

Global Terrorism and Anti-terrorism after ISIL: Two Key Aspects That Will Not Change Soon

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How much change should we really expect in global terrorism patterns and anti-terrorism after the demise of the physical core of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)¹ in Syria and Iraq? On the basis of Global Terrorism Index data, this chapter explores the main layer of global terrorist activity. It also draws out key implications of a sharp contrast in global distribution of terrorism and a reverse disproportion in broader effects of terrorism on international politics and security for global antiterrorism.

TERRORISM AFTER ISIL: MAIN CENTER OF GRAVITY

In the early 21st century, the main layer of transnational terrorism has not been formed by any single group or macro-network—instead, it has been formed by a handful of larger regional movements that accounted for a lion's share of terrorist activity worldwide, with the bulk of it concentrated in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. These six-seven violent movements generate from different regions, but display important typological similarities. All are based in Muslim countries or Muslim-populated areas; all are endemic to their regions and had gone through the bottom-up regionalisation process, from the more local and subnational to cross-border and regional level, and in case of ISIL, even further. Almost all operated in and around weak and failing states and all tried to build alternative Islamic states in their regions. All combine systematic terrorist attacks against civilians/non-combatants with military and combat operations against national and foreign forces in the world's deadliest armed conflicts.

In recent years, it is these several groups that accounted for up to 74 per cent of all terrorism fatalities by identified armed actors.² In 2017 alone, the top four of them including ISIL, the Taliban, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram, were responsible for over 56.5 per cent of all deaths from terrorism.³ Remarkably, some of these groups outmatched ISIL, even at its peak, in select parameters of terrorist activity. In 2015 to 2017, ISIL was the deadliest terrorist

actor,⁴ but in 2015, Al-Nusra Front in Syria showed the highest rate of lethality per terrorist attack.⁵ In 2014, Boko Haram in Nigeria overtook ISIL as the deadliest terrorist group both in absolute terms and in terms of rate of deaths and attack.⁶ The Afghan Taliban endured as one of the world's most active and deadliest militant-terrorist organisations, longer than any other group in the early 21st century, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, longer than any of the first three.

Typologically, ISIL at the pre-'caliphate' stage fully belonged to this group. What made ISIL stand out among these regionalised violent Islamist movements is that it extended its Islamic state-building ambitions and violence beyond the Iraq-Syria or Middle Eastern context, went global, and developed into a category of its own. It could be seen as a cumulative product of three trends in transnational violent Islamism: bottom-up regionalisation, network fragmentation of 'global jihad' movement, including in the West,⁷ and intensification of targeted intra- and cross-regional flows of foreign terrorist fighters. These three trends are interrelated, but distinct, develop in parallel, and only partially overlap. But it is precisely where they overlapped, at the interface of all three, that ISIL formed as we knew it at its peak in the mid-2010s – a centrifugal system, with the physical Caliphate in Syria and Iraq at its core, reinforced by inflows of foreign fighters and settlers from different regions, and extending to many localised armed groups, homegrown micro-cells and individual adepts globally.

The demise of the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq has had, and will still generate, some aftershocks for several years to come, but it did bring an end to the ISIL claim at a global caliphate. However, it did not radically change the overall set-up described above. In the coming years, much of global terrorist activity will continue to be generated by a handful of large, regionally based Islamist/jihadist militant movements that control territory and combine terrorism with active combat and state-building ambitions in the world's several most intense and most heavily

transnationalised major armed conflicts in the Muslim countries or areas, unless these conflicts are adequately addressed and fundamentally resolved.

CHALLENGES TO INTERNATIONAL ANTITERRORIST COOPERATION: BEYOND ISIL

International cooperation on anti-terrorism faces all sorts of impediments, from geostrategic rivalries to ubiquitous double standards, and the impact of domestic politics of the day. However, one of the most fundamental complications at the global level reflects objective reality and stems from a major divide in global terrorism patterns. This can be seen as one of the particular, contemporary manifestations of the North-South divide; more precisely, it involves a stark contrast between developed, postindustrial world ('West plus', or 'OECD minus'⁸), on the one hand, and select parts of the Muslim world, especially areas of protracted regional conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, on the other. This contrast manifests itself in a colossal disproportion and extremely uneven distribution of (a) actual manifestations and direct harm from terrorism and (b) broader political and international impact and effects of terrorism, between these two 'worlds'.

In the early 21st century, much of direct harm from terrorism was incurred neither in the global West, nor in the 'new East,' such as Eurasia and East Asia. Instead, it has been largely concentrated in just three regions: the Middle East, South Asia, followed by sub-Saharan Africa. These three regions accounted for 93 per cent of terrorism fatalities between 2002 and 2017.⁹ According to the Global Terrorism Index, up to 90 per cent of all terrorist activity tend to be concentrated in the top ten terrorism-affected countries, none of which has been a Western state. Conflict-torn Iraq and Afghanistan were the two countries most heavily affected by terrorism in the early 21st century, followed, in different orders, by Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. In contrast, direct manifestations of terrorism in the 'peacetime', post-industrial, mostly Western world remained very limited: between 2000 and 2014, Western states accounted for only 4.4 per cent of all terrorist attacks and 2.6 per cent of fatalities.¹⁰ A wider group of Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member states, referred here as the 'West plus', accounted for just one per cent of terrorism deaths in 2016—a peak year since 2001 (even as that was an increase from 0.1 percent in 2010 that was mainly due to the ISIL activity).¹¹

This does not mean that it is terrorism in three most heavily affected regions, and respective conflict areas, that is always in the focus of the world politics, grasps main international media and political attention and dominates global anti-terrorist agenda. More generally, political significance and impact of terrorist attacks are not

necessarily proportional to their physical parameters: instead, destabilising effect of terrorism on international politics and security largely depends on comparative centrality of a specific political or regional context to the world politics. This explains why, despite relatively limited, even minimal, exposure of the Western and most OECD countries to direct harm from terrorism, any deadly attack in London, Brussels, Paris, Nice or Chistchurch overwhelms international media and has a major effect on the world politics and security, far exceeding media-political effect from more regular and deadly attacks in Kabul, Baghdad, Lahore or Mogadishu. With or without ISIL, *this fundamental disproportion is not going anywhere*. Most physical manifestations of terrorism will continue to be associated with a handful of regional conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, but it is relatively limited manifestations of terrorism in the 'peacetime', developed world that have the largest media and political effect globally.

This discrepancy has three important lessons, or implications, for international anti-terrorist cooperation.

The first implication is the only one that brings some good news and points at the only lesson (out of three) that has been at least partly learned by the international community. High concentration of much of global terrorist activity in just several areas of major regional conflicts, in the hands of few violent movements, clearly implies that any major increase in international security pressure even against one or two such movements should reduce global terrorism by a substantial share. A case in point has been the recent decline in terrorist attacks and fatalities by ten or more per cent a year, since the historical peak of terrorism in 2014. This decline is largely due to stepped-up international efforts against ISIL and other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria and to consolidation of mostly region-level efforts against Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The second implication is less inspiring. The fact that relatively limited, by global standards, manifestations of terrorism in Europe, the United States, or in the developed world at large tend to produce the largest effects on global media, politics, and security also disproportionately affects and shapes global anti-terrorist agenda. Concerns that are more typical for a post-industrial society radicalisation of second-generation Muslim migrants, the phenomenon of homegrown jihadist loners and micro-cells, the rise in right-wing anti-migrant and anti-Muslim violent extremism are over-represented in international antiterrorist agenda, including at the United Nations level. However, these concerns are not a priority, or hardly even relevant, for those states and societies in the Middle East, South Asia or Central and East Africa that suffer incomparably heavier burden of direct losses from terrorism aggravated by enormous, direct and indirect, harm from broader armed conflicts. They have every right to claim that their

concerns are not adequately addressed or prioritised enough at the international level—especially as many of them do not have the resources and sometimes even lack basic state functionality required to effectively counter terrorism or implement even those international measures against terrorism to which they signed up to. For any effective international cooperation on antiterrorism, especially at the cross-regional and global and United Nations level, there is a need to bridge or at least narrow down this gap.

One of several ways to bridge that gap leads us to the third and final lesson, or conclusion. A lion's share of global terrorist activity is still concentrated in, and tied to the agenda of, a handful of regional armed conflicts of a certain type. These are not localised, low-intensity conflicts on the periphery of functional states, but the world's most intense, heavily transnationalised civil wars in failed or weak states. This fact alone is the best evidence for the need for a qualitative upgrade of multilateral efforts to advance genuine resolution and prevention of this type of conflict that accounts for the bulk of global terrorism, as one of the most effective, long-term global anti-terrorism strategies. One big question, among several others, is whether this task could be achieved, especially in relation to conflicts such as Syria or Afghanistan, without improved cooperation across the widening East-West divides, between the expanded 'West plus' and the 'new East', or Eurasia in a broader sense.

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