

Terrorism Threat Assessment

Middle East

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Terrorism emanating from the Middle East is less threatening to the U.S. homeland than it was when groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State were at their peaks. Terrorist threats to U.S. allies, however, remain an important U.S. concern.
- Powerful regional terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran-backed Iraqi militias are primarily focused on the Middle East region, and several are far weaker than they were in 2023.
- The 2026 U.S. and Israeli war with Iran, and the subsequent on-again, off-again military strikes after the initial ceasefire, are a tremendous source of regional uncertainty. Iran has greater incentives to strike the U.S. homeland and U.S. facilities and personnel abroad due to the devastation of the war and the threat to the Iranian regime.
- Al Qaeda and the Islamic State still have the power to inspire attacks in the West, as demonstrated by Islamic State-inspired attacks in New Orleans and Sydney.
- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the only al Qaeda affiliate to have directed a successful attack on U.S. soil since 9/11, is getting stronger in Yemen.

By Daniel Byman

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Each year, the CSIS Warfare, Irregular Threats, and Terrorism Program publishes the *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment*. This brief summarizes the [2026 report](#)'s key findings on terrorism in the Middle East.

The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israeli response still define the Middle East terrorism landscape today. Israeli military operations have weakened Hamas and Hezbollah, destroying much of their military inventories and killing many senior leaders. Hamas accepted a U.S.-brokered ceasefire in October 2025. The December 2024 collapse of the Assad regime in Syria meant the loss of a key Hezbollah ally and further degraded Tehran's conventional military and proxy network.

Yet the region is in flux. U.S. counterterrorism goals have benefited from Syria's new government. Despite being led by former al Qaeda member Ahmed al-Sharaa, it has joined the [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS](#) and opposes Hezbollah. However, the Islamic State has exploited the chaos in Syria to free detained fighters and rebuild in parts of the country. The Houthis continue to threaten Red Sea shipping and launch occasional attacks on Israel. AQAP is taking advantage of the collapse of Yemen's [Southern Transitional Council](#), increasing its attacks and presence in the country.

The uncertainty surrounding the 2026 Iran war reduces confidence in judgments about regional terrorism risk.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

With the stabilization of Syria remaining necessary for the United States to pursue counterterrorism efforts in the region, the way Congress interacts with the Syrian government is increasingly important. This includes financial measures to remove sanction pressure such as [S. 3172](#) (A Bill to Repeal Certain Acts that Impose Sanctions Upon Syria) and [H.R. 4241](#) (Syria Sanctions Relief Act). Similarly, the removal of funding sources for both Assad- and IS-affiliates, such as [Captagon](#) and other narcotics, could be a legislative priority through [H.R. 7180](#) (Countering Captagon and Narcotics Post-Assad Act).

As threats to the United States continue to materialize, intelligence sharing is integral to ensuring that the United States can remain ahead of its adversaries and coordinated with its allies. Legislation like [H.R. 1385](#) (Strengthening Cooperation and Security in the Middle East Act) puts forth a framework as to how Congress could approach expanding access to information and regional partnerships.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The United States must manage its counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East amid state weakness, the war in Iran, and changing alliances. Challenges include:

Iranian Retaliation: The 2026 [arrest](#) of a member of the Iran-backed Iraqi group Kataib al-Hezbollah for plotting attacks in the United States indicates that Iran is considering terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. The existential nature of the 2026 war and Iran's desire for revenge and to restore deterrence may be reducing any constraints Iranian leaders felt about striking the U.S. homeland.

Salafi-Jihadist Inspiration: The Islamic State and al Qaeda core organizations are degraded, but their propaganda still inspires attacks in the West. Inspired attacks are hard to detect and disrupt because they involve isolated individuals with limited organizational footprints.

Syria's Trajectory: The al-Sharaa regime, despite its positive steps on counterterrorism, remains weak. The government and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces fought in late 2025 and early 2026, and this allowed hundreds of Islamic State detainees to escape. Israeli and Turkish proxy competition in Syria also destabilizes the country and could lead to military clashes.

AQAP Resurgence: AQAP is growing stronger due to Yemen's ongoing civil war, the collapse of opponents such as the Southern Transitional Council, and the group's partnership with the Houthis and ties to al Shabaab in Somalia. AQAP leader Sa'ad bin Atef al-Awlaki has [called for](#) more attacks on the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritize monitoring the risk of Iranian terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland and on U.S. facilities and personnel abroad and disrupting any nascent activities. This includes potential operations by Iran's proxies such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militias.
- Continue aggressive counterterrorism measures against al Qaeda and the Islamic State to ensure their current weakness continues. Affiliated organizations such as AQAP retain their ambition to strike the United States, and Islamic State Khorasan Province regularly attempts attacks in Europe.
- Support efforts to stabilize the Syrian government and improve its counterterrorism capabilities to deny the Islamic State opportunities to regroup.
- Maintain intelligence cooperation with other regional partners to deter Iran and contain Hezbollah.
- Foster negotiations to bring stability to Lebanon while renewing diplomatic efforts to prevent the Israel-Hamas ceasefire from collapsing and to support Gaza reconstruction.
- Continue partner capacity building—intelligence cooperation, military training, and aid to state institutions—in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, where state weakness rather than state sponsorship bolsters terrorist groups.

Additional Resources and Contact Information

Alexander Palmer, Daniel Byman, Alexander Margolis, Riley McCabe, and Erin Oppel, *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2026* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 2026), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-terrorism-threat-assessment-2026>.

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