

THE FUTURE OF TERRORISM: DIVERSE ACTORS, FRAYING INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

Terrorist groups will continue to exploit societal fragmentation and weak governance to push their ideologies and gain power through violence. During the next 20 years, regional and intrastate conflicts, demographic pressures, environmental degradation, and democratic retrenchment are likely to exacerbate the political, economic, and social grievances terrorists have long exploited to gain supporters as well as safe havens to organize, train, and plot. These accelerants, the intensity and effects of which are likely to be uneven across different regions and countries, probably will also foster rural to urban international migration, further straining state resources and diminishing global and local counterterrorism efforts.

- Global jihadist groups are likely to be the largest, most persistent transnational threat as well as a threat in their home regions. They benefit from a coherent ideology that promises to deliver a millenarian future, from strong organizational structures, and from the ability to exploit large areas of ungoverned or poorly governed territory, notably in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.
- Extreme “rightwing” and “leftwing” terrorists promoting a range of issues—racism, environmentalism, and anti-government extremism, for example—may revive in Europe, Latin America, North America, and perhaps other regions.
- Insurgent groups and sectarian conflicts—increasingly around ethno-nationalist and communal causes—will also continue to foster terrorism. The specific groups will wax and wane as some are defeated and others gain power. Although some groups will aspire to conduct transnational attacks and maintain cross border connections, most attacks will continue to be perpetrated by local actors against local targets aimed at achieving local objectives.
- Iran’s and Lebanese Hezbollah’s efforts to solidify a Shia “axis of resistance” also might increase the threat of asymmetric attacks on US, Israeli, Saudi, and others’ interests in the Middle East.

Technology Evolving Tactics for Terrorists and Counterterrorism Forces

Most terrorist attacks during the next 20 years probably will continue to use weapons similar to those currently available—such as small arms and improvised explosives—be-

cause these are generally sufficient, accessible, and reliable. However, technological advances, including AI, biotechnology, and the Internet of Things, may offer opportunities for terrorists to conduct high-profile attacks by developing new, more remote attack methods and to collaborate across borders. Terrorists will also seek weapons of mass destruction and other weapons and approaches that will allow them to conduct spectacular mass casualty attacks. For example, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has already launched mustard gas attacks and uses unmanned aerial vehicles extensively—as do Iranian-supported Shia militants. Autonomous delivery vehicles guided with the help of AI systems could enable a single terrorist to strike dozens of targets in the same incident. Augmented reality environments could also enable virtual terrorist training camps, connecting experienced plotters protected by distant sanctuaries with potential operatives.

Technological innovations that expand surveillance capacity may help governments to combat terrorists despite challenges posed by poor governance. Governments are likely to continue dramatically expanding the amount and types of information they collect as well as the tools to sort and organize that data. Advances in biometric identification, data mining, full-motion video analysis, and metadata analysis will provide governments with improved capabilities to identify terrorists and plotting. Development of precision long-range strike capabilities might undermine terrorist safe havens that are inaccessible to police or infantry forces.

Geopolitics Reshaping Counterterrorism Landscape

Shifting international power dynamics—in particular, the rise of China and major power competition—are likely to challenge US-led counterterrorism efforts and may make it increasingly difficult to forge bilateral partnerships or multilateral cooperation on traveler data collection and information-sharing efforts that are key to preventing terrorists from crossing borders and entering new conflict zones. Poor countries probably will struggle with homegrown threats, particularly if international counterterrorism assistance is more limited. Some countries facing existential threats, such as insurgencies in which terrorists are active, may choose to forge non-aggression pacts that leave terrorists free to organize within their borders and others compelled to submit to terrorist rule over significant parts of their territory.