner Group and (since mid-2025) Africa Corps paramilitaries to the country.[379] Russia almost certainly lacks the capacity to launch an equivalent to France's Operation Serval, which restored government control over northern Mali after the 2012 uprising of separatist and jihadist groups. Operation Serval involved thousands of international forces and hundreds of armored fighting vehicles—resources Russia probably cannot spare given the current state of its war in Ukraine.[380]

Even in the absence of international forces, JNIM may not seek to overrun Bamako. Conquering and governing a capital city is a far cry from pushing a weak military

like Mali's out of rural areas. A variety of analysts agree that the group probably lacks the ability to overrun and occupy Bamako, but such assessments are never certain.[381] More likely than a JNIM attempt to enter Bamako by force and seize the city, therefore, is a government collapse like the one in Afghanistan, such that JNIM steps in to fill the vacuum. JNIM's propaganda has called for a change of government in Bamako, which suggests a focus on fomenting the government's collapse instead of seizing the capital by force.[382]

After Mali, the second-most likely government to fall is that of Somalia. Al Shabaab's offensive ended "almost at the gates of the capital with several thousand fighters amassed on its periphery in mid-2025."[383] Al Shabaab already has the capability to conduct complex attacks in Mogadishu, having conducted at least three high-profile attacks in 2025: an assassination attempt against the Somali president in March, a suicide bombing outside a military base in May, and a complex attack against the Godka Jilacow prison in October.[384] Al Shabaab also runs an effective administrative bureaucracy (by terrorist standards) across most of southern and central Somalia, which residents and analysts characterize as more efficient than the Mogadishu government.[385]

Like JNIM, al Shabaab may lack the will or capability to overrun the capital. Few in Mogadishu believe that an al Shabaab invasion is imminent, and various African analysts believe that al Shabaab lacks the will to overrun Mogadishu.[386] Al Shabaab already draws significant benefits from its ability to levy taxes on businesses in the city and may assess that it lacks the administrative capability to govern such a large urban area.[387] It previously controlled much of the capital city between 2009 and 2011 before it was driven out by a combination of international military pressure and famine.[388] The group's leadership may not wish to repeat that experience, especially if it believes the balance of power in Somalia will continue to shift in its favor.

Like the Malian regime, the Somali government could collapse even if al Shabaab makes no attempt to seize the capital. Internal tensions have pulled resources from counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Further, the chronic weakness of the Somali National Army has gone unaddressed, and international fatigue with Mogadishu's failures has reduced support for the counter-Shabaab mission.[389] Al Shabaab may merely need to wait for the Mogadishu government to collapse due to infighting, withdrawal of foreign support, or the assassinations of key government leaders.[390]

The least likely of these three governments to fall is that of Burkina Faso. But capital city Ouagadougou's relative safety has more to do with Salafi-jihadists' regional priorities than with the government's strength or its adversaries' weaknesses. The Burkinabe junta is also isolated from regional and Western partners, having withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and ejected French forces.[391] ISSP and JNIM control more than half the country and have been operating increasingly close to Ouagadougou in recent years.[392] JNIM has already demonstrated the willingness and capability to besiege and even overrun cities in Burkina Faso.[393] If JNIM turns its attention to Ouagadougou and attempts to pressure the junta the way it has pressured Bamako, the government might not survive for long.

The terrorist takeover of major cities or a national capital would have serious ramifications for regional and international security. In the past, terrorist-run states (whether recognized or de facto) have enabled external operations including the September 11, 2001, and October 7, 2023, attacks and have provided inspirational or facilitative support for attacks by radicalized individuals in other countries. A West African government run by the local branch of an international terrorist organization could therefore lead to a comparable increase in the terrorist threat emanating from the continent, though such a terrorist government could also become bogged down in administering its newly captured territory.

THREAT TO THE LITTORAL STATES

JNIM's and ISSP's push toward the Gulf of Guinea continued in 2025.[394] JNIM is most active in Benin and Togo, though it is also present in Ghana. ISSP, in contrast, is primarily active in the Benin-Niger-Nigeria borderlands.[395] The threat is increasing rapidly in Benin, Togo, and Nigeria. Meanwhile, the threat to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire is latent but likely to worsen given JNIM's growing strength in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Salafi-jihadist expansion into Benin and Togo began in earnest in late 2021 with a series of attacks by a JNIM subgroup in the national parks on Benin's northern border with Burkina Faso and Niger.[396] By mid-2022, IED and guerrilla attacks had pushed Benin's security forces away from the border areas, ceding the parks to JNIM.[397] During the same period, JNIM pushed into northern Togo.[398] By the end of 2022, ISSP had announced its presence in northern Benin as well.[399]

Currently, terrorist violence has increased dramatically in Benin, with a smaller rise visible in Togo (see Figure 4.3). In April 2025, for example, JNIM killed 54 Beninese soldiers in

the country's north.[400] Meanwhile, JNIM operates logistics infrastructure in Ghana and has attempted to establish cells in Côte d'Ivoire.[401] Ghana has remained safe, in part because it has tolerated JNIM's presence to avoid provoking the group, according to one high-ranking security officer.[402] Meanwhile, Côte d'Ivoire has taken a more aggressive approach, employing both military and economic tools.[403]

JNIM's expansion south seemed initially aimed at protecting its southern flank in Burkina Faso against Beninese and Togolese security forces.[404] However, the group began using northern Benin and Togo for logistical support, warping local economies to cater to its needs.[405] Now, a recent leadership shuffle suggests that JNIM may see southward expansion as a strategic goal. During the leadership change, the newly appointed head of JNIM's eastern Burkina Faso operations was instructed to expand JNIM activities in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Togo. At the end of the year, JNIM also appointed a new emir for Benin, who called on Nigerien Muslims to join the group in Benin.[406]

JNIM's and ISSP's drive south has been slowed by coordination problems between the littoral states, which belong to ECOWAS, and Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which have withdrawn from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The coups have harmed security cooperation between ECOWAS and the AES.[407] Although ECOWAS and the AES have attempted to increase counterterrorism cooperation, progress has been slow.[408]

Nevertheless, the region's Salafi-jihadists are unlikely to spread south to the coast the way that they have spread across the Sahel. The southern parts of the West African littoral states are more densely populated than the northern border regions.[409] In addition, these states are mostly populated by Christians or families of mixed religion, which will limit the appeal of Salafi-jihadist messaging and decrease these groups' ability to move within the population undetected by the state.[410]

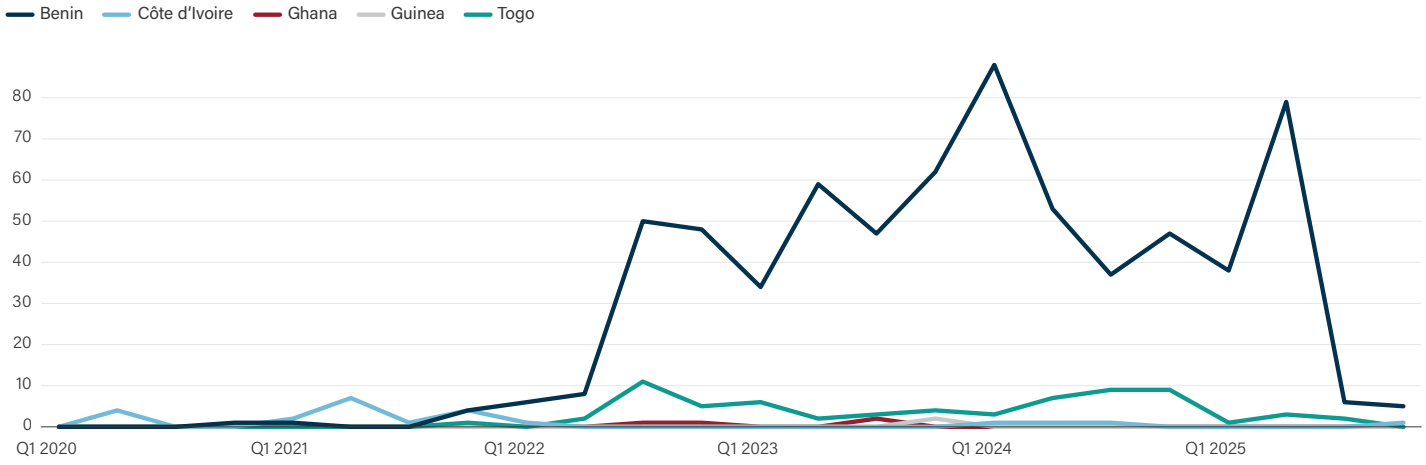
A more likely scenario is the continued deterioration of the less developed, sparsely populated majority-Muslim border areas, accompanied by infrequent but increasing common terrorist attacks in major cities. Although it has been many years since a mass-casualty attack in the capital of a West African littoral state, such attacks have occurred. In 2016, for example, members of JNIM's predecessor groups killed at least 19 people at a beach resort in Côte d'Ivoire.[411] A deteriorating security environment could have broader political consequences as well. West Africa's coup plotters have repeatedly used increasing jihadist violence to justify their coups d'état.[412] In December 2025, a group of soldiers attempted a coup in Benin, citing "continuing deterioration of the security situation in northern Benin" as a motivating factor.[413]

TERRORIST USE OF UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS

Africa's terrorist groups are conducting more attacks using weaponized UASs. Most African Salafi-jihadist groups use UASs for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and propaganda purposes. In 2025, they increasingly weaponized UASs, conducting attacks com-

Figure 4.3

Incidents Involving Salafi-Jihadist Groups in the West African Littoral States, 2020–2025



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), accessed March 18, 2026, https://acleddata.com.

parable to those seen in Ukraine today or in the Middle East during the heyday of ISIS. African terrorists' use of UASs, however, is still nascent. Their UAS capabilities are likely to grow in 2026 and beyond, increasing the military and terrorist threat the groups pose.

JNIM is currently the most prolific UAS user among Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups. From 2023 to mid-2025, JNIM carried out more than a dozen UAS attacks.[414] JNIM has integrated UASs into many facets of its operations, relying on them for ISR, propaganda, and payload delivery.[415] JNIM's UAS use continues to advance, with the group putting larger payloads on its UASs and overcoming geofencing in 2025.[416] JNIM's progress led the United Nations to note that "JNIM reached a new level of operational capability to conduct complex attacks" with UASs in 2025.[417]

JNIM's UAS capabilities may have benefited from knowledge transfer from the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), a conglomeration of rebel groups that was an early adopter of UASs in the Sahel.[418] Former FLA member Hussein Ghulam, for example, defected to JNIM in mid-2024 and was involved in a multifaction attack that used UASs for battlefield ISR in Mali.[419] Although Ghulam's involvement in the attack is insufficient to prove that he brought knowledge of UAS operations with him, JNIM is likely at least observing and learning from tactical experiments conducted by other nonstate armed groups in its area of operations.[420]

The continent's Islamic State affiliates also increased their UAS capabilities in 2025. ISWAP and IS-M were early adopters of UAS technology in Africa.[421] The continent's Islamic State groups have continued to advance. ISWAP reportedly weaponized drones against the Nigerian military by the end of 2024, and ISSP used weaponized UASs in its January 2026 attack against the Niamey airport.[422] The much smaller IS-Somalia also conducted its first armed UAS attacks in 2025.[423]

Al Shabaab remains something of an outlier among African terrorist groups. The group has used small UASs for ISR and to film propaganda for years, but evidence that it has weaponized them is scarce.[424] One Nairobi-based think tank alleged that al Shabaab conducted a one-way UAS attack against Kismayo Airport in 2025, but other sources have not yet corroborated the claim.[425] Even if al Shabaab has not yet conducted UAS attacks, however, its relationship with the Houthis and AQAP means that it will soon be able to weaponize UASs or already has the capability but chooses not to use it.[426]

UAS use by African terrorists represents a threat that merits special attention in 2026. UASs both increase battlefield effectiveness and provide a novel method of attack that African governments may struggle to defend against. Continued development of UAS tactics and weaponization will only intensify the threat to Africa's already-embattled governments.

Terrorist use of UASs in Africa also increases the threat beyond the continent in at least three ways. First, improved skill with and knowledge of weaponizing commercial UASs increases the threat of remotely facilitated UAS terrorism in domestic attacks by foreign terrorists. Some infrastructure and knowledge already exist; Islamic State networks share information about UASs on Telegram.[427] It is easy to imagine these groups advising a would-be terrorist on weaponizing a commercial UAS over the internet.

Second, UASs can lower the barrier to attacking distant targets. The Houthis have used long-range UASs and missiles to attack facilities in Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as civilian shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[428] Al Shabaab might become interested in using long-range systems to threaten shipping off the coast of Somalia or strike targets in countries backing the Somali government, including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Sahelian groups might use these systems to conduct attacks in cities they have not yet infiltrated.

Third, violent actors can copy terrorist organizations that innovate new uses for UASs. ISIS was an early adopter of UAS technology, integrating small UASs into its ISR and command-and-control processes nearly a decade before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[429] It weaponized these systems as early as 2016, improvising mechanisms for small UASs to drop explosive payloads or act as loitering munitions and setting up factories for larger UASs mass-produced in ISIS-controlled territory.[430] A group such as JNIM or ISSP may have increased willingness and ability to experiment with UAS terrorism, which could lead to unexpected developments in UAS technology or tactics that other terrorists imitate.

The missing piece for most African terrorist groups is control over cities, but that could change in 2026, unlocking their ability to scale up drone production and use. ISIS benefited from control over significant territory, including cities with manufacturing and educational centers, gaining access to skilled individuals, the ability to acquire UASs and components, and the financial resources to procure the necessary systems and parts.[431] Developments in African terrorists' use of UASs in 2025 demonstrate that they have many of these capabilities.

TERRORIST RESILIENCE

Africa's three smallest Salafi-jihadist groups—JAS, IS-DRC/ADF, and IS-M—have been seriously weakened by pressure from local militaries over the past few years. JAS has also faced pressure from its much stronger local terrorist rival ISWAP. All three have successfully adapted, often by restructuring as decentralized groups of mobile fighters pushing into new areas. JAS and IS-DRC/ADF have also benefited from the relaxation of military pressure amid other demands on the military's attention. Although none of these groups pose a threat on the level of al Shabaab, ISWAP, or even ISSP, all three are a reminder that terrorist groups are resilient and extremely difficult to defeat through military means alone. All also lack the capacity to regularly target state militaries in their areas of operation, leading them to focus primarily on killing civilians—though in the case of JAS, several years of growth allowed it to begin attacking hard targets in 2025.

JAS—while much weaker and more locally oriented than rival ISWAP—continued its steady resurgence in 2025.[432] JAS and ISWAP have been locked in conflict for years.[433] JAS teetered on the verge of defeat after founder Abubakar Shekau's death in 2021, but recent years have seen its resurgence as a threat to civilians and, more recently, security forces in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.[434]

The group is most dangerous to local civilians. In May 2025, for example, fighters associated with the group massacred 57 people in Nigeria's Borno State.[435] JAS also attacked at least three military targets in 2025, suggesting increased capability and ambition.[436] JAS has also extended its reach, moving from its traditional operational areas in Borno State into northwestern Nigeria, including the forests near Abuja.[437]

There appear to be three main drivers of JAS's resurgence. The first is the Nigerian military's focus on ISWAP. The Cameroonian, Chadian, Nigerian, and Nigerien militaries all intensified their counterterrorism operations against ISWAP, providing JAS an opportunity to regroup.[438] But the Nigerian military is increasingly overstretched as the country's security situation deteriorates.[439] It is simply unable to respond to every attack and maintain pressure on every militant faction in the country, leaving JAS room to maneuver.

The second is the failure of Nigeria's effort to demobilize former ISWAP and JAS fighters. Those demobilization efforts, known as Operation Safe Corridor, were initially successful, contributing to the group's deterioration.[440] But more recently, efforts have languished. The program has faced backlash from local communities where former fighters are being reintegrated, with residents expressing frustration over the lack of accountability and perceiving the initiative as rewarding former terrorist members.[441] Meanwhile, ISWAP and JAS have hunted down defectors to prevent further losses to Operation Safe Corridor.[442] Defectors are now reportedly rejoining terrorist groups in Nigeria, especially JAS.[443]

The third factor in JAS's resurgence is its ability to navigate Nigeria's complex local politics. For example, Abubakar Saidu, or Sadiku, as the group's main commander in northeast Nigeria is known, has proved a deft manager of relationships with local jihadists and bandit groups alike. He is highly pragmatic, defending local Christian communities against bandits while providing other bandits with more advanced weapons in exchange for their cooperation.[444] His flexibility is a feature of JAS's highly decentralized structure and the latitude it grants to local commanders. The powerful ISWAP commander Mikhail Usman, known as Kaila, defected to JAS in 2023, probably due to some combination of his rejection of tight ISWAP controls and local ethnicity (he and the most powerful JAS commander may both belong to the local Buduma ethnic group and have family ties).[445] This sort of local wheeling and dealing, as well as JAS's toleration of individual commanders' behavior, has allowed the group to survive and rebound.

Despite the serious threat it poses to local populations, JAS has demonstrated neither the intent nor the capability to conduct external operations since its break with the Islamic State. It remains unaffiliated with the Islamic State or al Qaeda, operating independently and relying on cooperation with local bandit groups to bolster its capabilities.[446] Although JAS allegedly collaborates with Lakurawa in northwest Nigeria, the collaboration is at best nascent and may be the result of fluid allegiances at ground level or misidentification based on Lakurawa's lack of clear definition.[447] It could also be the result of inconsistent group identification and therefore has little meaningful impact on JAS's capabilities or intentions. Even if JAS's capabilities continue to expand, there is little reason to believe that it will become any more than a minor threat to U.S. assets and the U.S. homeland for the foreseeable future, even if its capacity for mayhem in Africa increases.

Like JAS, IS-DRC/ADF has taken advantage of other demands on security forces' attention to increasingly

target civilians. The group had been under pressure for years until a major crisis involving the March 23 Movement drew the attention of the DRC and Ugandan militaries away from Operation Shujaa, their years-long joint offensive against IS-DRC/ADF. Operation Shujaa had achieved significant gains by the end of 2024, destroying many base areas and killing key IS-DRC/ADF commanders.[448] However, the group responded to increased pressure by regrouping into highly mobile guerrilla bands and pushing into areas with a lighter security force presence.[449]

The result was a surge in civilian deaths, with more than 500 killed by IS-DRC/ADF in the second half of 2025.[450] IS-DRC/ADF also appears to have resumed its attempts to operate in western Uganda in 2025. For the first time since 2021, the group attempted a suicide bombing just southeast of the Ugandan capital.[451] Although the plot failed when the bomb detonated prematurely, it suggests a renewed effort to attack Ugandan cities.

Also like JAS, IS-DRC/ADF has resurged despite a lack of support from the global Islamic State movement. The group consists of only 600–700 fighters, and the United Nations did not observe movement of foreign fighters into eastern Congo in 2025.[452] Nor did it note significant financial support for IS-DRC/ADF from outside groups.[453] However, the United Nations stated that access to private satellite communications systems has allowed IS-DRC/ADF to increase the amount of propaganda it sends to the Islamic State core and improve its access to cryptocurrency.[454] Overall, IS-DRC/ADF serves as a reminder of terrorists' adaptability, resilience, and ability to take advantage of unrelated conflicts.

Despite being Africa's most pressured and smallest Salafi-jihadist organization, IS-M expanded its area of operations in 2025. Even as the group's membership decreased to fewer than 350 fighters, it increased its operational tempo and spread into new areas.[455] ACLED observed a spread of IS-M activity within Cabo Delgado Province and into the neighboring Nampula Province in late 2025.[456] The group also conducted its first operations in the local economic center of Palma since 2021.[457] The movement of IS-M fighters in the second half of 2025 was catastrophic for local civilians, displacing more than 100,000 people.[458]

Much of the expansion results from the group organizing into roving bands and counterterrorist assaults against IS-M base areas, which displace fighters from more secure locations, which may indicate the expansion is actually a sign of weakness.[459] There are other indications, however, that IS-M may be establishing a longer-term presence in Nampula. Its activities there likely build on existing networks in the province and are motivated by the group's need to secure new sources of recruits and income, with the latter coming from the province's gold mines.[460] The group could also spread further west into Niassa Province in 2026, but has not sustained activity there the way it has in Nampula.[461] Unlike IS-DRC/ADF, there are some indications that IS-M could receive greater support from the Islamic State core. The global Islamic State propaganda enterprise increased its focus on Mozambique in the second half of 2025.[462] If the Islamic State's Central and East African office has indeed moved from Somalia to Mozambique, it could presage a greater flow of resources to the group.[463]

Terrorist organizations adapt to pressure and, when that pressure lifts, seize the opportunity to resurge.

Overall, the continued resurgence of these three groups should serve as a reminder that counterterrorist and counterinsurgent campaigns take a long time to work. Terrorist organizations adapt to pressure and, when that pressure lifts, seize the opportunity to resurge.

Policy Implications

CURRENT POLICY

The Trump administration has recently signaled that the U.S. strategy toward Africa is changing. The 2025 NSS emphasized "partner[ing] with select countries to ameliorate conflict" and "transition[ing] from an aid-focused relationship with Africa to a trade- and investment-focused relationship," especially in "the energy sector and critical mineral development."[464]

Regarding African counterterrorism, the NSS pledged to "remain wary of resurgent Islamist terrorist activity in parts of Africa while avoiding any long-term American presence or commitments."[465] The United States has also increasingly cited threats to the U.S. homeland in justifying its strikes in Somalia during 2025, though the language used is ambiguous and does not clearly suggest ongoing plotting.[466]

Beyond rhetoric, the administration has increased counterterrorist activity in two main areas: Somalia, where AFRICOM has dramatically increased air and drone strikes, and Nigeria, where the administration conducted an air

strike in December 2025 and began a "small" deployment of U.S. personnel in February 2026.[467] The United States, for now, appears focused on sharing targeting intelligence with the Nigerian military, but AFRICOM has signaled that the scope of assistance will expand.[468]

The administration also announced its intent to set a "new course" in its relationship with Mali, potentially opening the door to a resumption of formal security cooperation with Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger.[469] The administration already seems to be quietly supporting the three countries in their fight against the Sahel's terrorist groups: AFRICOM Deputy Commander John Brennan said in early 2026 that the United States has "shared information with some of them to attack key terrorist targets" although cooperation is "not official."[470]

The Trump administration has placed less of a counterterrorism focus on the DRC, where its main efforts have been related to seeking a cease-fire between the DRC military and March 23 Movement rebels and the pursuit of critical minerals.[471] While instability in the eastern area of the country has implications for the IS-DRC/ADF's capabilities, the Trump administration has neither identified that group as a counterterrorism priority nor conducted known strikes against the group. However, the Trump administration may decide that it has important interests in the Kivu areas where IS-DRC/ADF is active due to the reserves of tin, tungsten, coltan (which is processed into tantalum), and gold there.[472] If the United States commits to increasing access to those reserves, the result will be an expansion of U.S. counterterrorism interests on the continent when the United States has little spare capacity and pressing threats elsewhere in Africa.

In Mozambique, the most consequential development is probably the U.S. Export-Import Bank's reapproval of a $4.7 billion loan to TotalEnergies for its liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in northern Mozambique, which could deepen U.S. interest in the country and its terrorism landscape.[473] Expanded U.S. involvement in the project could also increase exposure to the threat of terrorism even if IS-M undergoes no meaningful change in its capabilities or intentions. The Trump administration has continued efforts to train Mozambican security forces, but those efforts have hardly been sufficient to reduce IS-M's ability to sow chaos in the country's north.[474] As is the case in the DRC, the Trump administration may find that its expanding economic interests in Africa entail new counterterrorism commitments that the military is not currently postured to meet. Some analysts also assess resource conflicts to be at the root of northern Mozambique's security problems and that the liquefied natural gas project could exacerbate local grievances if resources are not distributed in a way that seems fair to local communities.[475]

Ongoing turmoil regarding U.S. foreign aid could negatively affect U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa. In March 2025, the United States canceled roughly $852 million in aid to West Africa, accounting for about 30 percent of all U.S. aid to the region.[476] Six of the nine priority partner countries identified by the Global Fragility Act, a bipartisan law signed by President Trump aimed at increasing U.S. government involvement in conflict prevention, are in Africa, and five (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, and Togo) are identified in this report as affected or threatened by terrorist activity.[477] Former State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development personnel credit the law with reducing the risk of terrorist violence "spilling over" into the West African littorals and addressing the drivers of conflict in Mozambique.[478] The future of the law and foreign aid more broadly, however, remains uncertain.

PRIORITIZATION

If al Shabaab is the most serious terrorist threat in Africa and IS-Somalia is a critical node in the global Islamic State network, Somalia should be at the top of the Trump administration's counterterrorism agenda on the continent. The increase in counterterrorist operations in Somalia in 2025 suggests that the administration agrees. However, the administration's longer-term Somalia policy is in flux. The administration should prioritize deciding how it will mitigate the threat of al Shabaab and maintain gains against IS-Somalia—goals that will be best served by a diplomatic effort to reduce tensions between Mogadishu and subnational groups in Somalia.

The Trump administration faces the same dilemma as every administration since George W. Bush's presidency: choosing between maintaining counterterrorism pressure, which few (if any) observers believe has a chance of defeating al Shabaab; increasing engagement in Somalia in an attempt to roll back and eventually defeat the group; or ending the U.S. commitment to the government in Mogadishu—perhaps while continuing or increasing U.S. support to Somaliland and Puntland, which are located on the Gulf of Aden and therefore relevant to U.S. maritime interests in the region.[479]

Withdrawing support would increase the risk of Soma-

lia's federal government collapsing and increase uncertainty regarding the long-term threat from al Shabaab. Freed from U.S. pressure, the group could resume plotting against the U.S. homeland. Or it could decide its strategic interests are no longer served by such plotting and remain focused on its regional goal of establishing its interpretation of Islamic rule over the Horn of Africa. If the United States chooses to withdraw support from Mogadishu, it should hedge by refocusing security cooperation and counterterrorism efforts on Somaliland and Puntland.

Increasing support for defeating al Shabaab would be extremely costly and face uncertain success. The United States does not have a promising track record of nation building, which a successful effort to defeat al Shabaab would require. Even if the United States did succeed, a nation-building effort would almost certainly take many years of substantially greater spending and effort when the U.S. government's most critical security interests lie elsewhere.

The risks and costs associated with the other options presumably explain why president after president has taken a middle path, maintaining counterterrorist operations against al Shabaab and IS-Somalia while backstopping the Mogadishu government. The Trump administration is likely to choose this path in 2026. However, the United States should prioritize diplomatic efforts to strengthen the Somali government's efforts against al Shabaab by resolving the distracting internal conflicts between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States. Air strikes may keep al Shabaab under pressure, but they have not dramatically decreased its capabilities or prevented its expansion. Only stronger Somali forces and governance can do so.

Halting terrorist expansion in West Africa should be the Trump administration's second priority for African counterterrorism. JNIM represents the continent's most significant latent threat, and the region's Islamic State groups are growing stronger and more internationally oriented. However, the United States lacks the access and interest necessary to roll back these groups through a campaign like the one it waged against ISIS. The administration can therefore either do nothing or increase security and economic cooperation with some combination of the battleground states of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, along with at-risk states like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal, and Togo.

The most important of these states for U.S. policy is Nigeria. The country has the highest population and second-highest gross domestic product in sub-Saharan Africa. It probably has sub-Saharan Africa's most powerful military and, as the 2025 coup attempt in Benin suggests, the ability to affect security developments beyond its borders.[480] The country should be the keystone for regional security but is instead home to increasing violence. The Trump administration's work to increase security cooperation with the Nigerian government suggests early efforts to reverse that trend, though doing so will probably be slower and more costly than the administration hopes.

A second option would be to focus on the countries in which Salafi-jihadist violence has not yet become a major problem: the West African littoral states of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Senegal. These countries are all relatively wealthy, capable states that could serve as a Western bulwark against Salafi-jihadist expansion. They also are in the position of preventing Salafi-jihadist violence rather than rolling it back, meaning that the necessary investments in security cooperation are likely to be lower. Even so, jihadist networks already exist in several of these countries, and seeking to roll them up may invite greater terrorist violence as their parent groups seek to maintain their footholds.

Prioritizing Somalia and some combination of Nigeria and the West African littorals means accepting the risk of a new Salafi-jihadist government or statelet in the Sahel. The Trump administration seems unwilling to fully accept that risk, choosing instead to explore options for increasing security cooperation with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The depth of the countries' problems, however, strongly suggests that security cooperation must involve large, rapid investment to stabilize the situation in the Sahel.

The upshot is that it would be prudent to devote bureaucratic attention to understanding the threats that emerge from a new jihadist state or statelet in the Sahel before it arises, but neither JNIM nor the region's Islamic State affiliates have yet demonstrated the desire to attack the United States. Although a Salafi-jihadist government or declaration of a caliphate could shift their strategic calculus, this situation is less an argument for military action against the groups than one for continued vigilance and regular reassessment of their intentions.

The question of how to engage in the eastern DRC and northern Mozambique also deserves greater attention in 2026. The increased presence of U.S. mining interests (potentially including the presence of U.S. nationals) in either area, as well as the movement of the Islamic State's Central and East African office to Mozambique, would

deepen U.S. interest in degrading IS-DRC/ADF and IS-M. Rwanda plays a key role in both conflicts.[481] In the DRC, it helps drive the instability that has contributed to IS-DRC/ADF's freedom of action.[482] In Mozambique, Rwanda has played an important role in combatting IS-M, though one Mozambican militia commander recently accused Rwandan forces of being less effective than the Southern African Development Community forces also present in the country.[483] While Rwanda is far from the only player in both conflicts, Washington is unlikely to advance its counterterrorism interests in either country without Kigali's cooperation.

Africa's Salafi-jihadist groups represent an ever-increasing threat to local communities, regional stability, and the United States. The continent's terrorists are currently focused on local issues and probably lack the intent and, in most cases, the capability necessary to credibly plot against the United States. Al Shabaab remains the only group on the continent known to have plotted an attack against the U.S. homeland, but West Africa's Islamic State groups may be increasingly interested in external operations.

Regardless of their external intentions, within their areas of operation, Africa's terrorists are on the march. Al Shabaab, JNIM, and ISWAP undertook major offensives in 2025. Al Shabaab and JNIM have even come to pose a serious threat to the survival of the governments in Mogadishu, Bamako, and Ouagadougou. JNIM and ISSP have continued to push south into West Africa's littoral states, increasing violence and contributing to the likelihood of coups d'état. Even the continent's smallest groups appear to be resurgent, stepping up attacks against their jihadist rivals, security forces, and civilians. In multiple cases, these groups have taken increasing advantage of new technologies, especially UASs.

Amid these growing threats, the United States has shown signs of increasing its counterterrorism activities in the region, especially in Somalia and, more recently, Mali and Nigeria. These activities have been primarily military in nature, with the cancellation of many programs associated with the Global Fragility Act decreasing U.S. investment in activities intended to complement or prevent the need for military counterterrorism. The United States also seems poised to increase its counterterrorism interests in Africa through investments in extractive projects in the DRC and Mozambique. The resulting situation is highly fluid but unlikely to improve in 2026.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The United States faces an increasingly uncertain terrorism landscape in 2026. After decades of a clear threat from Salafi-jihadist organizations linked to al Qaeda and then the Islamic State, the United States lacks a clear number one threat for its counterterrorism enterprise to focus on. Today, it faces an array of active, latent, and suppressed threats abroad, along with an increasingly violent landscape at home. The lone actors who have dominated the counterterrorism discourse since the fall of the Islamic State are still out there, but capable and wealthy terrorist organizations continue to grow stronger on multiple continents and state sponsors such as Iran remain a threat.

Despite the amount of bad news in this report, uncertainty does not mean an inevitable increase in threat. An uncertain world is one in which a dramatically better world is possible as well. Multiple terrorist groups have been degraded by years of counterterrorist pressure and have not resurged. The Iranian Axis of Resistance, which once stretched unbroken from the Strait of Hormuz to the Mediterranean Sea, is coming apart. A former al Qaeda member now rules Syria and could carve a third way for local groups that are less committed to international jihadism than the al Qaeda or Islamic State cores.

This chapter briefly outlines the world of uncertainty that the United States faces in 2026. It then examines three trends that cut across the regions examined in this report: terrorist use of emerging technologies, terrorist resilience and resurgence, and the need for diplomacy.

Overall Assessment: A World of Uncertainty

Terrorism remains a threat to U.S. interests both overseas and in the homeland. Although mass-casualty terrorism involving hundreds of deaths is extremely rare in the United States—and will likely remain so—the frequency of low-level terrorist violence continues to increase in the United States as the strength of potentially hostile groups grows overseas, especially in Africa.

The uncertainty of the global terrorist threat is not all bad, however. More positive outcomes are possible. Most international terrorist groups remain heavily suppressed by security forces. Counterterrorist forces have significantly degraded the Islamic State in Somalia. The Syrian civil war, long an engine of regional instability, is over, and the country is now ruled by a former al Qaeda member who has renounced international terrorism and joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Iran's Axis of Resistance has been hollowed out by more than two years of war, and the United States and Israel are further weakening Iran's conventional military power in the 2026 war.

At the same time, counterterrorism continues to decline as a U.S. priority, decreasing the overall effort put into understanding and constraining the threat. The result is greater uncertainty and therefore greater risk. The correct level of risk for the United States to accept is fundamentally a political and moral question, and the analysis presented in this report cannot hope to answer it.

In the United States, the increase in lone-actor terrorism continues to pose a difficult challenge for a domestic counterterrorism enterprise designed to infiltrate and disrupt hierarchical organizations, primarily Salafi-jihadist groups. Anti-government extremism saw an increase in incident counts in 2025, driven largely by left-wing perpetrators responding to Trump administration immigration policies, though it remains too early to determine whether this level will persist. Partisan extremism, including political assassinations, has emerged over the last decade as a common feature of U.S. politics and poses a potentially serious threat to political stability and democratic resilience. Although white supremacist terrorists have not conducted a mass-casualty attack in several years, this phenomenon is likely a short-term trend. The decline in violence reflects a snapshot of the mobilization of white supremacists rather than real constraints on their capacity to conduct mass-casualty attacks on soft targets. Although the domestic jihadist scene is less active than it was in the heyday of the Islamic State, al Qaeda and Islamic State ideologies continue to inspire attacks and plots, while international terrorist groups like AQAP and ISKP are increasing their focus on the U.S. homeland. Iran, too, may be considering attacks on the U.S. homeland, driven by the existential nature of the 2026 war.

In the Middle East, the effects of the October 7, 2023, attacks continue to cascade through the regional system. A cycle that began with a terrorist attack has escalated into a regional war that involves both conventional militaries and fighters belonging to Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the many Iran-backed groups in Iraq's PMF as well as Iran itself. What follows the 2026 war will have significant implications for the global terrorist threat landscape given Iran's role as a state sponsor of terrorism, the de facto al Qaeda leader's presence in the country, and the Islamic State's continued desire to take advantage of regional chaos to reestablish its caliphate. The Islamic State has already made limited strides in Syria, as the Damascus government has clashed with the Kurdish-dominated SDF in its efforts to consolidate power. Of course, the war could end with a much more stable Middle East if a regime comes to power in Tehran that lacks its predecessor's willingness to support terrorist groups and destabilize its neighborhood. But that is hardly the only outcome. Most other outcomes—from an IRGC dictatorship to a multisided civil war—could increase the terrorist threat emanating from the region.

Slightly farther east, a conflict on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan also has counterterrorism implications for the United States. In February 2026, Pakistan announced open war against the Taliban. The escalation follows years of increasing violence in Pakistan spearheaded by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which has taken advantage of Afghan safe havens since the Taliban took power in Kabul in 2021. How the war will evolve is far from clear. For decades, Pakistan has preferred to pursue its interests in Afghanistan through nonstate proxies. But its current adversary in Kabul was its ally for more than 30 years, and Islamabad lacks viable partners in the country. Even if the current round of fighting does not escalate into a ground invasion or fragment the Taliban government, the violence in Pakistan is extremely likely to increase, further destabilizing both countries. Given the presence of the al Qaeda core in Afghanistan and ISKP in both countries, the increasing prospect of regional chaos will reduce analysts' ability to forecast and track the terrorist threat in an area in which the United States already has far less capability to monitor or influence events than it did before 2021.

Unlike the Middle East's terrorist organizations, most African terrorist groups are unquestionably ascendant.

Although Africa's terrorist groups are more focused on local concerns than are the Islamic State and al Qaeda cores, uncertainty is highest in Africa. Unlike the Middle East's terrorist organizations, most African terrorist groups are unquestionably ascendant. al Qaeda affiliates are at the gates of three national capitals—Bamako, Mogadishu, and Ouagadougou—and the capture of any would usher in a new, unpredictable era for terrorism on the continent. Meanwhile, the continent's Islamic State provinces are growing more prominent within the international organization, which could draw them into international plotting. The number of fighters Africa's terrorist groups command, the amount of money they control, and their ability to move openly across wide swaths of territory should worry international counterterrorist practitioners.

Worldwide uncertainty is being compounded by ongoing decreases in U.S. investment in counterterrorism and intelligence. The United States has cut personnel from key counterterrorism agencies such as the FBI and the CIA, redirected others from counterterrorism to focus on issues such as immigration, and politicized some services, making effective analysis harder. Such changes make it more likely that terrorist plots will not be detected or otherwise hinder an effective response.

Cross-Cutting Themes

USE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

Terrorist groups across the world continue to make increasing use of emerging technologies including UASs and artificial intelligence (AI). While neither has unlocked dramatically new capabilities for terrorists yet, terrorist use of emerging technologies is systematically under-analyzed and therefore a key driver of uncertainty.[484]

Terrorists' use of UASs is nothing new. The Islamic State was an early innovator in weaponizing small UASs. Today, global advances in and proliferation of UASs have increased the long-range threat from terrorist groups, especially those with access to more advanced technologies and state-like organizational infrastructure, such as the Houthis.[485] Worse, the world's most capable al Qaeda and Islamic State branches in Africa have made rapid advances in their use of UASs. Their increasing control over territory could allow for another surge of terrorist innovation resembling that seen under ISIS. In the U.S. homeland, terrorist use of UASs remains rare. This is likely because other weapons, especially firearms, are sufficiently accessible and capable of the intended effects.

Terrorists' use of AI appears to have increased in 2025. Most existing analysis of the topic is informed speculation, but analysts expect that AI will allow terrorist organizations to dramatically increase propaganda production, speed up radicalization, improve operational planning, and potentially even unlock autonomous weapons capabilities.[486] One ISIS supporter noted as early as 2022 that the free version of ChatGPT was better at strategic thinking and planning than most ISIS operatives.[487] For lone actors in the United States who radicalize on their own, there is also the concern that poor guardrails may lead some AI chatbots to encourage, or at least fail to mitigate, extremist behavior. Thus far, however, terrorists have not used AI in particularly novel ways. But as is the case with other types of technologies, the eventual effect of AI on terrorism remains unpredictable.

These new capabilities unlock new forms of operation, facilitation, and inspiration for international terrorists, requiring novel responses from states, which may also take advantage of emerging technologies. This war of adaptation increases uncertainty regarding the terrorist threat the United States will face in 2026 and beyond. Small UASs and AI are as new to states as they are to terrorists; both groups are still experimenting and working out the implications for terrorism and counterterrorism. Terrorists and counterterrorists are locked in a cycle of adaptation and counteradaptation.[488] Given the increasing pace of technological change, the future of how terrorists and counterterrorists will act against each other is increasingly unclear.

RESILIENCE AND RESURGENCE

Across the world, multiple terrorist groups thought to be in decline resurged in 2025. Most of these groups—JAS in the Lake Chad Basin, IS-DRC/ADF in the western DRC, and IS-M in Cabo Delgado—pose little threat to the United States because they currently lack clear reasons or desires to attack U.S. individuals or assets and have little or no ability to project power beyond their immediate surroundings. Their intentions might change, however, especially as their capabilities grow.

In addition, one group undergoing a minor resurgence poses a threat: AQAP, which was widely considered a shadow of its former self as recently as 2024, is once again on the rise. It has developed its UAS capabilities and forged new links with al Shabaab. It is once again publishing *Inspire*, an English-language propaganda magazine aimed at Western audiences. AQAP remains the only al Qaeda affiliate to have successfully launched an attack in the U.S. homeland, and its propaganda

activities suggest that it retains its ambition to strike U.S. interests. Its ability to do so will depend on the course of the conflict in Yemen, over which the United States has, at best, limited control.

Meanwhile, several groups that have been severely degraded by decades of U.S.-led pressure are seeking an opening for resurgence. ISIS has sought to benefit from the conflict between its adversaries in Syria. The al Qaeda core lurks in Central Asia, plotting its comeback. IS-Somalia, as beaten down as it is today, could bounce back if Somalia's member states are unable to maintain pressure on the group.

In the homeland, the capacity for lone actors to conduct violence against soft targets means all movements pose a resilient threat. In this way, whether a movement is currently latent, like white supremacy, or active, like anti-government extremism, reflects terrorist intent, not capability.

THE NEED FOR DIPLOMACY

In both Africa and the Middle East, terrorists benefit from international and internal conflicts. The dynamic is clearest in the Sahel, the DRC, and Yemen. In all of these locations, proxy conflicts between external powers worsen existing civil wars, divert security forces away from counterterrorism, and give terrorist groups room to operate. Similar dynamics lurk under the surface in Syria and Somalia, where Turkey and regional rivals have backed different sides, threatening to unleash the type of conflict that has benefited terrorists elsewhere. While force will play a role in counterterrorism in all of these contexts, diplomacy must be at the heart of managing the terrorist threat in these areas. The United States can conduct air strikes to keep ISIS off balance in Syria, for example, but it is highly unlikely to use force to keep Israel and Turkey from setting their proxies against each other or further destabilizing the country through their own armed interventions because both are U.S. allies or partners.

In Africa, this dynamic is clearest in the Sahel and the DRC. At the regional level, the Sahel has broken into two opposing blocs: the Nigeria-led ECOWAS and the Russia-backed AES. At the substate level, continued escalation of the Tuareg separatist conflict in Mali has helped terrorist groups by splitting security forces' attention and creating opportunities for opportunistic collaboration and organizational learning. In the DRC, the IS-DRC/ADF has benefited significantly from conflict between the DRC government and Rwanda-backed rebels in the country's east. The Trump administration has demonstrated an interest in resolving the conflict, but lasting stability has proved elusive. While force may play a role in bringing about a settlement, the United States has demonstrated limited interest in the type of expansive military operation that would be required to defeat the region's jihadist groups—if a military solution even exists. Without any resolution, IS-DRC/ADF will remain a highly lethal local threat at a time when the United States is increasing its interest in the DRC.

In the Middle East, the situations in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Yemen require greater U.S. diplomatic efforts. These areas see continuing strife, even after formal cease-fire declarations, and more effort is necessary to resolve conflicts and ensure reconstruction. In Syria, continued efforts to reconcile armed groups with the Damascus government will decrease the risk of civil war and limit the Islamic State's room to operate. Peace and development in Syria, unachievable without national reconciliation and avoidance of a regional cold war or proxy conflict between Turkey and Israel, could also demonstrate the benefits of breaking with al Qaeda for other would-be rulers currently leading terrorist organizations. Finally, the success of the 2026 war against Iran depends on the political settlement that results after the war—if negotiation backed up by force can decrease Iran's support for proxy groups or otherwise reduce the terrorism risk from Iran, that would be a major counterterrorism success.

What Comes Next

The terrorism landscape of 2026 defies easy summary. The threats facing the United States are the result of both formal group activity and lone-actor attacks arising from idiosyncratic ideologies. While the United States and its partners have succeeded in degrading the most dangerous international terrorist groups, other groups are rising in ways that could create a significant threat to U.S. interests or further undermine the unity of the global al Qaeda and Islamic State organizations. At the same time, the United States is decreasing its investment in counterterrorism, which will probably reduce the U.S. ability to track and disrupt threats to U.S. interests, people, and assets, as well as the U.S. homeland.

Terrorist groups and ideologies have repeatedly proven capable of adapting to new technological and security realities. In the United States, individuals are experimenting with novel ideologies, and the partisan climate continues to drive deadly violence that manifests in unpredictable ways. In the Middle East, the Islamic State

continues to seek opportunities to regain its former strength—and may find them in today's fragile Syria. AQAP, recently battered by international counterterrorism and riven by internal distrust, is poised to regain its place as al Qaeda's most internationally threatening affiliate. In Africa, groups that commanded little international attention a decade ago now threaten national capitals.

The combination of declining attention to counterterrorism, terrorist resilience, and in some cases terrorist growth does not make catastrophe inevitable. But it does make surprise more likely and effective prevention more difficult. There are no easy answers. Policymakers still have a large toolbox to draw on when monitoring and countering terrorism. Traditional military, intelligence, economic, and diplomatic tools retain their utility in the fight against terrorism. But balancing counterterrorism against other U.S. priorities requires the hard choice to accept uncertainty and risk. Understanding how to prioritize different terrorist threats is an important first step.

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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 3

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CHAPTER 4

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