

The Critical Lack of Credibility in State Department Reporting on the Trends in Global Terrorism: 1982-2014

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On June 19th, Tina S. Kaidanow, the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism, provided a special briefing on the U.S. Department of State *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*. A transcript of that briefing quotes her as saying that (<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/terrorism/14e1b582a521b67a>),

...according to the statistical annex that was prepared by the University of Maryland, the number of terrorist attacks in 2014 increased 35 percent, and total fatalities increased 81 percent compared to 2013, largely due to activity in Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria.

More than 60 percent of all attacks took place in five countries: Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nigeria. And 78 of all – sorry, 78 percent of all fatalities due to terrorist attacks also took place in five countries: Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.

The increase in total fatalities was in part a result of certain attacks that were exceptionally lethal. In 2014 there were 20 attacks that killed more than a hundred people, compared to only two such attacks in 2013.

While I cite these statistics, which are compiled by the University of Maryland and are not a U.S. product – U.S. Government product per se, I do want to stress again that in our view they don't provide the full context. Aggregate totals or numbers of attacks are not really a particularly useful metric for measuring the aims of the extremist groups or of our progress in preventing or countering those activities. So to that end, I'd like to talk a little bit more about the content of the report itself and some of the trends that we noted in 2014.

Unfortunately, the problems in the State Department's data on terrorism data –which are the principal U.S. government unclassified source of such data -- go far deeper than a lack of "full context," or the politics of whether the US is or is not winning the war on terrorism. They involve critical problems in the way the state Department has chosen to report on terrorism over the period from 1982 to the present, and in the credibility of the State Department report.

The U.S., government has provided three radically different estimates of the trends in global terrorism over the period since 1982. These have been presented each year in the Statistical Annexes to the State Department's annual reports on terrorism.

As **Figure One** shows, the data in these annexes are divided into three different sets of trend estimates that are not are not comparable in any way.

- The initial set of data for 1982-2003 shows low to negligible levels of terrorist activity, with a maximum number of terrorist incidents of 665 in 1987, although the number killed did reach a peak of 6,695 in 1998 – the first year it was reported in the corrected figures issue in 2003.
- The data for 2005-2011—suddenly lead to the point where the number of incidents rise to 11,153 in 2005 and peak at 14,338 in 2006, and never drop below 10,000 in any year. The number of killed leap to 14,618 in 2005, peak at 22,720 in 2007, and never drop below 12,000.

- A new type of START estimate for 2012-2014 again creates a radically different pattern. The number of incidents suddenly drops to in 6,771 2012, but leaps to in 13,463 2014. The number killed is more consistent at 11,098 in 2012, but leaps to 18,066 in 2013 and 32,727 in 2014

What is particularly critical in terms of U.S. government transparency and credibility is that the most recent figures for 2012-2014 show a radical increase in the rate of terrorism, the figures for 2005-2011 do not show any such increase, and are more than 40 times on average the totals used in an earlier methodology covering the period from 1982-2003.

The resulting lack of transparency and credibility is further complicated by the fact the START database used since 2012 does provide trend data by country in graphic form on charts that appear to going back go back to 1970 without any clear explanation.

As **Figure Two** shows, the country graphs on past trends seem to directly contradict the previous two sets of State Department estimates for the period from 1982 to 2011. Unfortunately, the START database does not appear to provide a way of obtaining the precise global totals for these years..

Moreover, it is unclear in all three sets of estimates how it is possible for any such estimate to have distinguished between acts of terrorism and the violence coming out of counterinsurgencies and civil war. Further, no effort is made to estimate acts of State Terrorism by the military forces, law enforcement, and internal security forces of the many states cites for such actions in the annual State Department human rights reports and many other sources.

This not only makes it impossible to have any clear metric for knowing the official U.S. estimate of trends in terrorism, and whether there is any form of “victory” in reducing the level of violence, it creates a massive credibility problem for the State Department and for U.S. efforts to communicate the threat and the effectiveness of its counter terrorism efforts.

There is a clear need to correct this situation, and provide the kind of data and explanation that restores the credibility of the U.S. government. It does seem all too likely that there was very real rise in the level of global terrorism from 2011 onwards, but at this point in time, there seems to be no way to either understand or trust the estimates being issue by the Sate Department.

Figure One: The Totally Contradictory U.S. Official Estimates of the Total Global Trends in Terrorism

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Estimates in State Department Country Reports on Terrorism^a

Year	Total Attacks	Total Fatalities	Total Injuries	Total Fatalities/ Injuries	Total Kidnapped/ Taken Hostage
2014	13,463	32,727	34,791	67,518	9,428
2013	9,964	18,066	32,880	50,946	3,137
2012	6,771	11,098	21,652	32,750	1,283

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Estimates in State Department Country Reports on Terrorism^b

Year	Total Attacks	Total Fatalities	Total Injuries	Total Fatalities/ Injuries	Total Kidnapped
2011	10,283	12,533	25,903	38,436	5,554
2010	11,641	13,193	30,684	43,877	6,051
2009	10,968	15,311	32,660	47,971	10,749
2008	11,663	15,709	33,901	49,610	4,680
2007	14,125	22,720	44,103	66,373	4,980
2006	14,338	20,498	38,191	58,689	15,854
2005	11,153	14,618	24,761	39,379	34,838
2004 ^c					

The Estimates in Appendix G to the State Department Report on Patterns of Global Terrorism.^d

	Total International Terrorist Attacks	Total International Casualties	Total Facilities Attacked	U.S. Killed	U.S. Injured
2004 ^c					
2003	208	4,271	201	35	29
2002	205	3,072	237	27	35
2001	355	5,799	544	2,689	90
2000	426	1,134	556	23	47
1999	395	930	477	6	6
1998	274	6,694	398	12	11
1997	304	-	-	-	-
1996	296	-	-	-	-
1995	440	-	-	-	-
1994	322	-	-	-	-
1993	431	-	-	-	-
1992	363	-	-	-	-
1991	565	-	-	-	-
1990	437	-	-	-	-
1989	375	-	-	-	-
1988	605	-	-	-	-
1987	665	-	-	-	-
1986	612	-	-	-	-
1985	635	-	-	-	-
1984	565	-	-	-	-
1983	506	-	-	-	-
1982	500	-	-	-	-

A. In 2012, the data base changed again, with the following explanation – which – as in 2004 -- made no attempt to explain the radical change in trend numbers.

Title 22, Section 2656f of the United States Code requires the Department of State to include in its annual report on terrorism "to the extent practicable, complete statistical information on the number of individuals, including United States citizens and dual nationals, killed, injured, or kidnapped by each terrorist group during the preceding calendar year." The definition found in Title 22 of the US Code provides that terrorism is "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." From 2004 to 2011, the data for the Annex of Statistical Information were collected by the National Counterterrorism Center, part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, through the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS).

In June 2012, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) contracted with the US Department of State to collect a Statistical Annex data set and provide a report to include in the State Department's annual *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*. Since 2001, START has maintained the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an unclassified event database compiled from information in open-source reports of terrorist attacks. The first version of the GTD was released in 2006 and included information on worldwide terrorism from 1970 to 1997. START consistently updates and improves the accuracy of the data. The full GTD (1970-2011) and accompanying documentation are available to the public at www.start.umd.edu/gtd. The GTD staff compiled the Statistical Annex data set to include violent acts carried out by non-state actors that meet all of the GTD inclusion criteria:^[1]

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law insofar as it targeted non-combatants.

These data represent our best efforts to report the most comprehensive and valid information on terrorism, based on the availability of open-source data and resources. We continually strive to evaluate and enhance our methodology to promote comprehensive, accurate, and systematic data collection. In particular, in 2012 we developed data collection tools that expand the number of sources available for analysis and automate the selection of potentially relevant articles from which GTD staff identify unique attacks and record their specific details.

Due to the evolution in data collection methodology with respect to both WITS and prior versions of the GTD it is important to note that the data presented here are not directly comparable with previous data from either of these sources. Because of this, we restrict the analysis in this annex to patterns of terrorism worldwide in 2012.

This Annex of Statistical Information is a guide to worldwide terrorist activity as reported by unclassified sources. We hope that these data will be useful for improving knowledge about patterns and characteristics of terrorism, and helpful for maintaining global awareness of the threat it poses.

The Annex of Statistical Information is provided for statistical purposes only. The statistical information contained in the Annex is based on reports from a variety of open sources that may be of varying credibility. Nothing in this report should be construed as a determination that individuals associated with the underlying incidents are guilty of terrorism or any other criminal offense. As with all records in the Global Terrorism Database, the statistical information may be modified, as necessary and appropriate, if new information becomes available.

Any assessments and descriptions, including those regarding the nature of the incidents or the factual circumstances thereof, are offered only as part of the analytic work product of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and may not reflect the views of the United States government.

B. The data after 2004 came after the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which presented radically different estimates. The NCTC never attempted to explain the nature of these changes or update the trend data from previous years, but explained its methodology as follows:

In compiling the figures of terrorist incidents that are included in the CRT, NCTC used the definition of terrorism found in Title 22, which provides that terrorism is "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."... NCTC maintains its statistical information on the U.S. government's authoritative and unclassified database on terrorist acts, the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS). The primary function of WITS is to provide terrorism statistics to the Department of State for preparation of its annual report. WITS uses a well-defined methodology that involves documented coding practices for categorizing and enumerating relevant statistics. WITS is accessible on the NCTC Web site, www.nctc.gov, providing the public with a transparent view of the NCTC data. The data posted to the website is updated on a quarterly basis, pursuant to a rigorous 90-day review and vetting process. While open source material provides an unparalleled expanse of information, the credibility of sources may vary. For example, the ability of WITS to provide specific details on incident victims, the perpetrators responsible, or the extent of the damage incurred is limited by access to reliable open-source reporting. Additionally, annual comparisons of the total number of global attacks do not indicate the international community's rate of effectiveness at preventing attacks or reducing terrorist capacity.

C. In 2004, without explanation. The State Department changed the title of its report on terrorism from *Patterns of Global Terrorism* to *Country Reports on Terrorism*. It stated on the web page that,

"U.S. law requires the Secretary of State to provide Congress, by April 30 of each year, a full and complete report on terrorism with regard to those countries and groups meeting criteria set forth in the legislation. This annual report is entitled *Country Reports on Terrorism*. Beginning with the report for 2004, it replaced the previously published *Patterns of Global Terrorism*." It also explained its methodology by stating that "Adverse mention in this report of individual members of any political, social, ethnic, religious, or national group is not meant to imply that all members of that group are terrorists. Indeed, terrorists rarely represent anything other than a tiny fraction of such groups. It is those few — and their actions — that are the subject of this report. Furthermore, terrorist acts are part of a larger phenomenon of politically inspired violence, and at times the line between the two can become difficult to draw. This report includes some discretionary information in an effort to relate terrorist events to the larger political context in which they occur, and to give a feel for the conflicts that spawn violence. Thus, this report will discuss terrorist acts as well as other violent incidents that are not necessarily international terrorism and therefore are not subject to the statutory reporting requirement. The 2004 report on the web site does not list a statistical annex and did not provide any summary data, or explanation indicating that State was shifting to a new National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) database.

The 2005 report did provide Statistical Annex, but it did not reference the previous data base or provide any summary data on terrorism except for attacks on U.S. citizens: 56 incidents, 17 killed, and 11 Kidnapped.

The 2006 report did provide both an explanation of the changes after 2003, and a Statistical Annex with global totals for both 2005 and 2006, but not for 2004... It stated that, "Consistent with its statutory mission to serve as the U.S. Government's knowledge bank on international terrorism, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) is providing the Department of State with required statistical information to assist in the satisfaction of its reporting requirements under Section 2656f of Title 22 of the U.S. Code. The statistical information included in this Annex to the 2005 *Country Reports on Terrorism* is drawn from the data NCTC maintains on the www.nctc.gov website.

It did not attempt to correct any of the previous trend data or provide a historical trend line of its own, but also explained the massive changes in the count of terrorist incidents and casualties as follows:

Section 2656f(b) of Title 22 of the U.S. Code requires the State Department to include in its annual report on terrorism "to the extent practicable, complete statistical information on the number of individuals, including United States citizens and dual nationals, killed, injured, or kidnapped by each terrorist group during the preceding calendar year." While NCTC keeps statistics on the annual number of incidents of "terrorism," its ability to track the specific groups responsible for each incident involving killings, kidnappings, and injuries is significantly limited by the availability of reliable open source information, particularly for events involving small numbers of casualties. The statistical material compiled in this Annex, therefore, is drawn from the number of incidents of "terrorism" that occurred in 2005, which is the closest figure that it is practicable for NCTC to supply in satisfaction of the above-referenced statistical requirements. In deriving its figures for incidents of terrorism, NCTC applies the definition of "terrorism" that appears in the 22 U.S.C. • 2656f(d)(2), i.e., "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

The figures in this Annex are not directly comparable to statistics reported in pre-2005 editions of *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, or to the figures NCTC reported in 2005. Those figures were compiled on the basis of a more limited methodology tied to the definition of "international terrorism," which is also contained in 22 U.S.C. • 2656f. Subject to changes in reporting statutes, NCTC anticipates that future statistics provided by NCTC for the *Country Reports on Terrorism* will (like this year's report) be tied to the broader definition of "terrorism."

To establish the repository for the U.S. Government's database on terrorist incidents, in 2005 NCTC unveiled the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), a data management system with a more comprehensive dataset than those used in previous years. The NCTC website, available on the Internet at www.nctc.gov, allows public access to WITS to facilitate an open and transparent look at the NCTC data. NCTC will ensure that data posted to the website is updated as often as necessary. Thus, the NCTC website must be viewed as a living document, regularly incorporating information about prior incidents as well as current events. As information on specific incidents is revealed through court cases or criminal investigations, for example, NCTC reviews its files and updates the relevant incident data.

NCTC cautions against placing too much weight on any set of incident data alone to gauge success or failure against the forces of terrorism. For the following reasons, NCTC does not believe that a simple comparison of the total number of incidents from year to year provides a meaningful measure:

- Approximately one half of the incidents in the NCTC database involve no loss of life. Note also that an attack that damages a pipeline and a car bomb attack that kills 100 civilians may each count as one incident in the database. Thus, an incident count alone does not provide a complete picture.
- The nature of this exercise necessarily involves incomplete and ambiguous information, particularly as it is dependent on open source reporting. The quality, accuracy, and volume of such reporting vary significantly from country to country. Thus, determining whether an incident is politically motivated can be difficult and highly subjective, particularly if the incident does not involve mass casualties.
- As additional information sources are found, and as more information becomes available, particularly from remote parts of the globe, NCTC will continue to enrich the database, revising and updating the tabulation of incidents as necessary. Thus, this data cannot be meaningfully compared to previous years since it suggests that attacks on civilians may have been occurring at a substantially higher rate than was reflected in previous years' reporting and accounting.
- Counting protocols inevitably require judgment calls. Events identified as simultaneous and coordinated, for example, would be recorded as one incident, as would be attacks that subsequently targeted first-responders. For instance, on August 17, 2005, there were approximately 450 small bomb attacks in Bangladesh. Because they were coordinated,

NCTC counted them as one incident; an argument could be made that they represented 450 separate attacks.

Despite these limitations, tracking incidents of terrorism can help us understand some important trends, including the geographic distribution of incidents and information about the perpetrators and their victims. Year-to-year changes in the gross number of incidents across the globe, however, may tell us little about the international community's effectiveness in preventing these incidents, and thus reducing the capacity of terrorists to advance their agenda through violence against the innocent.

Methodology Used to Compile NCTC's Database of Terrorist Incidents

Over the course of the past year, NCTC, working with a panel of terrorism experts, has revised the methodology for counting terrorist incidents, basing it on the broader statutory definition of "terrorism" rather than that of "international terrorism,"^[1] on which the NCTC based its incident counting in previous years. The broader definition and revisions in cataloging have resulted in a larger, more comprehensive set of incident data, all of which can now be found on NCTC's website, www.nctc.gov.

The data provided on the website are based on the statutory definition set forth in the Foreword to this Annex. Accordingly, the incidents NCTC has catalogued in the database are those which, based on available open source information, meet the criteria for "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." Determination of what constitutes an incident of terrorism, however, is sometimes based on incomplete information and may be open to interpretation. The perpetrator's specific motivation, whether political or otherwise, is not always clear, nor is the perpetrator's identity always evident. Moreover, additional information may become available over time, affecting the accuracy of initial judgments about incidents. Users of this database should therefore recognize that expert opinions may differ on whether a particular incident constitutes terrorism or some other form of political violence.

NCTC has, in the interests of transparency, adopted the following counting rules:

- Incidents must have been initiated and executed for them to be included in the database; foiled attacks, as well as hoaxes, are not included in the database.
- Spontaneous (i.e., non-premeditated) hate crimes without intent to cause mass casualties were excluded to the greatest extent practicable.

What is a "noncombatant"?

Under the statutory definition of "terrorism" NCTC uses to compile its database, the victim must be a "noncombatant." However, that term is left open to interpretation by the statute. For the purposes of the WITS database, the term "combatant" was interpreted to mean military, paramilitary, militia, and police under military command and control, in specific areas or regions where war zones or war-like settings exist. Further distinctions were drawn depending on the particular country involved and the role played by the military and police, e.g., where national security forces are indistinguishable from police and/or military forces. Noncombatants therefore included civilians and civilian police and military assets outside of war zones and war-like settings. Diplomatic assets, including personnel, embassies, consulates, and other facilities, were also considered noncombatant targets.

Although only acts of violence against noncombatant targets were counted as terrorism incidents, consistent with the statutory definition of terrorism, for purposes of the WITS database, if those incidents also resulted in the death of combatant victims, all victims (combatant and noncombatant) were tallied. In an incident where combatants were the target of the event, non-combatants who were incidentally harmed were designated "collateral" and the incident excluded from the posted data set. For example, if terrorists attacked a military base in Iraq and wounded one civilian bystander, that victim would be deemed collateral, and the incident would not be counted.

In the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is particularly difficult to gather comprehensive information about all incidents and to distinguish terrorism from the numerous other forms of violence, including crime and sectarian violence, in light of imperfect information. The distinction between terrorism and insurgency in Iraq is especially challenging, as Iraqis participate in the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other terrorist network as well as in tribal and sectarian violence. Therefore, some combatants may be included as victims in some incidents when their presence was incidental to an attack intended for noncombatants. We note, however, that because of the difficulty in gathering data on Iraq and Afghanistan, the dataset may not provide an accurate account of all incidents of terrorism in these two countries.

What is "politically motivated violence"?

The statutory definition also requires the attack to be "politically motivated." NCTC has adopted a series of counting rules to assist in the data compilation. Any life-threatening attack or kidnapping by any "Foreign Terrorist Organization" or group appearing on the list of "Other Organizations of Concern" is deemed politically motivated. Similarly, any serious attack by any organization or individual against a government/diplomatic official or a government/diplomatic building is deemed politically motivated and is therefore considered terrorism. On the other hand, any attack that is primarily criminal or economic in nature or is an instance of mob violence is considered not to be "politically motivated." Similarly, any terrorist organization actions that are primarily intended to enable future terrorist attacks (robbing a bank or selling narcotics for the purpose of raising money, for example) are not considered terrorism.

In between these relatively clear-cut cases, there is a degree of subjectivity. In general, NCTC counting rules consider that attacks by unknown perpetrators against either unknown victims or infrastructure are not demonstrably political and therefore are not terrorism. However, there are exceptions to this general rule: if such an attack occurs in areas in which there is significant insurgency, unrest, or political instability, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the attack may be considered terrorism; or if the attack occurs in a region free of such political violence but involves something more than a shooting (for instance, improvised explosive device, beheading, etc.), the attack may, depending on the circumstances, be considered terrorism. Finally, if low-level attacks against noncombatant targets begin to suggest the existence of a chronic problem, the attacks may be considered terrorism.

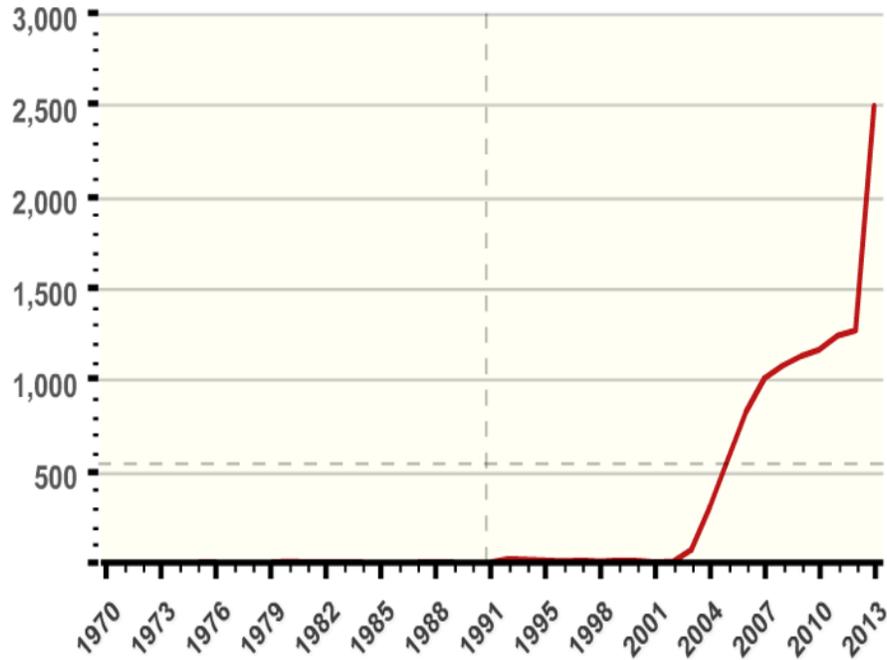
D. The data came from the 2003 report on Patterns in Terrorism, which corrected past estimates as follows, and were further revised on June 22, 2004 (see <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2003/33777.htm>):

In past years, serious violence by Palestinians against other Palestinians in the occupied territories was included in the database of worldwide international terrorist incidents because Palestinians are considered stateless people. This resulted in such incidents being treated differently from intraethnic violence in other parts of the world. In 1989, as a result of further review of the nature of intra-Palestinian violence, such violence stopped being included in the US Government's statistical database on international terrorism. The figures shown above for the years 1984 through 1988 have been revised to exclude intra-Palestinian violence, thus making the database consistent.

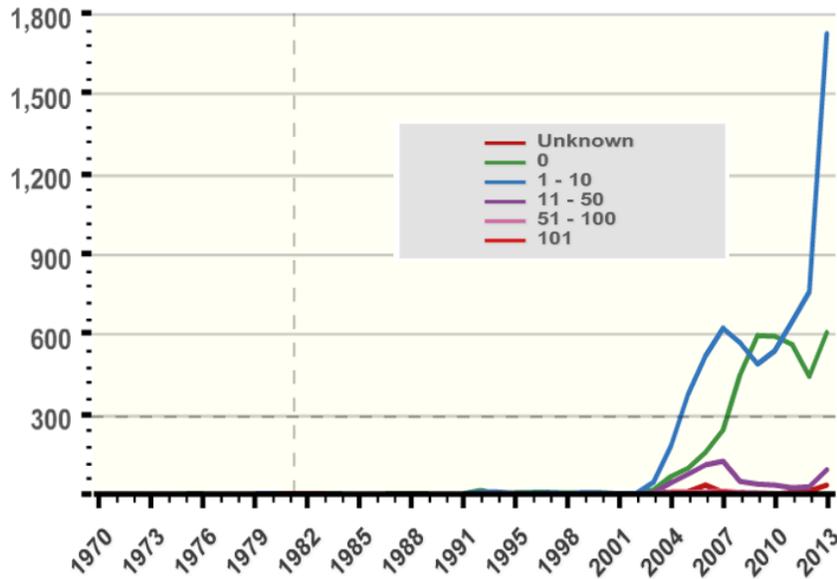
Investigations into terrorist incidents sometimes yield evidence that necessitates a change in the information previously held true (such as whether the incident fits the definition of international terrorism, which group or state sponsor was responsible, or the number of victims killed or injured). As a result of these adjustments, the statistics given in this report may vary slightly from numbers cited in previous reports.

Source: Adapted from the Statistical Annexes to the U.S. State Department Country Reports on terrorism. See <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/>.

Figure Two: START Estimate of Iraqi Terrorism: 1970-2013
Iraq – Terrorist Incidents



Iraq - Fatalities



Source: START Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>;

