

Terrorism Threat Assessment

Africa

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Africa now accounts for most global Salafi-jihadist violence, although the continent's terrorist groups are focused on local goals.
- Al Qaeda affiliates and Islamic State provinces threaten the survival of governments in Mali, Somalia, and Burkina Faso.
- Al Shabaab continues to pose the greatest threat to the United States. It is Africa's most capable terrorist organization and the only African group known to have plotted a mass casualty attack against the U.S. homeland.
- Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is the strongest it has been in its 13-year existence and has been openly operating in a coalition with local separatists.
- The Islamic States's Africa provinces are increasingly important to the global organization, raising the risk that Africa becomes a staging ground for external operations.

By Alexander Palmer

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 Africa.

Africa increasingly represents the epicenter of global Salafi-jihadism. For example, [more than two-thirds](#) of global Islamic State activity recorded by ACLED in 2025 took place in Africa, up from roughly 50 percent in 2024. Most African Salafi-jihadist groups, however, remain focused on local or regional goals—control of territory, governance of populations under their interpretation of Islamic law, and the displacement of national governments—rather than external operations against U.S. interests.

The continent's terrorist groups are on the march. Al Shabaab launched a major offensive in early 2025 that reversed most of the gains Somali forces had made in 2022 and 2023 and brought al Shabaab fighters to the periphery of Mogadishu. JNIM escalated pressure on the Malian government through a fuel blockade of southern Mali and, in early 2026, a major military offensive alongside the Azawad Liberation Army. Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the smaller Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) stepped up attacks against military targets and demonstrated growing coordination, including during a January 2026 attack on an international airport in Niamey, Niger.

The main positive development in 2025 was an internationally backed offensive that significantly degraded the Islamic State's Somalia province, though the group remains intact and could resurge.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As Somalia remains a key theater for U.S. counterterrorism in Africa, it is necessary to consider the implications that U.S. recognition of Somaliland would have on U.S. counterterrorism in East Africa. As such, the potential impacts on coordination with Mogadishu must be taken into consideration for legislation such as [H.R. 3992](#) (Republic of Somaliland Independence Act) and [H.R. 7993](#) (Somaliland Economic Access and Opportunity Act).

With the Salafi-jihadist expansion into West Africa, paired with the spread of Islamic State activity in Mozambique, the role of U.S.-backed conflict stabilization initiatives could become a part of the solution. The reauthorization of the Global Fragility Act through [S. 2678](#) (Global Fragility Reauthorization Act) would fund programs in coastal West Africa and Mozambique, which could improve U.S. counterterrorism efforts in these key areas.

U.S. coordination with Nigeria in combating both JNIM and ISSP could be complicated by measures to restrict U.S.-Nigeria relations or condemn the Nigerian government. The potential for political damage must be considered when discussing legislation around the “country of particular concern” designation Nigeria has received, as well as other measures that could impact the U.S. partnership with Nigeria, such as [H.R. 7457](#) (Nigeria Religious Freedom and Accountability Act of 2026).

CHALLENGES AND RISKS

Calibrating U.S. counterterrorism in Africa in 2026 involves real trade-offs as the continent’s Salafi-jihadist groups grow stronger and U.S. interests on the continent shift.

Risk of State Collapse: Mali is the most acutely threatened. Somalia and Burkina Faso also face significant pressure. The takeover of a national capital by a Salafi-jihadist affiliate would mark a generational shift in the African terrorism landscape. However, demands on the U.S. military are high even without increasing support to these embattled regimes. Meanwhile, [Section 7008](#) restricts U.S. cooperation with the governments in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Civilian Harm: Some African governments fighting terrorism have been accused of killing large numbers of civilians. As the United States increases its support for African counterterrorism efforts, it risks greater involvement in violence against civilians. U.S. intelligence and precision capabilities can reduce civilian casualties, but the United States has relatively few intelligence assets in affected African countries, has loosened restrictions on airstrikes and raids, and recently eliminated programs dedicated to reducing civilian harm.

Expanding Exposure to Local Threats: New and prospective U.S. investments in critical mineral production in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and in the TotalEnergies-led liquefied natural gas project in northern Mozambique (backed by a [\\$4.7 billion Export-Import Bank loan](#)) would increase U.S. exposure to Islamic State activity in both countries.

Blowback from U.S. Strikes: The December 2025 U.S. strike against alleged Islamic State camps in northwest Nigeria and joint operations in 2026 may push West Africa’s Islamic State affiliates to target U.S. interests directly to demonstrate strength under pressure, even though those affiliates have shown limited intent to do so to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make Somalia the top counterterrorism priority on the continent. Pair sustained pressure against al Shabaab and the Islamic State’s Somalia province with diplomatic efforts to resolve internal conflicts between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States, subnational governments that have engaged in uneven patterns of conflict and cooperation with the Somali government. Stronger Somali forces and governance—not air strikes alone—will be required to degrade al Shabaab over time.
- Increase security cooperation with Nigeria while investing in the intelligence assets necessary to reduce civilian harm associated with U.S. operations in Africa and to understand and mitigate the risk of blowback.
- Mandate study of the threats that could emerge from a Salafi-jihadist government or statelet in the Sahel before one materializes, creating a list of indicators and warnings to guide intelligence collection and analysis.
- Reassess U.S. counterterrorism engagement in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Mozambique, where expanding U.S. economic interests in critical minerals and liquefied natural gas could create new counterterrorism interests that the United States is not currently postured to meet.

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>.

Alexander Palmer, “The Killing of Abu-Bilal al-Minuki and the U.S. Military’s Deepening Involvement in Nigeria,” CSIS, *Critical Questions*, May 18, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/killing-abu-bilal-al-minuki-and-us-militarys-deepening-involvement-nigeria>.

For more information, please contact **Chloe Himmel**, chimmel@csis.org; 202-775-318