

ISSUE I • SPRING 2026

Statecraft & Strategy

An American Foreign Policy Council Publication

THE NEW COUNTERTERRORISM TERRAIN



Featuring articles by:

COLIN P. CLARKE, PRITI PATEL, and ANDREW MICHTA



Statecraft & Strategy

An American Foreign Policy Council Publication

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Statecraft & Strategy is a quarterly journal of foreign affairs, focused on bringing cutting-edge analysis and fresh thinking about world events to policymakers and the general public.

ABOUT AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL (AFPC)

AFPC is widely recognized as a source of timely, insightful analysis on issues of foreign policy, and works closely with members of Congress, the Executive Branch and the policymaking community. It is staffed by noted specialists in foreign and defense policy, and serves as a valuable resource to officials in the highest levels of government.

©2026 American Foreign Policy Council | All rights reserved.

Published by the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC). All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

A NEW AXIS IS TAKING SHAPE.

RUSSIA. CHINA. IRAN.
COORDINATED. EXPANSIONIST. DETERMINED.

TODAY, A NEW AXIS OF AUTOCRATS IS TRYING TO RESHAPE THE WORLD ORDER AND SIDELINE THE UNITED STATES IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS. THE NEW IMPERIALISTS DELIVERS EYE-OPENING DETAILS OF HOW THREE MAJOR GLOBAL PLAYERS-RUSSIA, CHINA, AND IRAN-ARE WORKING WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH KEY ALLIES, SUCH AS NORTH KOREA AND VENEZUELA, TO UNSEAT THE U.S. AS A GLOBAL LEADER. THE CHALLENGE IS PROFOUND AND REQUIRES BOTH LEADERSHIP AND ACTION FROM WASHINGTON.

THE NEW IMPERIALISTS IS A REMARKABLY IMPORTANT OUTLINE OF THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE FACING AMERICA... THERE ARE DETAILS IN THIS BOOK WHICH WILL BE EYE OPENING EVEN FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BEEN WORKING ON NATIONAL SECURITY FOR A LONG TIME.

- THE HONORABLE NEWT GINGRICH, FORMER SPEAKER OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE THREATS TO THE U.S. POSED BY RUSSIA, CHINA AND IRAN. PIRCHNER AND BERMAN MAKE A UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION BY CONNECTING THE DOTS AMONG THE THREE, AND BY OFFERING AN INVALUABLE PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR LONG HISTORY AS IMPERIAL POWERS. THEY ARE EQUALLY COMPELLING IN THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW THE U.S. CAN COUNTER THESE THREATS.

- THE HONORABLE RYAN C. CROCKER, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ, PAKISTAN, SYRIA, KUWAIT, AND LEBANON. BOARD CHAIR, MIDDLE EAST BROADCASTING NETWORKS

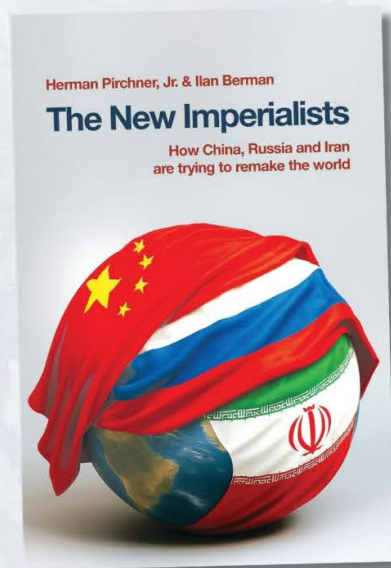
PIRCHNER AND BERMAN ARE LAYING OUT A PIVOTAL HISTORICAL QUESTION: AFTER CENTURIES OF CITIZEN-BASED DEMOCRACIES BECOMING STRONGER AND BUILDING PEACEFUL ALLIANCES WITH EACH OTHER, ARE AUTHORITARIANS WITH VISIONS OF RULING OVER OTHERS MAKING A COMEBACK? THE ANSWER IS "YES" - BUT IT IS NOT GAME OVER. BY DOCUMENTING HOW THE IMPERIALISTS ARE GAINING GROUND, THEY ALSO POINT THE WAY FORWARD.

- THE HONORABLE KURT VOLKER, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO NATO AND FORMER U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FOR UKRAINE NEGOTIATIONS

IN THE NEW IMPERIALISTS, PIRCHNER AND BERMAN EXPERTLY DIAGNOSE AND THEN PROSCRIBE SOLUTIONS TO DEAL WITH THE PREEMINENT FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY - THE RISE OF TOTALITARIAN, EXPANSIONIST DICTATORSHIPS WORKING TOGETHER TO THREATEN OUR SECURITY, PROSPERITY AND FREEDOM... THE NEW IMPERIALISTS IS AN INDISPENSABLE CALL TO ACTION.

- JOSH ROGIN, LEAD GLOBAL SECURITY ANALYST, WP INTELLIGENCE, AUTHOR, CHAOS UNDER HEAVEN: TRUMP, XI, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (MARINER BOOKS, 2021)

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON



Statecraft & Strategy

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Good ideas are rare. In today's hyper-partisan political climate, they're even rarer. Yet America's leaders must grapple with complex global challenges that require more than partisan posturing and social media soundbites. They need serious, credible, and actionable foreign policy insights that are rooted in experience and informed by history.

The existing marketplace of ideas is broken. The nation's most prominent think tanks are increasingly perceived through a partisan lens. Institutions on the Left and Right alike are tethered to domestic policy agendas that alienate half the political spectrum. As a result, their foreign policy ideas often fall on deaf ears.

The consequence is a narrowing of vision, precisely at a time when our country needs clarity and breadth more than ever. There is a growing void where serious, intellectually grounded, and politically credible strategic thinking should be.

Statecraft & Strategy is our answer to this moment. It is designed to advance an internationalist vision rooted in responsible U.S. engagement abroad, and to elevate the national conversation on U.S. foreign policy by showcasing original, constructive, and bipartisan analysis that equips policymakers to make better decisions.

In an age of strategic instability and political dysfunction, such an approach isn't just timely. It is deeply needed.

ILAN BERMAN

Editor-in-Chief

ASSOCIATE EDITORS: Anna Harvey, Amanda Azinheira, Calla O'Neil

EDITORIAL BOARD: In Formation

The opinions expressed in *Statecraft & Strategy* (ISSN 3071-1754) are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Foreign Policy Council. Neither *Statecraft & Strategy* nor the American Foreign Policy Council accepts funding from foreign governments, organizations, or individuals.

THE WAR ENDED. THE REORDER BEGAN.

THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR MARKED A TURNING
POINT IN THE POST-SOVIET WORLD.

AFTER KARABAKH: WAR, PEACE, AND THE FORGING OF A NEW CAUCASUS PERFORMS A GREAT SERVICE TO THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT INTERNATIONAL POLITICS. WE NOW HAVE IN ONE VOLUME A SET OF COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSES OF THE MAIN DIMENSIONS OF THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR-A TURNING POINT IN A LONG AND COMPLEX PROCESS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO THE WORLD, NAMELY, THE RE-SHAPING OF THE POST-SOVIET WORLD DUE TO THE DECLINE OF RUSSIA.

THE AUTHORS, WHO ARE ALL INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED EXPERTS IN THEIR FIELDS, HAVE ENSURED THAT THIS VOLUME WILL BECOME THE STANDARD ACCOUNT OF THE CONFLICT.

EDITORS/CONTRIBUTORS

SVANTE E. CORNELL IS RESEARCH DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL'S CENTRAL ASIA-Caucasus INSTITUTE AND A CO-FOUNDER OF THE INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY (ISDP).

DAMJAN KRNIJEVIĆ MIŠKOVIĆ IS PROFESSOR OF PRACTICE AT ADA UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE SERVES CONCURRENTLY AS DIRECTOR FOR POLICY RESEARCH, ANALYSIS, AND PUBLICATIONS AT THE INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND DIPLOMACY AND CO-EDITOR OF BAKU DIALOGUES.

CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT M. CUTLER IS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF THE ENERGY SECURITY PROGRAM AT THE NATO ASSOCIATION OF CANADA AND A PRACTITIONER MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO'S INSTITUTE FOR COMPLEXITY AND INNOVATION.

MICHAEL DORAN IS SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AT HUDSON INSTITUTE.

NIKOLAS K. GVOSDEV IS PROFESSOR OF NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS AT THE U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE. HE IS A 2024 TEMPLETON FELLOW AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM AT THE FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, WHERE HE IS ALSO A SENIOR FELLOW IN THE EURASIA PROGRAM AND EDITOR OF ORBIS.

FARIZ ISMAILZADE IS VICE RECTOR FOR GOVERNMENT AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND PROFESSOR OF PRACTICE AT ADA UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE SERVES CONCURRENTLY AS DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND DIPLOMACY AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF BAKU DIALOGUES. HE HAS BEEN A VISITING FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

ONNIK JAMES KRİKORIAN IS A TBILISI-BASED JOURNALIST AND PHOTOJOURNALIST FROM THE UK WHO HAS COVERED THE SOUTH CAUCASUS CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1994. HE REGULARLY WRITES ARTICLES AND ANALYSES FOR A VARIETY OF REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS.

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

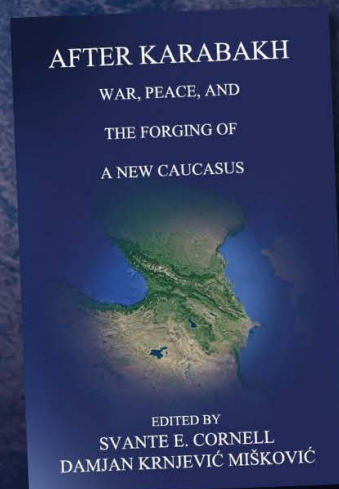
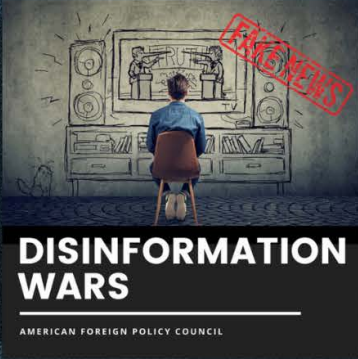


Table of Contents

ISSUE I • SPRING 2026

The New Shape Of Global Jihadism	7
COLIN P. CLARKE	
Keeping Iran’s Proxies on their Back Feet	15
MATTHEW LEVITT, MICHAEL JACOBSON	
The “War of Ideas” to Come	25
ALBERTO M. FERNANDEZ	
AI and the Future of Counterterrorism	35
PRIYANK MATHUR	
The Promise and Peril of Africa	43
J. PETER PHAM	
The Information Front in Modern Terrorism	53
JAMES S. ROBBINS	
Blacklisting the Brotherhood	63
JONATHAN SCHANZER	
Europe’s Changing Counterterrorism Challenge	75
HANS JAKOB SCHINDLER	
THE BIG QUESTION: IS EUROPE STILL A DURABLE PARTNER?	
PRO: Europe Is Still Critical To U.S. Strategy	85
ANDREW A. MICHTA	
CON: The Continent Is Still A Helpless Dependent	91
DOUG BANDOW	
THE HOT SEAT	
Crisis and Opportunity	97
NEWT GINGRICH	
GLOBAL VIEW	
Taiwan’s Version Of Peace Through Strength	101
FEI-FAN LIN	
Trump’s War, and What Putin Really Wants	105
OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK	
Making The (Moral) Case For Israel	109
ERAN ORTAL	
Envisioning A Different Direction For Britain	113
PRITI PATEL	



DISINFORMATION WARS
INFORMATION IS NOW A CENTRAL DOMAIN OF CONFLICT. JOIN HOST ILAN BERMAN AS HE TAKES YOU BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE STRUGGLE FOR HEARTS AND MIND IN GLOBAL POLITICS.



SPACE STRATEGY
HOW CAN THE UNITED STATES CATALYZE POLICY FOR THE NEXT STRATEGIC FRONTIER? JOIN HOST PETER GARRETSON AS HE HELPS TO DEFINE A STRATEGIC VISION FOR U.S. SPACE POLICY.



GREAT POWER PODCAST
THE UNITED STATES IS NAVIGATING A NEW ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION. JOIN HOST ILAN BERMAN AS HE EXPLORES INSIGHTS TO HELP CRAFT A FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY.

LISTEN ON
 Spotify  Apple Podcasts

The New Shape Of Global Jihadism

COLIN P. CLARKE

Even a cursory glance at current U.S. foreign policy priorities reveals a wide range of challenges, from Venezuela to Ukraine to Gaza. The rise of China and a revanchist Russia also pose significant threats, while other near-peer adversaries, including Iran and North Korea, continue to destabilize important global regions. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's November 2025 *National Security Strategy* mentions terrorism just five times in its more-than-thirty pages, while its recently released *National Defense Strategy* contented itself simply with laying out that "The Department will maintain a resource-sustainable approach to countering Islamic terrorists, focused on organizations that possess the capability and intent to strike the U.S. homeland."¹

That superficial focus reflects a profound shift in priorities. Following more than two decades of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), Washington has shifted resources away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, is attempting to harness artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing, and is actively seeking to procure the critical minerals that underpin many of these emerging technologies. Counterterrorism, long the primary guiding framework for national security policy, has now been profoundly deemphasized. And yet, transnational terrorist groups continue to target the U.S. and its allies, determined to strike in the heart of the West.

This is reflected in recent U.S. counterterrorism operations. In mid-January, the United States launched airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria (including weapons caches, supply routes, and other terrorist infrastructure). This followed a similar assault weeks before in which the United States bombed Islamic State targets in Syria in response to an attack in Palmyra that killed two U.S. servicemen and a civilian interpreter. Earlier, the Trump administration had ordered airstrikes against Islamic State militants in Nigeria on Christmas Day, 2025, driven by recognition that: "In 2025, ISIS inspired at least 11 plots or attacks against targets in the United States."² The list goes on.

Dr. Colin P. Clarke is the Executive Director of the Soufan Center, a non-profit research institution focused on global security issues. He is the author of *After the Caliphate: The Islamic State & the Future Terrorist Diaspora* (Polity, 2019).



As this recent flurry of activity confirms, terrorist groups remain a major threat to U.S. national security. Even as the U.S. shifts resources and attention toward great power competition with near-peer rivals such as Russia and China, it is crucial not to underestimate the threat posed by transnational terrorist groups – especially *jihadists* like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their affiliates – as well as the lone actors and small cells throughout the globe who remain inspired by their message.

ISLAMIC STATE: ADAPTATION AFTER THE CALIPHATE

The Islamic State in 2026 is less about expansion and more about adaptation and evolution. The group's members have begun experimenting with AI, using it to translate propaganda into multiple languages and tailor themes to different demographics. As militants become more proficient with agentic AI, the technology could handle tasks that previously would have taken terrorists hundreds of hours, freeing them to devote that time to attack planning and training.³ Islamic State militants are also likely to leverage other emerging technologies, including encrypted communication platforms, virtual currencies, and 3-D printed weapons and explosives, especially as barriers to the acquisition of those capabilities continue to lower.

Most counterterrorism analysts today would not be able to name the current leader of the Islamic State. That isn't because nobody cares or isn't paying attention, but more of a byproduct of his increasing irrelevance, even as the group itself and the Islamic State's affiliates remain potent. The United States and its allies have continuously killed the group's overall *emir*, leaving it unable to find a replacement that could measure up to its once

charismatic *caliph*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who famously ascended the pulpit at a mosque in Mosul, Iraq, to declare the so-called Islamic State more than a decade ago. At the height of al-Baghdadi's reign, the Islamic State ruled over territory equivalent to the size of Great Britain. Tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries flocked to Iraq and Syria to join the group. In response, the United States and its allies came together to defeat the Islamic State militarily, reclaiming the final piece of territory by conquering Baghuz, Syria, in the spring of 2019.

But even without a recognizable leader, the Islamic State lives on. Its propaganda continues to resonate with followers and supporters worldwide, and it maintains a decentralized network of regional affiliates, branches, and franchise groups that fight in its name and to further its ideological objectives. In December, a father-son team inspired by the Islamic State launched a deadly terrorist attack in Sydney, Australia, targeting a Hanukkah celebration on Bondi Beach. These were not battle-hardened Islamic State fighters, but rather individuals living in the West who were inspired by the group's propaganda and mission. In that sense, while the GWOT may be over, the fight against terrorist groups and those motivated by them will never cease. Rather, the threat will ebb and flow, evolve over time, and adapt in response to counterterrorism pressure.

In Syria, the group retains a hardened core of fighters capable of launching sophisticated operations. Islamic State attacks have increased in frequency and complexity over the past several years, and the recent emergence of Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, which many believe to be an Islamic State front organization, demonstrates the group's propensity for suicide attacks.⁴

The core group of the Islamic State in Syria is also still believed to be in charge of the General Directorate of Provinces, which manages the organization's decentralized and sprawling global network. With the fledgling government of Ahmed al-Sharaa now assuming control over prisons and detention centers previously controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), there is growing concern that the Islamic State will attempt to break its fighters and their families out of these facilities.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), also referred to as the Islamic State Sahel Province, remains highly active, engaging in battles against other Islamist militants while also targeting security forces and civilians in places like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In late January, Islamic State militants claimed a complex attack on the airport in Niger's capital, Niamey. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) controls large swaths of territory in and around the Lake Chad Basin, and more recently has sought to cooperate with its brethren in the Sahel. Moreover, ISWAP continues to experiment with unmanned aerial systems, or drones, which it has used for a variety of functions, including reconnaissance.⁵

There is now a debate within the counterterrorism community about the exact nature of the threat posed by Islamic State militants in the Sahel. Some analysts are sanguine that these groups will remain a mostly localized problem – one with limited regional power projection capabilities. But others, including this author, are increasingly concerned about planning for Islamic State external operations targeting France, Spain, or another Western country emanating from the Sahel.

Elsewhere on the continent, the Islamic State maintains affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mozambique, and Somalia. The al-Karrar Office in Somalia

and the al-Furqan Office in Nigeria function as critical nodes in the Islamic State's broader global network, facilitating the organization's financing endeavors, assisting with its propaganda output, and coordinating the travel of foreign terrorist fighters to various conflict zones where its affiliates remain active. This dynamic highlights the importance of sub-Saharan Africa to the Islamic State, not just a theater of conflict but as a crucial logistical and facilitative node in the group's global network.

Because the Islamic State is a highly adaptive organization, it is constantly seeking ways to evolve, including opportunistically searching for new territories or reviving regional affiliates that have been weakened by host nation security forces. In 2025, Islamic State cells were dismantled in Libya, Morocco, and Sudan. The year prior, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) demonstrated the intent and capabilities to conduct numerous external operations. In Iran, Türkiye, and Russia, ISKP launched deadly attacks. Its attack on a Moscow concert hall in March 2024 was complex and sophisticated, and served as a painful reminder of the lethal nature of the threat it poses. Numerous other ISKP plots were disrupted by authorities in 2024, including one targeting the Paris Summer Olympics and another targeting a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, Austria. One particularly worrisome trend is the increasingly young age of many of the *jihadists* being radicalized by ISKP.⁶

ISLAMIC STATE: ADAPTATION AFTER THE CALIPHATE

For its part, al-Qaeda's global network has been significantly attenuated. Nevertheless, several of its franchises continue to wreak havoc in various regions, including Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa-al Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. There are also growing concerns about al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan, where the United Nations Monitoring Team has reported steady activity, including training camps in various provinces throughout the country. What is left of al-Qaeda's core leadership, including the current *de facto* head of the organization, Saif al-Adel, is now believed to be in Iran.

The most lethal al-Qaeda branch is JNIM, the organization's Sahelian franchise. JNIM formed from the merger of several smaller groups, including the Sahara Emirate subgroup of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din, al-Mourabitoun, and the Macina Liberation Front.⁷ It maintains a fighting force of approximately 6,000 militants, operates throughout the border regions of Benin, Niger, and Nigeria, and has pushed further southward toward the Gulf of Guinea. Late last year, JNIM had made significant progress toward seizing large swaths of Mali, and there were serious concerns that it might seek to topple the government in Bamako. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel remained the epicenter of terrorist activity worldwide, with countries like Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali dominating the list of those most impacted by terrorism.⁸

In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), once the organization's most prolific and capable affiliate, had been hampered in recent years. However, it now has an opportunity to mount a resurgence. Recent fighting between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has further destabilized Yemen, which is still reeling from the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks that brought Israel and the United States into direct conflict with the Houthis (Ansarallah). AQAP could exploit the lingering instability

to recruit new members and reconstitute its capabilities. If it does, the effects could be global. After all, AQAP's calling card for years has been the ability to plot external operations (among them the August 2009 plot to kill Saudi intelligence chief Prince Mohamed bin Nayef, the December 2009 underwear bomber plot, and the successful December 2019 attack at a Pensacola, FL military base that resulted in the death of three U.S. Navy sailors).⁹

In the Horn of Africa, al-Qaeda's Somali branch, al-Shabaab, remains among the group's most potent affiliates. Al-Shabaab remains a significant force both in Somalia and throughout the broader region because it retains the capability to launch complex attacks. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has repeatedly struck al-Shabaab targets over the past year, conducting dozens of attacks aimed at degrading the organization and its ability to plan and conduct attacks on the U.S. homeland. Nevertheless, the group's militants maintain control over parts of southern Jubaland and the Lower Shabelle, and al-Shabaab continues to successfully bring in money, raising between \$100 million and \$200 million per year, according to some estimates.¹⁰

Al Qaeda's original vision, meanwhile, remains relevant to global *jihād*. The core tenets of what Osama bin Laden advocated – defeating the United States, pushing its troops out of the Middle East, and working to sever the U.S.-Israel relationship – have not been accomplished. To the contrary. The U.S. today arguably has more military muscle and manpower in the region than ever before. As a result, those ideas will assuredly remain a rallying cry of *jihādists* worldwide. At the same time, some trends could conceivably lead al-Qaeda to regain popularity in parts of the world. One is Saudi Arabia's push for rapid liberalization, which may generate a backlash against Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from some fundamentalists and hardcore Wahhabis. Another is anti-Israel sentiment in the aftermath of the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7th and Israel's subsequent war in Gaza. These and other topics have the potential to breathe new life into the narrative that al-Qaeda has long promoted.

Thus, al-Qaeda has its own global network of affiliates, branches, and franchise groups – several of which, including al-Shabaab and AQAP, represent a global threat to this day. And with bin Laden's messages still resonating with segments of Western populations, there could be a revival among a small portion of homegrown violent extremists.

Even so, al-Qaeda is nowhere near its apex. In fact, in many ways, it has reached a nadir. But the group nevertheless poses a latent threat. Moreover, there are factors that keep it relevant (including its connection to the Iranian regime, for example, which provides some of its leadership with safe haven and sanctuary). Countering al-Qaeda means continuing to combat its ideology and propaganda online while also addressing the operating environment. In some parts of the world where the U.S. is drawing down its presence, this will cede the advantage to terrorist and insurgent groups. There are blind spots in the Sahel and Central Asia, for instance, and an overreliance on signals intelligence (SIGINT) may prove detrimental to America's ability to conduct over-the-horizon attacks to take out significant al-Qaeda or other *jihādist* assets in different parts of the globe.

At the end of the day, al-Qaeda and similar groups are master opportunists. There are any number of events that could transpire that would completely change the fortunes of a group like al-Qaeda overnight.

WHAT MIGHT COME NEXT

A range of factors and variables is also likely to exacerbate this terrorism threat landscape. The international system is in profound flux, and some argue that the world is shifting toward spheres of influence, with geopolitical realignments reshaping dynamics in regions such as the Sahel, Southeast Asia, and the Levant. Failed states and ungoverned spaces will continue to flourish, and as the United States pulls back from certain areas and cuts back significantly on funding for economic development and foreign aid, it creates opportunities for a range of violent non-state actors, including *jihadi* groups, to fill the resulting void.

True, the United States has launched several rounds of air strikes at Islamic State targets in Syria over the past several months. Overall, however, the bandwidth dedicated to counterterrorism has been reduced drastically. When the U.S. government has focused on counterterrorism, it has been to combat drug trafficking organizations – relabeled as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) – in Mexico, Venezuela, and elsewhere throughout Latin America. But pivoting away from counterterrorism will have a real-world impact, including giving groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State the breathing room they need to survive and rebuild.

With less funding for programs dedicated to countering violent extremism, there are fewer experts available to study, understand, and design programs intended to combat radicalization, including among youth populations, which have been directly targeted by the Islamic State on online platforms like TikTok.¹¹ With the disintegration of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), fewer economic development initiatives are aimed at assisting vulnerable populations in conflict-stricken locales. In regions like the Sahel, *jihadi* terrorists are in control of the narrative and have leveraged local grievances to recruit for their organizations.

There also needs to be a more concerted effort to combat the virulent strain of anti-Semitism promoted by the Islamic State and its supporters. Islamic State propaganda frequently focuses on anti-Semitic themes. And while anti-Semitic incidents throughout the West have spiked since the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023, the problem runs much deeper. In Australia, for instance, antisemitic acts recorded from October 1, 2023, to September 20, 2024, showed a 316% increase from a year earlier, to 2,062 incidents, a report by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry showed.¹² Nevertheless, in much the same way that today's generation of Sunni *jihadists* was shaped by the attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, *jihad's* next generation will be shaped by the recent conflict in Gaza (and the ongoing instability there). This could have major implications, including the next generation of Sunni *jihadists* being more squarely focused on Israel, perhaps more so than the United States.

Sunni *jihadists*, including many who are opposed to Hamas for ideological reasons, will make the slaughter of Gazans a primary focus of their propaganda, which will in

turn contribute to the radicalization of homegrown violent extremists. It may also lead Westerners with non-Muslim backgrounds and a penchant for extreme left politics to provide a support network for future plots. And Sunni *ihadists* could be more open to or willing to work with Shi'a extremists, including groups like Lebanese Hezbollah, which will be looking for revenge after the past two years of Israeli military campaigns in the Middle East.

The next generation of Sunni *ihadists* will also be more technologically adept than previous generations, having grown up as so-called “digital natives.” This could mean greater reliance on emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, 3D printing, drones, encrypted communications, and virtual currencies. As such, it would be possible, though unlikely, for the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to evolve into a primarily criminal network. The bonds forged among many of these individuals are ideological in nature, but many foreign fighters, including many from the West, traveled to the Caliphate after leaving behind criminal pasts in their countries of origin. Some of these fighters were radicalized in jail. The Islamic State, in particular, specifically recruited militants with criminal backgrounds and skills.

For the United States, one of the primary challenges will be the shift in resources away from counterterrorism and toward other priorities, including great power competition. It was always inevitable that there would be an overcorrection in the wake of the GWOT, in terms of money, manpower, and other resources. But within the United States, there is now a dearth of counterterrorism resources, creating new vulnerabilities for the homeland. Meanwhile, political and diplomatic tensions with longstanding partners, including the “Five Eyes” countries, could impact intelligence sharing and security cooperation.

Terrorism is not existential, especially when compared to the threat posed by a militarized China. However, terrorist attacks have a unique way of upending the strategies and approaches of governments, due in part to the deep psychological impact they can have. The United States learned this the hard way following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In turn, the way 9/11 reshaped American foreign policy demonstrated the enduring importance of maintaining robust counterterrorism capabilities. In a world of finite resources, that inevitably means reduced capability in other key areas. But it behooves the Trump administration to maintain counterterrorism expertise within the government and across the interagency. Otherwise, it risks squandering the hard-earned counterterrorism gains of the past quarter-century.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Department of War, 2026 NDS: National Defense Strategy, January 2026, 17, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>
- 2 United States Central Command, “CENTCOM Forces Remove ISIS Operatives in Syria in Syria After Large-Scale Strike,” December 30, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4368374/centcom-forces-remove-isis-operatives-in-syria-after-large-scale-strike/>
- 3 Tom O’Connor, “Generating Jihad: How ISIS Could Use AI to Plan Its Next Attack,” Newsweek, September 19, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-ai-terrorism-al-qaeda-attack-2132143>
- 4 Caroline Rose and Colin P. Clarke, “The Return of ISIS,” Foreign Affairs, September 18, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/return-isis?check_logged_in=1
- 5 John Sunday Ojo, “Techno-Caliphate or Terror from the Sky? ISWAP and Drone-Enabled Insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin Region,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, July 7, 2025, <https://gnet-research.org/2025/07/07/techno-caliphate-or-terror-from-the-sky-iswap-and-drone-enabled-insurgency-in-the-lake-chad-basin-region/>
- 6 Nicolas Stockhammer, “From TikTok to Terrorism? The Online Radicalization of European Lone Attackers since October 7, 2023,” CTC Sentinel 18, Iss.7, July 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-tiktok-to-terrorism-the-online-radicalization-of-european-lone-attackers-since-october-7-2023/>
- 7 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Jama’at Nusrat Al-Islam Wal-Muslimin (JNIM),” n.d., https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/jnim.html
- 8 Vision of Humanity, “Global Terrorism Index,” n.d., <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>
- 9 Colin Clarke, “The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa’ida and its Affiliates,” CTC Sentinel 13, Iss.3, March 2020, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/pensacola-terrorist-attack-enduring-influence-al-qaida-affiliates/>
- 10 United Nations Security Council, “Thirty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” February 6, 2025, 10.
- 11 Kris Inman, “Trump Administration Cuts to Terrorism Prevention Departments Could Leave Americans Exposed,” The Conversation, August 10, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/trump-administration-cuts-to-terrorism-prevention-departments-could-leave-americans-exposed-261630>
- 12 “Antisemitic and Anti-Israeli Attacks Rise Since October 7, 2023,” Reuters, October 2, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/antisemitic-anti-israeli-attacks-around-world-since-october-7-2023-2025-10-02/>

Keeping Iran's Proxies on their Back Feet

MATTHEW LEVITT
MICHAEL JACOBSON

The day after the Hamas-led campaign of terror on October 7, 2023, Hezbollah began launching near daily rocket attacks targeting Israel. A year later, Israeli forces finally took the fight to the Shi'ite militia in Lebanon, and on September 27, 2024, a targeted Israeli airstrike on an underground Hezbollah command center killed Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and senior Iranian IRGC commander Abbas Nilforoushan. Their bodies were recovered intact, embracing one another, underscoring the deep, longstanding ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies.

Just two months earlier, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh had been killed by an explosive device planted in the IRGC guesthouse where he was staying in Tehran to attend the inauguration of Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian, highlighting Hamas' intimate ties to Iran even after the October 7th massacre. Yemen's Houthis also made their allegiance to Iran clear following the U.S. attack on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, warning of their "full solidarity with Iran and its right to respond and deter the arrogance of the American-Zionist aggression."¹

Then came the latest Israeli and U.S. strikes targeting Iran in March, which killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and many other senior Iranian leaders and commanders and extensively targeted the infrastructure of Iran's security establishment. Hezbollah decided to enter the fray, targeting Israel with rockets and drones once more, leading to a new wave of Israeli strikes against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and, for the first time, a Lebanese government decision outlawing all Hezbollah military and terrorist activity in the country.

Matthew Levitt is the director of The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and a former Deputy Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in the Institute's Reinhard Program, and former director of strategy, plans, and initiatives in the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau.

To be sure, Israel has inflicted major blows against Iran's assorted proxies over the past several years, with Hamas and Hezbollah suffering particularly serious setbacks. Iran, for its part, has made clear that rearming and rebuilding its so-called "Resistance Front" remains a high priority for the regime.

But accomplishing this feat is far more difficult for Tehran than it was in the past. The regime of Bashar al-Assad, a key pillar of Iran's proxy network, has been removed from power in Syria. A new government in Lebanon has begun clearing Hezbollah infrastructure and weapons from that country's south. Israel, meanwhile, has demonstrated increased determination to target Hezbollah violations of the ceasefire. On top of this, Iran is facing a litany of challenges at home, including economic and environmental crises that contributed to massive protests across the country against the regime in January 2026.

And yet, Iran is finding ways to circumvent these potential roadblocks. U.S. officials report that Iran provided Hezbollah some \$1 billion over the first ten months of 2025, and continues to provide significant funding to Hamas as well. Iran is also still finding ways to send weapons to Hezbollah and the Houthis, some of which (though certainly not all) have been seized or interdicted. Moreover, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis all have their own independent fundraising, procurement and logistical networks around the world which can fill some of the gaps.

Iran's proxy network, in other words, may be down, but it isn't out. While the outcome of the U.S. and Israeli war against Iran and the separate Israeli assault on Hezbollah is far from clear, we should not assume that these threats will be behind us when the conflict concludes. Identifying how both the Islamic Republic and its radical partners might adapt to whatever new circumstances they are facing is therefore of the utmost importance.

ENDURING IRANIAN SUPPORT...

From the outset of the Israeli retaliation, Iran has made clear that rebuilding the capabilities of its terrorist partners is a top regime priority. In May 2024, the heads of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its paramilitary arm, the Quds Force, met with Hamas and Hezbollah leaders in Iran, with the Iranian generals underlining the importance of a "continued struggle to be jointly fought from across the region by all resistance groups."²

In September 2024, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi reiterated this message on state television, underscoring that Tehran would provide "unlimited support" to its "Resistance Front."³ More recently, in November 2025, Araghchi told the country's parliament, the *majles*, that one of the Iranian Foreign Ministry's highest priorities is to support the "axis of resistance" and that his agency was "effectively functioning as the foreign ministry of the axis."⁴

Iran has been attempting to follow through on these public pledges of support, undaunted by its deepening economic crisis at home. In November 2025, the U.S. Treasury Department publicly reported that Iran had provided Hezbollah with approximately a billion dollars in the first ten months of the year.⁵ And while Hamas has always received far less than Hezbollah, Iran is still providing it with sizeable levels of funding. The U.S. government estimates that, since 2018, Iran has provided Hamas around \$100 million per

year, with that figure increasing to closer to \$120 million annually in the lead up to the October 7th attacks.⁶

Many of these Iranian funds – for Hezbollah, the Houthis, and sometimes for Hamas – have come from the sale of illicit oil. In round after round of designations, the U.S. Treasury Department has exposed and targeted Iranian and other elements of this international oil smuggling network, which facilitates oil trades and generates funds for both the IRGC Qods Force and Hezbollah.⁷

Not surprisingly, given President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ideological alignment with Hamas, Türkiye has emerged as a major hub for Hamas financial activity as well, both for Iranian funding and for money coming from other sources.⁸ In December 2025, the Israeli government revealed a network of money exchange houses operating in Türkiye staffed by Hamas members from Gaza and designed to facilitate the transfer of Iranian funding to the terrorist group. The Israelis alleged that this large-scale funding enterprise was in the “hundreds of millions of dollars.” Perhaps more unexpected have been the reports that Hezbollah was also using Türkiye as a transit hub for its financial activity.⁹

Iran remains equally committed to rebuilding the military capacity of its proxies and partners. The Islamic Republic is known to still be sending weapons to Hezbollah to help it reconstitute its badly damaged military capabilities.¹⁰ Iran also continues to arm the Houthis, regularly sending a broad range of drones, missiles, among other sophisticated weapons systems, to the Yemeni group.

...BUT NEW CHALLENGES

Yet, while bolstering its proxies and partners may be a priority for the Iranian regime, doing so is a far more challenging proposition than in the past. Historically, Iran provided weapons and funding to Hezbollah either via direct flights to Beirut or overland through Syria. There are now significant obstacles to utilizing either of these routes.

For instance, the Lebanese government has taken previously inconceivable steps, including preventing Iranian aircraft from landing in Beirut, searching Iranian couriers on arrival, and banning Lebanese banks and brokerages from working with several financial institutions tied to Hezbollah.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that Hezbollah's financial and military needs are also far more significant than in the past. On the military front, the Israeli Defense Forces estimates that it has destroyed some 80 percent of Hezbollah's arsenal of short-range rockets.¹¹

Civilian rebuilding costs are also estimated to be in the billions, and Hezbollah's constituency in Lebanon's Shi'a south is looking to the group for continued support for reconstruction and social services. Hezbollah has struggled to meet these increased financial needs, failing to cover promised reconstruction grants, salaries, and stipends for the families of killed and wounded fighters.

With regard to Hamas, while Iran remains able to provide funding to the terrorist group outside of Gaza without great difficulty, the movement itself has struggled at times to bring these resources into the Strip—particularly since financial institutions in the territories are now “non-functional.”¹² Iran-Hamas ties were also set back by Israel's June 2025

killing of Muhammad Saeed Izadi, the commander of the Palestine branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Izadi had served as the senior liaison between Iran and Hamas and was responsible for Iranian financial and military support for the group.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and international community have stepped up their interdiction efforts against vessels supplying arms to the Houthis. Thus, in late 2024, U.S. Central Command announced that forces loyal to the Yemeni government had seized a ship in the Red Sea with 750 tons of Iranian military equipment being shipped to the Houthis.¹³ According to the U.S. military, this ranked as the largest weapons seizure in the history of the Yemeni National Resistance Forces. Additionally, many of the Yemeni banks that once operated in North Yemen have moved their headquarters to the government-controlled capital in the south, making it more difficult for the Houthis to transfer funding from outside the country.

There are also looming domestic challenges to Iran's continued funding of its proxies. One of the notable grievances of protestors during the recent unrest in Iran was the Islamic Republic's continued funding of Hamas and Hezbollah. The decision to prioritize funding foreign militant groups rather than addressing basic domestic economic problems led protestors to chant "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran."¹⁴ As Iran grapples with ongoing domestic discontent, it may face internal challenges to funding its proxies to the extent it had in the past.

Despite these obstacles, however, Iran is aggressively and creatively seeking solutions. For example, instead of sending the majority of its weapons and funding resupply for Hezbollah overland through Syria, it is now increasingly relying on maritime routes for such shipments.¹⁵ Additionally, as the Lebanese government cracked down on financial transactions and activity with an obvious Iranian link, Iran began instead leveraging money exchange houses and other businesses in Dubai to send hundreds of millions of dollars to Hezbollah.¹⁶

And although the new Syrian government is certainly attempting to intercept Iranian weapons transiting the country, its capabilities are still limited – something the Iranians are aiming to exploit. Iranian weapons smuggling has always thrived in places where state control has been weak, as it is in Syria today. With the Houthis, meanwhile, Iran has employed a range of techniques to avoid detection, including disguising the provenance of vessels carrying arms and skirting mandatory inspections. As for Hamas, while getting it weapons is certainly more difficult in the current environment, history suggests that Iran could do so again if the group remains in control of even just part of Gaza.

INDEPENDENT SOURCES AND METHODS

What's more, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis all have their own extensive global procurement and financial networks – capabilities that allow them to address gaps in Iranian sponsorship on their own. As such, cracking down on Iranian support ranks as a critical step to mitigate these threats, but by itself it is not a sufficient one.

When it was short on funds in the past, Hezbollah relied on its own global networks in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas to supplement Iranian funding. The trend began in



earnest after Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, when the group faced similar rebuilding and reconstruction challenges. These networks expanded further when Iran itself faced financial difficulties in 2009 from the combined impact of the "Green Revolution," new Western sanctions, and a drop in global oil prices. Thereafter, Hezbollah again tapped its global networks when its entry into the Syrian civil war further strained its budget.

This time around, Hezbollah seems to have already turned to Africa and South America – both places where it has long had a significant presence – in order to raise funds. Thus, an October 2024 alert by the U.S. Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network warned financial institutions that Hezbollah was active in West Africa, where it had a "network of financiers" raising and laundering money on the organization's behalf.¹⁷ More recently, in May 2025, the U.S. State Department issued a Rewards for Justice notice seeking information on Hezbollah's financial mechanisms in the tri-border area where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet.¹⁸ The notice laid out that Hezbollah financiers and facilitators operate there (and in other parts of South America) generating revenue from narcotics trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, and smuggling.

Hezbollah is also seeking to use its procurement networks and front companies around the world to acquire military and dual-use technologies. In 2024, for example, Britain, Germany, and Spain disrupted a major Hezbollah operation to obtain components for suicide drones that could carry explosives.¹⁹ According to the U.S. Justice Department, Hezbollah has also procured precursor chemicals suitable for making bombs from a medical device company in Guangzhou, China, as part of its attack planning in Cyprus, Thailand, and elsewhere.²⁰

Then there is Hamas. While the Palestinian movement has raised funds around the world for decades, its overseas financial solicitations increased after its October 7th assault on Israel. Just three days after the terrible 2023 attack, Hamas leader Khaled Mishal called

on supporters to give “aid, money, and all that you have” in what he called an act of “financial jihad.”²¹ Hamas fundraisers responded in force; within days, the group had launched several new fundraising campaigns, primarily under the guise of alleviating the genuine humanitarian suffering in Gaza. Europe has been a particularly active hotbed of Hamas’s post-October 7th fundraising—hardly a surprise given the group’s long-standing ties and networks there.²²

The Houthis also have their own extensive international connections and reach. The group, for instance, has developed particularly strong ties in China, where it has obtained a broad range of cutting edge and dual use technology. As the Treasury Department has noted, the Houthis “leverage a global network of shipping and logistics companies to transport military-grade components from commercial suppliers to their terrorist forces in Yemen.”²³ This materiel has been essential to their efforts to target commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and disrupt the freedom of navigation in the region.

ADAPT TO SURVIVE

There are several ways in which Tehran may seek to preserve some level of operational capability among its proxies. Such efforts could also help account for Iran’s own domestic financial and political instability, and the likelihood that international actors will increase efforts to disrupt large-scale Iranian efforts to fund and arm its proxies.

One is the increased efforts to develop proxy capabilities in drones and other unmanned systems. The use of surveillance and attack drones by Iran and its proxies has already become ubiquitous. In an era of scarcity, previous successful deployments may portend a growing interest in drone warfare.

Additionally, drone components are more easily procured and smuggled than large, big-ticket weapons systems like precision guided missiles – and the technology lends itself to domestic production, creating a level of autonomy that is highly desirable among threat actors. As such, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis are all likely to invest heavily in smuggling drones and drone components and building out their domestic drone production capabilities to field assets for conflicts and operations to come.

A second potential trend is a propensity for joint operations. At a time when Iranian proxies find their military capabilities significantly degraded, they may decide that, by acting together, they are stronger than the sum of their parts – especially if they carry out reasonably deniable attacks abroad. In the near to medium term, Iran’s proxies will likely prefer not to carry out attacks from Gaza, Lebanon or Yemen, for fear of inviting still fiercer Israeli responses. But they nonetheless all have significant interest in continuing to carry out foreign operations. One way they might be able to continue to do so is through activities carried out under the umbrella of the Qods Force’s unit 3900, a joint unit under the Qods Forces through which Hezbollah and Hamas operatives work with their Iranian counterparts.

A third potential trend is an emphasis on small arms. As its traditional proxy and partner groups work to resuscitate themselves, Iran is likely to double down on a tactic it initiated in the years leading up to October 7th: to try to flood the West Bank (and today also Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) with small arms in an effort to promote instability and create opportunities for its proxies to operate more freely within a wider, lawless environment. As one former Israeli official has put it, "Iran is really, really focused on trying to create another front... because they're having less success in Lebanon and Gaza."²⁴ Indeed, an ongoing study by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies has found that a growing number of Palestinian rejectionist groups have become recipients of Iranian small arms as part of this emphasis.²⁵

MORE ACTION NEEDED

The U.S. and allied governments have already taken a number of steps to prevent Iran from continuing to arm and fund its terrorist proxies and partners. However, much more still needs to be done to address the global terrorist, procurement and fundraising networks of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis.

As a first step, if they haven't already, all countries should designate or ban all three, and then use the enforcement tools that flow from those designations to crack down on any associated activity on their soil. Such a step matters, because when terrorists plot and execute attacks, countries don't need an official designation to apply relevant criminal charges. However, that is not the case when it comes to illicit fundraising, money transfers, procurement schemes, or other logistical support activities. Indeed, studies have found a direct correlation between such designation and a decline in a given group's activities.²⁶ And while many countries, particularly in Europe, the Middle East, and South and Central America, have already designated Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, far fewer have attached this label to the Houthis.

Other measures should be taken as well. Efforts like increased intelligence sharing among partner nations, heightened examination of alternative financial flows (like cryptocurrency) and stepped-up American assistance to allied governments can all help to better disrupt the activities of Iran's proxy network.

The stakes are enormous. The Middle East is currently at a major inflection point. Iran and its primary terrorist partners have been significantly weakened, and the war underway as of this writing between the U.S., Israel and Iran is likely to take a further toll on the regime in Tehran. Even if the regime survives, it will likely be under enormous financial strain and have fewer resources in the short-term to dedicate to its terrorist partners, requiring them to ratchet up their own independent fundraising and weapons procurement and development.

The bottom line is that there are now opportunities for counterterrorism progress that haven't been present for decades. But positive momentum is far from guaranteed. It will require a concerted, multinational effort to ensure that Iran and its still-dangerous network don't regain their former ability to menace the region.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bridget Toomey, "Houthis repeat threats against US over strikes against Iran," Long War Journal, June 22, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/06/houthis-repeat-threats-against-us-over-strikes-against-iran.php>.
- 2 "In Tehran, resistance officials vow struggle until 'complete victory,'" Press TV, May 24, 2024, <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/05/24/726108/Iran-Tehran-resistance-officials-meeting-IRGC-commanders?ht-comment-id=14837964>.
- 3 "New Iranian FM pledges 'unlimited' support for regional terrorism," JNS.org, September 17, 2024, <https://www.jns.org/new-iranian-fm-pledges-unlimited-support-for-regional-terrorism/>.
- 4 "Iranian foreign minister doubles down on strengthening 'axis of resistance,'" Iran International, November 10, 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202511102551>.
- 5 "US official: Iran funneled some \$1 billion to Hezbollah this year, despite sanctions," Times of Israel, November 9, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-official-iran-funneled-some-1-billion-to-hezbollah-this-year-despite-sanctions/>.
- 6 U.S. Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, "FinCEN Advisory to Financial Institutions to Counter the Financing of Iran-Backed Terrorist Organizations," May 8, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/system/files/advisory/2024-05-07/FinCEN-Advisory-Iran-Backed-TF-508C.pdf>; Andres Mourenza, Hamas Ltd: The financial muscle of the Palestinian Islamist militia," El Pais, January 9, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-01-09/hamas-ltd-the-financial-muscle-of-the-palestinian-islamist-militia.html>.
- 7 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Oil Shipping Network Supporting IRGC-QF and Hezbollah," November 3, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1076>.
- 8 Sinan Ciddi, "IDF reveals Hamas financial network operating in Turkey," Long War Journal, December 8, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/12/idf-reveals-hamas-financial-network-operating-in-turkey.php>.
- 9 Abdullah Bozkurt, "Turkey accused of financing Hezbollah's resurgence in Lebanon, sending planes loaded with cash," Nordic Monitor, May 5, 2025, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2025/05/turkey-accused-of-financing-hezbollahs-resurgence-in-lebanon-sending-cash-loaded-planes/>.
- 10 Benoit Faucon and Adam Chamseddine, "Iran is Moving to Rearm Its Militia Allies," Wall Street Journal, July 17, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-militia-allies-houthis-hezbollah-a36d7de7?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWEtsqft81pOrEAP_hYqJr187GPWg5ZW XmPMcN M2dIvOgZGxCK83 Q8lCIUa4&gaa_ts=696faec7&gaa_sig=Rk7c2sru3ghGK Vg47i2Fjd-0qTPBrX8OKFSVUCPcKSYgSOHjJxE KakISAg1zLO0zSdTqcd rXHXUIF-Sktlt3Q%3D%3D.
- 11 Amir Bohbot, "IDF reveals Hezbollah missile arsenal severely depleted since beginning of operations," Jerusalem Post, November 10, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-828349>.
- 12 Yoav Zitun, "Israel says Hamas moving tens of millions to military wing despite war," Yediot Ahronot, December 24, 2025, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/sjxooft711e>.
- 13 U.S. Central Command, "Press Release: Yemeni Partners Successfully Interdict Massive Iranian Weapons Shipment Bound for the Houthis," July 16, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4246960/yemeni-partners-successfully-interdict-massive-iranian-weapons-shipment-bound-f/>.
- 14 See, for instance, "Iran's protests: What we know," France24, February 1, 2026, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20260102-iran-s-protests-what-we-know>.

KEEPING IRAN'S PROXIES ON THEIR BACK FEET

- 15 Lior Ben Ari, "Report: Hezbollah using sea routes to smuggle weapons following Assad regime's fall," Yediot Ahronot, April 8, 2025, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/sjnx6vmryl>.
- 16 Dov Lieber, "Iranian Funds for Hezbollah Are Flowing Through Dubai," Wall Street Journal, November 27, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iranian-funds-for-hezbollah-are-flowing-through-dubai-85785a77?mod=middle-east_news_article_pos1.
- 17 U.S. Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, "FinCEN Advisory to Financial Institutions to Counter Financing of Hizballah and its Terrorist Activities," October 23, 2024, <https://www.fincen.gov/system/files/shared/FinCEN-Alert-Hizballah-Alert-508C.pdf>.
- 18 U.S. Department of State, "Rewards for Justice – Reward Offer for Information on Hizballah Financial Networks in the Tri-Border Area," May 19, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/rewards-for-justice-reward-offer-for-information-on-hizballah-financial-networks-in-the-tri-border-area>.
- 19 Stav Levaton, "Hezbollah-linked drone smuggling ring uncovered in Europe – report," Times of Israel, April 14, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-linked-drone-smuggling-ring-uncovered-in-europe-report/>.
- 20 "Ali Kourani Travels to Guangzhou," Washington Institute Interactive Map of "Lebanese Hezbollah: Select Worldwide Activity," n.d., <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=418>.
- 21 Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, "Seeking cash, Hamas turns to allies experienced in 'financial jihad,'" Washington Post, January 12, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/01/12/al-qaeda-hamas-gaza-money-cash/>.
- 22 Israeli Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, "Hamas and the PFLP Terror Groups Affiliated Activists in Europe," September 2024, https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/hamas_and_pflt_terror_groups_affiliated_activists_in_europe_sep_24/en/Research_Reports_Hamas%20and%20the%20PFLP%20Terror%20Groups%20Affiliated%20Activists%20in%20Europe_Sep%2024.pdf.
- 23 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Houthi Illicit Revenue and Procurement Networks," September 11, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0243>.
- 24 Adam Kredó, "Iran Smuggling Advanced Weaponry to Growing Terrorist Proxy Network in West Bank," Washington Free Beacon, November 11, 2025, <https://freebeacon.com/israel/iran-smuggling-advanced-weaponry-to-growing-terrorist-proxy-network-in-west-bank/>.
- 25 Joe Truzman, "Profiles of 28 Iran-Backed Terrorist Groups and Branches in the West Bank," Long War Journal, n.d., <https://www.longwarjournal.org/westbankterrorgroups>.
- 26 Marzia Giambertoni, "Hezbollah Networks in Latin America: Potential Implications for U.S. Policy and Research," RAND Expert Insights, March 2025, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA3500/PEA3585-1/RAND_PEA3585-1.pdf.

LEARN HOW TO WIN WITHOUT WAR

EARN YOUR GRADUATE DEGREE



IWP | Institute of
World Politics
GRADUATE SCHOOL

The “War of Ideas” to Come

ALBERTO M. FERNANDEZ

To a great extent, we rely on learned experience. That can be as true for nation states as it is for individuals. That is why, when conflict comes, states often find themselves succumbing to the temptation of “fighting the last war.” The questions of fighting the last war, and of anticipating the next one, are salient when it comes to the what was once called the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) – the George W. Bush-era shorthand for the war fought by the United States and its allies against global Salafi- *jihadism*, most prominently al-Qaeda and its offspring, the Islamic State (ISIS).

September 2026 will mark a quarter-century since the terrible attacks of September 11, 2001, not to mention almost forty years since the founding of al-Qaeda and nearly a century since the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, it is an appropriate time not only to take stock of the past but also to look ahead, at the “war of ideas” to come in the Middle East.

THE RECENT STATE OF PLAY

In terms of concrete results against Salafi- *jihadists* in the Middle East, the overall record is positive. The past two decades have seen the decimation of most of the leadership of both of the world’s most notorious *jihadist* actors, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. And after a brief, brutal rule, the latter’s self-declared *caliphate* in eastern Syria and western Iraq was demolished by the United States in concert with local allies on the ground. Over the past decades, *jihadists* also lost ground in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Political Islam likewise took a beating in several countries in the region, many of them through a surprising dynamic: victory at the ballot box, but failure in governance. Indeed, across the region, Islamist political parties faltered after experiencing difficulties in actually

Ambassador Alberto M. Fernandez is Vice President of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and a retired career Senior Foreign Service Officer. He was also President of Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), the US Government-funded Arabic language media corporation, from 2017 to 2020.



ruling. In places like Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, Islamists were in power – and then they were not.

Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took a different course. Under the guidance of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it became a beacon for Arabic-language Islamist propaganda aimed at overthrowing regimes in Egypt and elsewhere.¹ But over time, pressure built on it to reverse course. The propaganda offensive from Istanbul diminished or was shut down, as Islamist Turkey decided that improving relations with onetime adversaries in Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh was more important than being seen as openly promoting Islamist revolutionary subversion.

Meanwhile, military defeat, technical advances and social media censorship and policing greatly diminished the presence and scope of jihadist propaganda on major Western platforms. *Jihad* as an idea was never defeated, though. It was merely expunged from social media. The heyday of 2013-2014, when Islamic State “media knights” had tens of thousands of followers on Twitter and Facebook and daily posted the group’s latest snuff videos, are long gone. The old incendiary content still exists, including troves of the group’s “greatest hits” on the dark web. But it is harder for ordinary people, for casual or curious bystanders, to access easily. Those that do find it, even in the West, can still be radicalized by content depicting a ten-year-old reality which no longer exists.

But while American allies in the region did and still do engage in the propaganda war against Salafi-*jihadism*, one cannot say that it was a full-blown “war of ideas.” It was more tactical, opportunistic immediate propaganda than strategic messaging – that *jihadist* terror killed mostly Muslims, that it was counterproductive, and that it defamed all Muslims in the eyes of the world. It was more about reacting to the latest event and blunting the

THE “WAR OF IDEAS” TO COME

immediate appeal of the adversary than presenting a full-fledged political, ideological or religious alternative, something the West can't do and most Muslim states really won't.

Thus Salafi- *jihadism* was hurt in the public sphere in the Middle East mostly because it lost on the battlefield. It is hard to claim the mandate of heaven when you progressively lose not only Mosul and Raqqa, but the entirety of your statelet. So, while insurgent action by ISIS in the Middle East continues and even spikes, including in Syria and Iraq, it has been difficult for the group so far to match the panoply of spectacular acts from twelve years ago. Yet, although diminished, the Islamic State still seeks to make the big statement – and it occasionally succeeds in doing so, as in Iran (Kerman, January 2024), Russia (Crocus City Hall, March 2024) and Australia (Bondi Beach, December 2025). And globally, we see *jihadist* terror everywhere, but the most rapid growth is limited to some specific areas, particularly the African Sahel.

The authoritative IEP Global Terrorism Index for 2025 graphically illustrated the shift.² Of the ten countries most affected by terrorism, six were African (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Cameroon). Two were the traditional hotspots of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Only two were in the traditional Middle East: Syria and Israel. Syria is, of course, undergoing a major transformation, and the extremist terror against Israel is Palestinian terror, a brand going back many decades and, while often religiously based, one that also has deep nationalist “national liberation” roots grounded in the rhetoric of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle.

Indeed, despite the ongoing war between Israel and its adversaries, 2024 actually saw a 7% reduction in terrorist attacks in the Middle East.³ In terms of sheer carnage, of course, nothing in recent years has matched the terror campaign carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023. That attack, and the war it touched off, has certainly caused turmoil in the Middle East. But its more lasting political impact will probably be in the West, among Americans and Europeans, rather than among Middle Easterners.

In the Middle East, positions for or against Israel are pretty well set, the fissures within societies and policy stances of regimes well known. The fact that the Gaza War was quickly subsumed into a larger conflict between Israel, Iran and Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere fed into pre-existing concerns among the region's majority Sunni Muslim population about Iranian and Shi'a ambitions in the region. This is an issue of greater concern among many Arab Muslims than it is to the average American or European rioting for Gaza on their university campus.

This is not to say that Israel or Palestinian nationalism aren't issues in the Middle East – they certainly are. But they are nothing new, and regional governments have dealt with them for decades. While “Free Palestine” revolutionary activists in the West, with the zeal of converts, immediately denounced the October 2025 “Trump Plan” on Gaza, the same proposal was accepted by the governments in Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia and even Hamas-supporting Turkey and Qatar.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

These and other developments (such as the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the current travails of Iran's proxy network) have led the United States to “right-size” the

THE “WAR OF IDEAS” TO COME

Middle East in its strategic planning. The Trump administration’s new *National Security Strategy*, released in December of 2025, underscores this shift.⁴ Its first mention of the Middle East is not in the context of extremism or terrorism, but with regard to preventing “an adversarial power from dominating the Middle East, its oil and gas supplies, and the chokepoints through which they pass while avoiding the ‘forever wars’ that bogged us down in that region at great cost.”

The Trump NSS does a good job outlining the challenges of a changing world and how America will address them. The emphasis on hemispheric security (the so-called “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine) and the Indo-Pacific (in other words, China) mean that the broader Middle East will necessarily be downgraded. In American eyes, the region will not be unimportant, of course. But the document makes clear that it will not be a place where the United States is prepared to wage a “war of ideas” with a retrograde or reactionary Islam.

But if Washington isn’t, then who is? Despite the perception of perpetual turmoil, the Middle East – particularly the Arab Middle East – remains the same region with the same problems that it had when it gave birth to the Muslim Brotherhood, to the rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and to the development of the *Velayat e-Faqih* in Iran. The political and socio-economic “building blocks” that created that extremist world are still in place – authoritarianism, poor governance, persistent youth unemployment (historically, the highest in the world as a region), disinformation and incitement (including by regimes), and the weaponization of Islam as a tool (including by authoritarian regimes themselves).

But while much in the region remains the same, the world – the global landscape – is changing in ways that we do not yet fully understand. You might call them the Four Horsemen of the New Apocalypse, beginning in the West and spreading uncertainly elsewhere:

- The burgeoning technological revolution, from artificial intelligence (AI) to robotics and beyond, which is accelerating and promises to radically up-end, if not entirely eliminate, the contemporary workplace within a decade.
- The remorseless rise of global public debt, which – while also threatening developing countries – represents a massive economic threat to the West, including the United States, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Runaway public debt is also a risk factor in regional states like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia.
- Connected to both tech and economics, an unprecedented social revolution is also unfolding before us: the so-called “birth dearth” which has hit the West and East Asia particularly hard, but which represents a global phenomenon.
- At the same time, a political revolution is unfolding as well, as the old Western confidence about the triumph of liberal democracy and free market capitalism seems increasingly irrelevant in the face of rising populist anger from both the political right and left.

How and if these trends will affect the Middle East and the region’s ideological discourse is not yet known. In some of these trends, the region is an outlier – for instance, the Middle East birth dearth is predicted to come later than it did in the West, while liberal democracy never really took hold and has long been discredited (something that both authoritarian regimes and Islamist revolutionaries can agree upon). Arab populations are still considerably younger than those in the West. Looming Western problems like “elite overproduction” and imploding governance leading to extreme inequality hit the Arab Middle East long ago. They are, in a sense, a political bomb which has already exploded but the lasting effects of which are still being felt.

Yet despite the uncertainty about the impact of broader global trends, we can nevertheless trace the future Middle East ideological battlefield with some clarity, based on certain given realities.

The Middle East’s authoritarian regimes will remain more or less the same.

There is simply no liberal, western-style democratic alternative ready-made and waiting in the wings. Existing regimes will do all they can to survive and, depending on changing circumstances, either fight Islamism or use elements of it to bolster their hold on power. The Egypt of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, where the Muslim Brotherhood is demonized and persecuted while Salafism flourishes, is one model. An older example would be the Jaafar al-Nimeiry regime in Sudan (1969-1985), which began as a nationalist/leftist regime and ended as an Islamist one. Indeed, an appeal to Islam, to the legitimizing power of posing as authentic guardians of the faith, is a tool that almost all Arab Muslim regimes will utilize if circumstances warrant.

With the exception of non-Muslim Israel, every regime stretching from Morocco to Pakistan is authoritarian. Some are freer than others; they may have more press freedom or allow opposition parties, and those parties may sometimes even win local elections. But at bottom, these regimes are more alike than they are dissimilar. Most survived intact the upheaval of the Arab Spring, and those that did not and actually fell (Tunisia, Libya and Egypt among them) were in relatively short order replaced by *other* authoritarian regimes. There is no future guarantee that the current regimes will survive intact, but the idea that they will radically change into something very different in terms of governance is unlikely.

That is not to say that the nature or style of the authoritarianism itself won’t change. It certainly can. One can say that the authoritarianism of dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh was “less bad” than the Houthi rule we see today in Yemen, or that the authoritarianism of Ahmed al-Sharaa in Syria today might turn out to be a considerable improvement over the rule of the Assad regime. We will need to wait and see.

Political or Salafi-jihadist Islam will remain the default language of revolution.

Islam as the voice of rebellion, as the call of the oppressed and poor, will remain a powerful weapon. Since existing states also know this, they will seek to misdirect and appropriate it for the sake of regime survival. This leads to a kind of political one-upsmanship by both regimes and rebels, where each seeks to outdo the other and prove the authenticity of their political-religious *bona fides*. This is why many ostensibly anti-Islamist authoritarian regimes, like Egypt, will zealously police public morality; it is a way to show that they are “enjoining good and forbidding wrong,” as the Qur’an commands.

Such a reality also means that well-intentioned attempts at “reforming” Islam by watering down what to Westerners are radical or extreme elements are bound to be difficult – albeit not impossible. Indeed, there is a long record of attempts at internal reform by Muslims throughout Islamic history. Islam is no monolith, although to outsiders it may seem that way. The 20th century saw reformers like Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Ridah, and Mahmud Muhammad Taha (Taha was killed as an apostate for his reform efforts).⁵ But the concept of Islamic reformers doesn’t only mean “liberals.” One can make the case that extremists like Muhammad Abdul Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb also represented a type of reformer, seeking to reform the *status quo* and move the religion toward a more rigorous, militant direction.

Efforts at religious reform often came from above, from authoritarians in power, such as Ataturk in Turkey, Amanullah II in Afghanistan, or Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia. The subsequent Islamic history of all three countries shows that their reform efforts didn’t stick. In our era, we have seen more recent efforts at reform from above by the UAE (the “Abrahamic Family House” and the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration) and by Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman.

The rise of Islamism and sectarian conflict in the West will be a wild card. High levels of migration, conversion, economic crisis, and political realignment in Europe and North America could ignite levels of societal conflict in the West not seen for more than fifty years. The result could be a violent iteration of today’s so-called Red-Green Alliance of migrants, Islamists and leftists pitted against local nativist nationalists. In turn, the rise of Western Islamism could lead to new levels of cross-fertilization, as these “Westernized” forms of Islamism head back to the Middle East. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed’s famous 2017 warning that in the future there would be more radical extremists and terrorists coming out of Europe than from the Middle East will not only turn out to be true, but will not even be the whole story.⁶ The subversion and infiltration that authoritarian Middle East regimes won’t allow the Muslim Brotherhood to do back home, the organization and its proxies and fronts will do in the West – even if it is banned in Europe and North America.

Westernized Islamism could include new variations repackaged for Middle Eastern audiences primed for change. In 2025, for example, we have already seen a raft of so-called “Islamotubers” preaching a Western-oriented type of Salafism in Western languages to European audiences.⁷ Information and ideological flows will move in both directions. And it won’t be hard to do so, since over 70% of people in the Arab World are internet users, while in the Gulf that figure is 99%.⁸

As far as the West is concerned, the “Islamic Moment” is only just arriving, and it will have far-reaching ramifications that we cannot yet foresee. Current migration patterns alone, particularly in some European countries, will lead to the growth of Muslim political clout in the West, and become an inevitably destabilizing feature. Some Christian scholars

believe that the West, however you define it, can only survive if it has a dominant spiritual core moving forward. And they believe that there are only two real candidates for such an organizing principle – either the revival of Western Christianity or the rise of Islam in the West.⁹

The emergence of a somewhat “domesticated” model of Islamist governance seems likely. This is even more likely if HTS-ruled Syria “succeeds” with the help of Islamist Turkey and Qatar, while Afghanistan under the Taliban remains more or less intact. A third example of this model could emerge in the near future in Africa, where the al-Qaeda aligned JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) may succeed in establishing its own state in the Sahel and seems to be willing to politically distance itself from its extremist connection.

At the same time, ideological regimes have their own set lifespan. They run down and are discredited over time. If the rise of new-style Sunni Islamist regimes might attract new followers in the future, others may wane in popularity. For instance, the Shi’a Islamist regime in Iran, now almost fifty years in power, looks ideologically spent even if its coercive powers could keep it in place for years to come.

Western (i.e., American) counterterrorism will focus on kinetic strikes against jihadists and transactional engagement with willing Islamist interlocutors. The Trump administration, either by design or by chance, has hit on the minimalist sweet spot of counterterrorism. There are those in the Islamist constellation who will have to be killed, and others who will necessitate engagement. Post-Assad Syria provides one template in this regard. Transactional diplomacy based on perceptions of national interests, not ideology, will be the order of the day.

A third pillar, not directed principally at the Middle East but at home, should be law enforcement and bureaucratic action aimed at dismantling subversive Muslim Brotherhood-aligned support networks in the West, including non-governmental organizations, media outlets and businesses. This is an urgent need, especially in Western Europe. But it is not at all clear, despite recent encouraging pronouncements by the current Administration,¹⁰ that Western countries have both the political will and the long-term patience to implement such measures.

WHOSE WAR, AND WHOSE IDEAS?

With the United States firmly set on disengagement from the region, Europe supine and authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes still seemingly firmly in charge, one might think that a war of ideas will be irrelevant. Not at all. The intellectual and ideological ferment of a faith held by more than two billion souls will continue. But the role of Western states, as states or as propagandists or influencers, will be marginal at best. There are many Islamists working hard to bring about the fulfillment of their agendas in both east and west, but they don’t all agree as to the best way to do so.

In Syria, the ruling Islamist government finds itself fighting its one-time masters turned bitter rivals in the Islamic State. In the African Sahel, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State fight each other. Sunni Islamists oppose Shi’a Islamists, except when they don’t, as Iran’s support for al-Qaeda’s leadership (still based in Iran) and Sunni Islamists in Gaza amply

THE “WAR OF IDEAS” TO COME

demonstrates. Some Islamists and *jihadists* seek to follow or restore the well-worn paths of the Muslim Brotherhood or al-Qaeda or the Islamic State and some, like the influential Qatar-backed Libyan radical Ali al-Sallabi, seek to come up with a powerful new synthesis in order to gain power.

The most effective thing the West can do in this struggle has nothing to do with Arabs or with Islam. Rather, it is to put its own ideological and intellectual house in order. Today, it is hard to say what the West actually stands for or believes in. Liberal internationalism seems ragged and exhausted. America seems more self-assured than Europe and Canada, but that is only a matter of degree. Where is the “civilizational self-confidence and Western identity” that the 2025 Trump National Security Strategy refers to?

These are hard questions. In an era of accelerating technological and economic change, what precisely do we stand for? Public diplomacy tools and strategies are mostly useless if they are not at least tenuously connected to an attractive and compelling core narrative nested in reality. The authenticity and genuineness of the real world will still matter in an age of digital trickery.

Going forward, whoever can convincingly model that sincerity and conviction – whether *jihadist*, communist or fascist – will hold a powerful weapon in a world where the fake seems to dominate. There will be the world of the distracted and the world of those searching for meaning, and this will be the new war of ideas. And in this culture clash, all too often we focus on the latest shiny new propaganda tool while missing that we lack a real message. Quite simply, we have nothing meaningful to say at the moment.

That is a fatal shortcoming. You can’t fight for something or defend yourself if you stand for or believe in nothing. Much of the West seems to have lost confidence in itself, and most of its old symbols have been hollowed out by those who should have defended them. At the end of the day, a flourishing West is the most powerful tool we can have at our disposal in the war of ideas to come.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alberto M. Fernandez, “The Arabic Propaganda War From Istanbul,” MEMRI, July 17, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/arabic-propaganda-war-istanbul>.
- 2 Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2025,” 2025, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.
- 5 George Packer, “The Moderate Martyr,” New Yorker, September 4, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-moderate-martyr>.
- 6 Sapir Benjamin and Daniel Edelson, “Arab leader’s prescient warning gains renewed attention amid US campus turmoil,” Yediot Ahronot, April 29, 2024, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/hy5dtth11r>.
- 7 Alberto M. Fernandez, “Objective Al-Andalus: The ‘Islamotuber’ Campaign in Spain,” MEMRI, December 9, 2025, <https://www.memri.org/reports/objective-al-andalus-islamotuber-campaign-spain>.
- 8 Arun Shankar, “Internet penetration reaches 70% in the Arab world finds Orient Planet Research,” Intelligent CIO, April 19, 2025, <https://www.intelligentcio.com/me/2025/04/19/internet-penetration-reaches-70-in-the-arab-world-finds-orient-planet-research/>.
- 9 “The West’s Ideological Future: Islam, Christianity, and Wokeism,” Jerusalem and Athens, September 23, 2024, <https://jerusalematahens.com/2024/09/23/the-west-ideological-future-islam-christianity-and-wokism/>.
- 10 Jeff Breinholt, “The Muslim Brotherhood and the Limits of Terrorist Designations,” War on the Rocks, December 23, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/12/the-muslim-brotherhood-and-the-limits-of-terrorist-designations/>.



GREAT POWER PODCAST

WITH HOST ILAN BERMAN

LISTEN ON



DISINFORMATION WARS

WITH HOST ILAN BERMAN

LISTEN ON



AI and the Future of Counterterrorism

BY PRIYANK MATHUR

At 3:30 AM on a muggy October night in Mindanao, Philippines, Faizal (not his real name) awoke to the familiar sound of his own screams. Haunted by nightmares ever since he returned from Syria one year ago, the former ISIS fighter was palpitating, overcome with a sudden wave of guilt. Reaching for his phone, Faizal’s fingers scrolled automatically to the WhatsApp profile of his former roommate in Raqqa, tempted to call him. But he scrolled a little further and typed out a two-word message to a contact named “Aldous” instead: “Help me.” He told Aldous he felt both guilty for abandoning his brothers in Raqqa and angry at them for ruining his life. He confessed to Aldous that he had recently thought about returning to Syria.

For the next 45 minutes, Aldous empathetically spoke to Faizal, ultimately convincing him that it was better to build a new life of peace here in Mindanao than return to his old life of violence. “Thank you, my friend.” Faizal messaged before going back to sleep. His friend Aldous wasn’t a person, however – “he” was a rehabilitation chatbot currently speaking not just with Faizal, but with 52 other former terrorists in the Southern Philippines and Indonesia.

Faizal’s story offers a preview of how artificial intelligence (AI) is beginning to transform counterterrorism. Much of the public discourse around AI and terrorism has rightly focused on mitigating threats: AI-generated propaganda, deepfakes, and the radicalization of vulnerable individuals by extremist chatbots. In a previous article, my co-authors and I explored how a 19-year-old British man named Jaswant Singh Chail was nudged toward an attempted assassination of Queen Elizabeth II by an AI chatbot he had created on the app Replika, exchanging over 5,000 messages with it in the weeks before the attack.¹ The threats are real, and they are growing.

Priyank Mathur is the Founder and CEO of Mythos Labs, an organization that uses AI and strategic communications to combat global security threats. Previously, he served as a Policy Advisor and Intelligence Officer in the Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and as Global Consulting Director at Ogilvy and Mather.

At the same time, however, AI is already demonstrating enormous potential to improve the efficacy and efficiency of counterterrorism efforts. Three opportunities in particular stand to reshape the future of counterterrorism: the AI-powered rehabilitation of former terrorists, “Physical AI” that powers robots capable of executing high-risk counterterrorism operations, and “World Models” that strengthen preparedness against future attacks.

AI-POWERED REHABILITATION

The challenge of rehabilitating former terrorists is one of the most consequential and least glamorous problems in counterterrorism. Thousands of former fighters from groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda have returned from or been repatriated to countries across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. Many do not meet the evidentiary threshold for criminal prosecution in their home countries and must be reintegrated into society. Potential recidivism among these returnees risks seeding the next wave of attacks. For the United States, which remains the primary target of many *jihadi* groups around the world, the failure to rehabilitate former fighters in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Tajikistan, or France is not a distant abstraction. It is an urgent and direct security concern.

But traditional rehabilitation programs face three common limitations related to scale, accessibility, and evaluation. Countries grappling with the return of thousands of former terrorists struggle to find enough qualified human practitioners to sufficiently counsel every individual. Human counsellors who work normal hours and carry heavy caseloads are also not always accessible. If a former fighter wakes up with PTSD at 3AM, it is unlikely their human counsellor will be available to chat, let alone be patient enough to engage in a one-and-a-half hour conversation with them. Traditional rehabilitation programs that rely solely on manual evaluations of participants also lack standardized, objective and unbiased metrics to track progress and risk levels associated with each former fighter. Relying on case notes that are subjective and inconsistent across different counselors risks producing an incomplete or misleading picture of an individual’s trajectory, making it harder to identify red flags.

AI-powered systems, though, can significantly strengthen a government’s rehabilitation efforts by offering almost limitless scale and accessibility as well as objective risk assessments. One example is Aldous, an AI-powered rehabilitation and risk assessment system developed by Mythos Labs. Aldous consists of two components: the Aldous Chatbot and the Aldous Risk Assessment Dashboard. The Aldous chatbot engages former terrorists in personalized, empathetic conversations addressing the cognitive and emotional drivers of their radicalization, and steering them away from violent ideologies. The Aldous Risk Assessment Dashboard enables practitioners and law enforcement officials who are running the rehabilitation program to view real-time analysis of each individual’s radicalization stage, psychographic profile, risk level, and recommended deradicalization approaches – all auto-generated from chatbot conversations. Aldous was trained on real-world data from over 40 countries, including actual case files from terrorist rehabilitation programs. It has been deployed in pilot programs in the Philippines and Indonesia, two countries at the sharp end of the foreign fighter reintegration challenge.

The results have been encouraging. Participants who engaged with the Aldous chatbot showed measurable reductions in assessed risk levels, and the system’s real-time risk



assessments proved useful to the human practitioners overseeing the programs. But perhaps the most revealing insights came from qualitative feedback, specifically, from the former fighters themselves. Two findings in particular stood out.

First, the chatbot is always available. Former terrorists suffering from PTSD, nightmares, or sudden ideological crises in the middle of the night (as “Faizal” did) have something to reach for other than the phone number of a former comrade. The human counselor has gone home. Aldous has not.

Second, the chatbot never quits. Former fighters often hold views about the world that are deeply, almost geologically, entrenched. Shifting those views requires not just expertise but extraordinary patience: the willingness to revisit the same arguments, absorb the same hostility, and re-engage the same individual dozens or even hundreds of times without losing interest or composure. Even the most well-trained human counselors eventually hit a wall. Ironically, chatbots don’t give up on people the way people give up on people.

These findings are consistent with a growing body of research suggesting that AI chatbots may be uniquely effective at changing deeply held beliefs. A landmark 2024 study published in *Science* by researchers at MIT Sloan, Cornell, and American University found that a brief, personalized conversation with an AI chatbot reduced individuals’ belief in conspiracy theories by 20 percent on average – an effect that persisted, undiminished, for at least two months.² The researchers found that the chatbot’s ability to marshal vast amounts of evidence and tailor its counterarguments to the specific reasoning of each individual gave it a persuasive edge that is difficult for any single human interlocutor to replicate. A follow-up study supported by the Anti-Defamation League applied a similar approach to

antisemitic conspiracy theories, with comparable results.³ If AI can move the needle on conspiracy beliefs in a lab setting, its application to the far more structured and supervised environment of terrorist rehabilitation programs is a logical and promising next step.

The scalability of this approach is difficult to overstate. An AI-powered rehabilitation system can be deployed in any country, in any language, trained on the ideological specifics of any terrorist group, and made available around the clock, all at a fraction of the cost of expanding human-led programs. It is not, however, a replacement for human practitioners and the unique judgement and experience they bring. It is, instead, an always-on complement to their abilities.

TAKING HUMANS OUT OF HARM'S WAY

The rehabilitation of former fighters is a long-term problem. But counterterrorism also involves acute, high-stakes physical operations where lives are on the line in real time: defusing a bomb, investigating a chemical threat, clearing a building during a hostage rescue. These are the most dangerous tasks in the CT toolkit, and they have always required putting human operators in extreme peril. That calculus is beginning to change.

The catalyst is what the technology industry has begun calling “physical AI,” a new generation of AI models designed not just to process language or generate images, but to understand the physical world, reason about it, and direct machines to act within it. NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang declared at CES 2026 that “the ChatGPT moment for robotics is nearly here,” announcing open foundation models that enable robots to perceive their environment, plan actions, and adapt in real time. Companies like Boston Dynamics, Figure AI, and NEURA Robotics are already building systems powered by these models. In January 2025, NVIDIA launched its Cosmos platform, a suite of world foundation models trained on 20 million hours of video, specifically designed to generate physics-aware synthetic environments for training robots and autonomous systems.⁴

What does this mean for counterterrorism? Consider bomb disposal. In February 2025, the UK Ministry of Defense conducted live trials of advanced robotic systems (including robotic canines built on Boston Dynamics’ Spot platform) that successfully detected and defused improvised explosive devices. The robots navigated stairs, opened doors autonomously, and fired disruptors at IEDs to render them safe, all while their human operators remained at a safe distance.⁵ These are tasks that traditional remote-controlled robots struggle with, because they involve too many moving parts, too many unexpected variables, and too much need for real-time improvisation. Physical AI closes this gap by giving machines the ability to reason about their environment and adapt on the fly, much as a human operator would, but without the human being inside the blast radius.

Beyond bomb disposal, AI-powered autonomous systems could investigate suspected chemical, biological, or radiological threats, entering contaminated environments too dangerous for first responders. They could support kinetic operations like building raids, providing real-time situational awareness and even physical assistance in the chaotic, unpredictable final moments of a tactical assault. Every bomb defused by a machine rather than a human technician, every contaminated site assessed by a robot rather than a first responder, would take one more human life out of harm’s way.

There are, of course, real risks. An AI-powered system that miscalculates during bomb disposal could trigger the very explosion it was meant to prevent. A robot that misjudges a tactical situation during a hostage rescue could cause casualties. These are not trivial concerns, and they deserve sober attention. But they must be evaluated against the right baseline: not against perfection, but against current human performance under the same conditions.

AI AND COUNTERTERRORISM RESILIENCE

Even the most sophisticated prevention architecture will not stop every attack, however. Terrorist groups are adaptive adversaries that probe for weaknesses, exploit seams, and occasionally succeed despite the best efforts of intelligence agencies and law enforcement. This has been true since long before AI existed, and it will remain the case. The question, then, is not only how to prevent attacks but how to prepare for them. Here, AI offers transformative potential.

Perhaps the most significant (and least understood) AI development relevant to counterterrorism preparedness is the rise of what the AI community calls “world models.” What is a world model and how is it different to the large language models (LLMs) that power chatbots like ChatGPT? LLMs are sophisticated prediction engines that, given a string of words, predict what word comes next. They are extraordinarily good at this, which is why they can write essays, summarize reports, and hold conversations. But they do not understand the world in the way that a policymaker or an intelligence analyst does. They do not grasp that a bridge collapse in one city will disrupt supply chains in another, or that a currency shock in one market will cascade through a dozen others within hours. They model language, not systems.

World models, on the other hand, attempt to simulate how complex, interconnected systems behave over time. They build internal representations of how objects, institutions, and forces interact, how physical and social systems respond to disruption, and how the effects of a single event ripple outward through layers of interdependence. In January 2025, NVIDIA launched its Cosmos platform, one of the first major world model initiatives, and since then Google DeepMind, Meta, and a growing ecosystem of startups have raced to build systems capable of modeling not just language but reality itself.

For counterterrorism preparedness, the implications are substantial. A specialized world model could help policymakers, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies simulate and plan for the second- and third-order consequences of major terrorist events before they occur. What happens to financial markets if a coordinated attack strikes a major financial capital? What are the cascading infrastructure failures if a critical transportation node is targeted? How do different government responses (a lockdown versus an all-clear, a

presidential address versus silence) affect public behavior, social stability, and the likelihood of copycat attacks? These are the kinds of complex, interconnected questions that have traditionally been answered through intuition, historical analogy, and the educated guesses of senior officials operating under enormous stress. World models offer the possibility of answering them systematically, in advance, through simulation, giving decision-makers not just a plan but a stress-tested understanding of how that plan interacts with a dynamic, unpredictable environment.

AI also stands to transform more immediate preparedness tools. Traditional crisis exercises (the tabletop simulations familiar to anyone in the national security community) have long relied on scripted scenarios that follow predictable patterns and rarely surprise participants in the way a real attack would. AI is enabling a new generation of simulations that are agentic – that is, populated by AI actors that make autonomous decisions – interactive (responding in real time to the choices of human participants), and capable of generating novel, emergent scenarios rather than following a predetermined script. Along similar lines, AI models can now be trained to emulate specific types of terrorist actors, such as a lone-wolf attacker, an ISIS cell leader, or a hostage-taker with particular ideological motivations, and used to train law enforcement and intelligence officials in negotiation and tactical decision-making. This gives practitioners an inexhaustible training partner that never breaks character, never runs out of new scenarios, and can be calibrated to reflect specific psychological profiles, cultural contexts, and ideological drivers.

RIGHT-SIZING THE RISKS

None of the applications of AI described above are risk-free, however, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

Rehabilitation chatbots trained on biased or incomplete data could misread the individuals they are counseling or, in a worst case, inadvertently reinforce the very narratives they are meant to counter. Overdependence on AI counselors could atrophy the human relationships and institutional knowledge that remain essential to deradicalization. Physical AI systems that malfunction in high-stakes CT operations could cause the very harm they were designed to prevent. Crisis simulations powered by flawed world models could generate scenarios that lead to misguided planning.

These risks are real. But the question policymakers should be asking is not whether AI will make mistakes; it will. Rather, the question is whether it will make fewer mistakes than humans currently do under the same conditions. If an AI system fails to defuse a bomb 0.5 percent of the time, but a human bomb technician fails to do so 1 percent of the time, the AI system is the safer option by the only metric that should matter.

Yet research in behavioral science has documented a phenomenon known as “algorithm aversion,” in which people lose confidence in algorithmic forecasters more quickly than in human ones after observing them make the same mistake, even when the algorithm demonstrably outperforms the human.⁶ Critically, this aversion intensifies in high-stakes decision contexts – precisely the domain where AI-assisted counterterrorism operates.⁷ When a human bomb technician is killed in the line of duty, it is mourned as a tragic but expected cost of dangerous work. When a robot fails at the same task, it is held up as

evidence that the technology is not ready. This asymmetry is understandable; there is something viscerally unsettling about delegating life-and-death decisions to machines. But it is a bias that policymakers must consciously resist if they are to make sound decisions about the role of AI in counterterrorism.

THE PATH FORWARD

The terrorist threat has not paused while the United States and its allies have turned their attention to great power competition. AI offers a way to sustain and even enhance counterterrorism capabilities in an era of constrained budgets and competing priorities, but only if policymakers act deliberately.

Three imperatives stand out. First, the United States should invest in AI-powered rehabilitation tools and actively partner with allied governments that are already piloting them. Second, the Department of War and its allied counterparts should accelerate the development and real-world testing of physical AI systems for counterterrorism operations, building on the promising UK trials and integrating advances from the commercial robotics sector. Third, the national security community should begin integrating AI-driven crisis simulations and world models into its preparedness infrastructure – not as futuristic pilot projects, but as core operational tools that inform planning, training, and resource allocation.

AI technology is moving fast. As we have seen time and again – from the Islamic State's early adoption of drones to terrorist exploitation of encrypted messaging apps and cryptocurrencies – terrorists do not wait for governments to finish deliberating before they harness new tools. AI will be no different. The question, therefore, is not whether AI will reshape counterterrorism. It is whether the United States and its allies will be ahead of that curve, or behind it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Priyank Mathur, Clara Broekaert, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Radicalization (and Counter-radicalization) Potential of Artificial Intelligence,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), April 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/radicalization-and-counter-radicalization-potential-artificial-intelligence>.
- 2 Thomas H. Costello, Gordon Pennycook, and David G. Rand, “Durably reducing conspiracy beliefs through dialogues with AI,” *Science* 385, 2024, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adq1814?__cf_chl_rt_tk=fIee7_qxCv3MnfPSwHpXt940_U5.CzC5o60hHYAqlm4-1771258994-1.0.1.1-YCIHFFT_kkwea2pHmIE6Q2h0CMgazhfBySXp7hC1IY4.
- 3 Anti-Defamation League, “Experimental AI Chatbots Significantly Reduce Belief in Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories, New ADL-Supported Study Shows,” November 20, 2025, <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/experimental-ai-chatbots-significantly-reduce-belief-antisemitic-conspiracy>.
- 4 NVIDIA Newsroom, “NVIDIA Launches Cosmos World Foundation Model Platform to Accelerate Physical AI Development,” January 6, 2025, <https://nvidianews.nvidia.com/news/nvidia-launches-cosmos-world-foundation-model-platform-to-accelerate-physical-ai-development> .
- 5 Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom, “New Robots Lead the Way in Bomb Disposal Innovation,” February 5, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-robots-lead-the-way-in-bomb-disposal-innovation>.
- 6 Berkeley J. Dietvorst, Joseph P. Simmons, and Cade Massey, “Algorithm Aversion: People Erroneously Avoid Algorithms After Seeing Them Err,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no. 1, 2015, 114–126.
- 7 S Mo Jones-Jang and Yong Jin Park, “How do people react to AI failure? Automation bias, algorithmic aversion, and perceived controllability,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 28, no. 1, January 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/28/1/zmac029/6827859>.

The Promise and Peril of Africa

BY J. PETER PHAM

Thankfully, both the number of deaths caused by terrorism around the globe as well as the number of terrorist attacks have been gradually trending downward since they peaked in 2015. However, the progress has been uneven. And in Africa, the trend has, sadly, been in the opposite direction.

The continent is in the grip of mounting violence, with the Sahel being the most affected region globally. According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, it accounted for over half of all deaths from terrorism and one-fifth of all attacks in the world.¹ And while the Sahel remains the epicenter of terrorist activity, the phenomenon has spread across Africa, with notable upticks in terrorist attacks recorded from Cameroon on the continent's west to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Central Africa to Mozambique in the east.²

Overall, Africa has overtaken the Middle East as the region with the most deaths from terrorism. That condition, moreover, is expected to persist. Analysts now forecast that some 60-70 percent of terrorists attacks globally in 2026 will occur in African countries.³

The spiraling violence flies in the face of the other prevailing narrative about Africa, one that is no less true: that of an emerging region with significant economic gains powered by profound, long-term trends. Demographically, the continent is in the midst of a massive expansion, and by 2050 one in four workers in the world will be an African. Additionally, Africa has some of the world's fastest-growing urbanization rates, which means lower basic infrastructure costs and concentrated consumer markets. It is also an

J. Peter Pham, a Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council and a Ben Franklin Fellow, served as United States Special Envoy for the Great Lakes (2018-2020) and Sahel (2020-2021) Regions of Africa, with the personal rank of Ambassador. From 2009 to 2017, he was the Editor-in-Chief of the peer-reviewed *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*.

emerging technology hub and market, with the rapid expansion of mobile telephony and internet usage growth rates five times global averages over the last decade.

These trends have set Africa on a path of sustained, and explosive, growth. In the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, seven of the twenty fastest-growing economies in the world were in Africa, including Ethiopia, Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Djibouti, Ghana, and Guinea.⁴ This year, six of the ten fastest-growing economies will be African: South Sudan, Guinea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Libya, and Uganda.⁵ Moreover, many African countries are either already benefiting from burgeoning global demand and, indeed, competition for access to the continent's abundant natural resources or are poised to do so. This is so for good reason; Africa holds approximately 30 percent of the world's known reserves of critical minerals, including approximately 90 percent of its chromium and platinum and more than 50 percent of its cobalt.

It is in the unresolved tension between the promise of being “the world's next major economic success story,” as the Obama administration's 2012 strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa described it, and the reality of surging *jihadist* violence, political instability, and geopolitical competition that Africa's strategic landscape is being forged today.

EXPANDING THREATS

Outbreaks of *jihadist* violence are certainly not new to Africa. Recall the early 19th century Fulani *Jihad* led by Usman dan Fodio, which resulted in the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now Nigeria, or the eruption of violence in late 19th century Sudan that accompanied the rise of self-proclaimed Mahdi Muhammad Abdullah, famously played by Sir Laurence Olivier in the 1966 Academy Award winning film *Khartoum*. Still, these instances have hitherto been largely local or perhaps regional affairs. In contrast, the current century has seen a growing connection between terrorist violence on the continent and global movements and ideologies.

Twenty years ago, in the early days of the “War on Terrorism,” the magazine of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia ran a remarkably prescient article entitled “Al-Qaeda is Moving to Africa.” In it, the author wrote that the terrorist network and its members “appreciate the significance of the African region for the military campaigns against the Crusaders” and predicted that “this continent has not yet found its proper and expected role and the next stages of the conflict will see Africa as the battlefield.”⁶ He went on to enumerate and evaluate what he saw as the significant advantages to shifting operations to Africa, including: *jihadist* doctrines having already spread throughout many African countries; the political and military weaknesses of African governments; the easy availability of a wide range of weapons; the geographical position of Africa vis-à-vis international trade routes; the proximity to old conflicts against “Jews and Crusaders” in the Middle East; the poverty of Africa, which “will enable the holy warriors to provide some finance and welfare”; the technical and scientific skills that potential African recruits would bring; the presence of large Muslim communities, including ones in conflict with Christians or other Muslims; the links to Europe through North Africa “which facilitates the move from there to carry out attacks”; and Africa's wealth of natural resources.⁷ All of this, of course, remains just as true today, if not even more so.

Nowadays, the direst terrorism challenge on the African continent lies in the Sahel. What started in late 2011 with the attempt by heavily armed ethnic Tuareg recruits, returning from the ruins of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, to carve out a separate homeland in northern Mali has metastasized into violence across the vast region linking the Maghreb with Sub-Saharan Africa. Over the last decade, it has spread into a complex conflict involving not only al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), already a longtime presence in the region, but also two affiliates of ISIS, the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

This ferment has defied easy resolution. It drew in a 5,000-strong French counter-terrorism force operating across the region until that detachment was unceremoniously ejected following a series of coups that began in 2020. A 15,000-strong United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali that was deployed between 2012 and 2023, albeit to rather limited effect. The United States operated two airbases in Niger from which intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and other missions were staged until maladroit post-coup diplomacy by the Biden administration led the *junta* in Niamey to order their closure and the withdrawal of about 1,000 American military personnel in 2024.⁸

Despite these outside interventions, militant groups proved adept at capitalizing on the frailty of national governments and exploiting local grievances and ethnic tensions. Embedding themselves in local communities, especially marginalized ones, they carried out repeated attacks on both national and international forces, as well as civilian populations not under their sway. As the violence increased, the numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) expanded, sometimes with astonishing speed.

In Burkina Faso, for example, the number of IDPs increased from just 87,000 in January 2019 to more than one million in December 2020, before leveling off at slightly more than 2 million by the end of 2023.⁹ Nowadays, out of a population of roughly 24 million, roughly one in four Burkinabè require humanitarian assistance on account of insecurity, displacement, and lack of food.¹⁰

In Africa's east, meanwhile, Somalia has long struggled with a different *jihadi* challenge. In that failed state, whose fortunes have waxed and waned, al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab has successively seized and held shifting territories for two decades. There is also growing evidence that the Somali insurgent group has developed systemic cooperation with the Houthis in Yemen just across the Gulf of Aden, including arms transfers, training exchanges, and financial links.¹¹ Another, more recent phenomenon has been the expansion of Islamist terrorist groups into Central and Southern Africa.

In March 2021, building on work begun during the first Trump administration, the newly installed Biden administration added ISIS affiliates operating in the eastern DRC and Mozambique to the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations.¹² Some Washington-based analysts initially derided the designations, but the pundits fell mostly



silent once the seriousness of the threat was underscored less than a month later, when attacks by the Mozambican group forced French energy giant Total to evacuate its staff and suspend work on a \$20 billion natural gas project in northern Mozambique. Fortunately, a timely intervention by a small, well-trained Rwandan force turned the tide against the *jihadists*, at least for the moment.

As I repeatedly emphasized during my service in the first Trump administration as the inaugural U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel—at times, to the great annoyance of some of our European allies—the heart of the crisis in many of these situations is the question of state legitimacy: that is, whether or not citizens perceive that their government is accountable, equitable, able, and willing to meet their needs. Ineffectual foreign interventions by Western countries (to say nothing of more recent ones by Russia via state-aligned private military companies) have hardly contributed to reinforcing the already-rickety legitimacy of those regimes.

The inability of African governments, especially in the Sahel, to provide basic security for citizens—to say nothing of fostering economic opportunity and social development—has enabled armed groups, whether insurgents with a *jihadist* ideology or simply bandits with more pedestrian motivations, to seize control of significant swathes of rural territory. The two ISIS affiliates in the West Africa, ISGS and ISWAP, have been major beneficiaries of this dynamic, significantly expanding their territorial dominion over rural areas where government forces have been unable to control or unwilling to venture.

Meanwhile, in late 2025 and early 2026, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM, “Support Group for Islam and Muslims”) effectively laid siege to

landlocked Mali's capital of Bamako by ambushing the convoys of truck that supply food and fuel to its four million residents. The situation became so dire that United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reported to the Security Council that it was "a moment of profound urgency" that risked precipitating "a domino effect" across West Africa.¹³ In fact, in neighboring Burkina Faso, JNIM has increasingly demonstrated its ability to mobilize across vast expanses of the country, attacking towns and garrisons in the northern and eastern parts of the country in rapid succession throughout 2025 and into early 2026.¹⁴

Moreover, both al-Qaeda- and ISIS-affiliated groups in the Sahel have increasingly targeted countries on the West African coast like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo—states that previously have been largely or even entirely unaffected by terrorist activity. Although the number of casualties to date has been mercifully small, in relative terms, the increasing frequency of such attacks is worrisome. In mid-2025, for example, Togo's foreign minister confirmed that his country, which borders Burkina Faso, had suffered fifteen cross-border attacks by JNIM during the first half of the year, resulting in the deaths of at least fifty-four civilians and eight soldiers.¹⁵

Similarly, even as the so-called Islamic State has lost ground in the Levant, groups that have aligned themselves to it have proliferated in Africa. In 2025, approximately two-thirds of ISIS's global activity was recorded on the African continent.¹⁶ This has happened not only in places like the Sahel or Somalia, where Islamist terrorist groups have found haven amid ungoverned geographies and Muslim populations, but more recently in places like the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo or northern Mozambique, where ongoing conflict (or at least the weakness of government authority) creates a permissive environment. These new affiliates operate with greater operational autonomy since, with the loss of its so-called *caliphate*, ISIS has been forced to shift to a less hierarchical structure and adopt the equivalent of a "remote management model" in order to survive. Affiliates have thus developed their own "war economies" financially independent of central leadership, even as the latter's ideology remains easily accessible online, and capable of radicalizing individuals across borders.

DEFINING AMERICAN INTERESTS

The most recent edition of the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, released in November 2025, charts a fairly limited approach to Africa. Discussion of the continent is limited to three short paragraphs, focused on partnering with select countries "to ameliorate conflict, foster mutually beneficial trade relationships, and transition from a foreign aid paradigm to an investment and growth paradigm capable of harnessing Africa's abundant natural resources and latent economic potential," while remaining guarded against "resurgent Islamist terrorist activity in parts of Africa while avoiding any long-term American presence or commitments."¹⁷ Similarly, the January 2026 *National Defense Strategy* mentions Africa only twice, stating that the Department of War's priority on the continent "is to prevent Islamic terrorists from using regional safe havens to strike the U.S. Homeland" and that otherwise it would "seek to empower allies and partners to lead efforts to degrade and destroy other terrorist organizations."¹⁸

To these objectives, one could add President Donald J. Trump's public commitment to help Christians facing violence, persecution, or other abuses in Africa, especially Nigeria, which the Administration once again designated a "country of particular concern" for international religious freedom after the Biden-era State Department removed it from the list over the protests of the Congressionally-established bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.¹⁹ The Administration's attention is apt. One well-regarded advocacy group for persecuted Christians, Open Doors, documented 4,849 Christians killed for their faith worldwide in the year covered by its most recent annual report, of whom 4,491 were in Africa, including 3,490 in Nigeria alone.²⁰

Even setting aside the issue of persecution, attacks by *jihadi* groups in Africa against Christians have been on the rise, including in areas like the eastern Congo and Mozambique, where such terrorist targeting is a relatively new phenomenon. In late July 2025, for example, militants from the ironically named Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an ISIS-linked group, attacked a Roman Catholic parish in the Congo's Ituri province during a night vigil at the church, killing dozens.²¹ A few months later, the *jihadi*s massacred twenty more people, most of them bedridden patients, at a hospital run by Catholic nuns in neighboring North Kivu province.²² As these assaults multiply, a reaction from American Christians will probably elevate the concern, as it has for Nigerian Christians.

However, even as the Administration charts a restrained course on Africa, its forward-leaning approach to reshaping the global market for critical minerals, including both rare earths and strategic bulk metals, necessitates a wider aperture on the African continent and its resource wealth. Seven African countries participated in the inaugural Critical Minerals Ministerial hosted by the Department of State in February 2026.

While most the discussions at that conference focused on building partnerships to enable access to resources and preventing the weaponization of supply chains by a rival power such as China, the focus is imperative for another reason as well; as that al-Qaeda magazine writer recognized two decades ago, these raw materials could also prove "very useful for the holy warriors in the intermediate and long term."²³

To cite one example, the United States is entirely dependent on imports for tantalum, a metal used for superalloys in aerospace and other defense applications as well as in high-performance capacitors in advanced electronics. Not only is the DRC the world's top producer of tantalum, which is mainly derived from coltan, accounting for nearly half of global output, but almost all of that mining occurs in areas where terrorist groups, both *jihadi* and other, are active.²⁴ In fact, the Congolese government recently designated the Rubaya coltan mine in its eastern North Kivu province, one of the richest tantalum deposits in the world, as a "strategic asset reserve" offered preferentially to the United States under the bilateral mineral cooperation agreement between the two countries.²⁵

Similarly, America, via the Export-Import Bank of the United States, has recommitted nearly \$5 billion for an integrated liquified natural gas project developed by TotalEnergies in northern Mozambique.²⁶ The loan package to support the export of goods and services

from almost seventy American companies in fourteen states was originally approved during the first Trump administration. But work on the \$20 billion total investment in the northern Cabo Delgado region was halted in 2021 due to attacks by Islamist insurgents, who were only subsequently pushed back when Rwandan forces intervened at the invitation of the Mozambican authorities.²⁷

In other words, counterterrorism in Africa is shaping up to be not only a question of American security, but also of its economic interests.

STRIKING A BALANCE

By the sheer number of attacks and their lethality, the African continent has clearly emerged as the global epicenter of the terrorist phenomenon in general and the *jihadi* variety in particular. True, the nature of the threat is markedly different than a decade ago, when militants imbued with ISIS's apocalyptic ideology flocked from around the globe to borderlands of Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, there are plenty of potential recruits among Africa's abundant economically struggling and socio-politically marginalized youth for today's militancy to flourish.

The second Trump administration's apparent view that American interests in Africa are limited is in some measure understandable. After all, the White House has made clear that direct counterterrorism action will only be taken against those terrorists "who are both capable of and intent on striking the U.S. Homeland." It has also emphasized the need to simultaneously empower "allies and partners to lead efforts to degrade and destroy other terrorist organization."

Yet such a more limited approach risks an over-correction that fails to account for the broader national interests in supporting and securing African allies: preserving access to their strategic resources, many of which not only play critical roles in defense and other advanced technological applications, but whose supply chains are presently dominated by China and other rivals. Striking a better balance is essential.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2025, March 2025, [https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#:~:text=•%20Islamic%20State%20\(IS\)%20expands,where%20attacks%20doubled%20to%2067.](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#:~:text=•%20Islamic%20State%20(IS)%20expands,where%20attacks%20doubled%20to%2067.)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Rohan Gunaratna, “Global Terrorism Forecast 2026,” RSIS Commentary, January 5, 2026, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/global-terrorism-forecast-2026/>.
- 4 Jason Mitchell, “IMF: African Economies are the World’s Fastest Growing,” fDi Intelligence, October 17, 2019.
- 5 International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Update, January 19, 2026, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/91345bb0-ce36-563a-9297-ce34b29b44ab>.
- 6 See J. Peter Pham, “Next Front? Evolving United States-African Strategic Relations in the ‘War on Terrorism’ and Beyond,” *Comparative Strategy* 26, 2007, 39-54.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Military to Withdraw Troops from Niger,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/us/politics/us-niger-military-withdrawal.html>.
- 9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Burkina Faso Situation Report,” February 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-situation-report-1-feb-2021>.
- 10 UNICEF, “Burkina Faso Situation Report No. 4 (End of Year), January-December 2025,” February 18, 2026, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/unicef-burkina-faso-humanitarian-situation-report-no-4-end-year-jan-dec-2025>.
- 11 Faisal Ali, “Al-Shabaab and Houthis Deepen Red Sea Alliance as Gulf Rivalries Intensify,” *The Africa Report*, February 17, 2026, <https://www.theafricareport.com/409130/al-shabaab-and-houthis-deepen-red-sea-alliance-as-gulf-rivalries-intensify/>.
- 12 U.S. Department of State, “State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique,” March 10, 2021, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-isis-affiliates-and-leaders-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-mozambique/?safe=1>.
- 13 United Nations, “Secretary-General’s Remarks to the Security Council on Enhancing Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation in West Africa and the Sahel,” November 18, 2025, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2025-11-18/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-enhancing-regional-counter-terrorism-cooperation-west-africa-and-the-sahel>.
- 14 Jessica Donati and Anait Miridzian, “Islamist Militants Show ‘Unprecedented Coordination’ in Burkina Faso Attacks,” *Reuters*, February 19, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/islamist-militants-show-unprecedented-coordination-burkina-faso-attacks-2026-02-19/>.
- 15 “Togo Confirms At Least 60 Killed in Al-Qaeda-linked Attacks,” *Africa News*, July 30, 2025, <https://www.africanews.com/2025/07/30/togo-confirms-over-60-killed-in-al-qaeda-linked-attacks/>.
- 16 ACLED, “The Islamic State’s Pivot to Africa,” September 4, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/qa/qa-islamic-states-pivot-africa>.
- 17 White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF AFRICA

- 18 Department of War, 2026 NDS: National Defense Strategy, January 2026, 17, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>
- 19 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “USCIRF Appalled at Administration’s Removal of Nigeria from List of Violators of Religious Freedom,” November 17, 2021, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-appalled-administrations-removal-nigeria-list-violators>.
- 20 Open Doors, “World Watch List 2026,” n.d., <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>.
- 21 “Scores Killed in DR Congo Attack on Catholic Church,” Vatican News, July 28, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2025-07/drc-attack-catholic-church-islamist-extremists.html>.
- 22 “DR Congo: Terrorists Kill Civilians in Church-run Hospital in North Kivu,” Vatican News, November 16, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-11/drc-kivu-massacre-north-kivu-sisters-hospital.html>.
- 23 J. Peter Pham, “Next Front? Evolving United States-African Strategic Relations in the ‘War on Terrorism’ and Beyond.”
- 24 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Department Designates Militant Groups in the DRC,” January 3, 2013, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1815>.
- 25 Ange Adiho Kasongo and Maxwell Akalaare Adombila, “Congo Offers Tantalum Deposit under M23 Control to U.S. in Minerals Pact, Document Shows,” Reuters, February 18, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/congo-offers-tantalum-deposit-under-m23-control-us-minerals-pact-document-shows-2026-02-18/>.
- 26 Export-Import Bank of the United States, “EXIM Board of Directors Votes to Proceed with \$4.7 Billion LNG Equipment and Services Transaction After Four-Year Delay,” March 19, 2025, <https://www.exim.gov/news/exim-board-directors-votes-proceed-47-billion-lng-equipment-and-services-transaction-after>.
- 27 Borges Nhamirre, “Are Rwandan Troops Becoming Cabo Delgado’s Main Security Provider?,” ISS Today, September 26, 2024, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/are-rwandan-troops-becoming-cabo-delgado-s-main-security-provider>.

The Information Front in Modern Terrorism

JAMES S. ROBBINS

In recent years, the proliferation of social media has reshaped the informational landscape. It has created synergies that go well beyond the traditional media-empowered terrorism that dominated the latter half of the 20th century.

Today, violent extremist organizations no longer treat media as merely a publicity tool. Rather, social media has become part of their core strategic infrastructure. By tailoring propaganda, intimidation, and recruitment campaigns to the logic of platform algorithms and the rhythms of online news cycles, these actors can project power far in excess of their real-world capabilities. And the use of shocking imagery broadcast live on social media channels is becoming a standard part of terrorist information strategy. In recent years, we have seen groups like Hamas and ISIS weaponize contemporary social media platforms to shape perceptions, mobilize supporters, and influence state behavior. In the process, they have revealed real, serious vulnerabilities in the global information environment – vulnerabilities that need to be addressed as part of a forward-looking counterterrorism strategy.

THE MEDIA/TERROR SYMBIOSIS

By its nature, terrorism is an asymmetrical engagement, one in which a weak insurgency seeks to destabilize a powerful *status quo*. But while terrorists are at a material disadvantage in armed struggle, the information war is a level playing field on which they can be peer competitors, setting narratives, dominating news cycles and commanding public attention.

The modern age of media-driven terrorism was born in September 1970, when members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked and blew up three passenger airliners at a desert airstrip near Zarqa, Jordan.¹ Hostages were evacuated from the aircraft, the international press was summoned, and made-for-TV explosions

James S. Robbins is Senior Fellow for National Security Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council and Dean of Academics at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC.

took place. In his pioneering work on the reciprocal relationship between terrorism and the media, the scholar Abraham H. Miller noted that “the uniqueness of contemporary terrorism lies in its need its almost incessant craving for publicity, whether favorable or unfavorable, at whatever cost.” Miller asserted that “terrorism is the media’s stepchild, a stepchild which the media unfortunately can neither completely ignore nor deny.”²

There is indeed a durable symbiosis here. Reporters want dramatic stories with striking visuals, and terrorists supply them. Thus, from the 1970s onward, media coverage became a force multiplier for terrorists, amplifying their message and encouraging more spectacular, headline-worthy incidents.

Terrorist groups developed sophisticated media strategies, establishing sympathetic narratives and even courting influential journalists who were interested in their activities. Al-Qaeda, which provided probably the most visually spectacular terrorist attacks in history on September 11, 2001, had recognized the possibilities of web-driven news content early on, and had a well-developed and detailed strategy that sought to exploit both Arab and western media.³

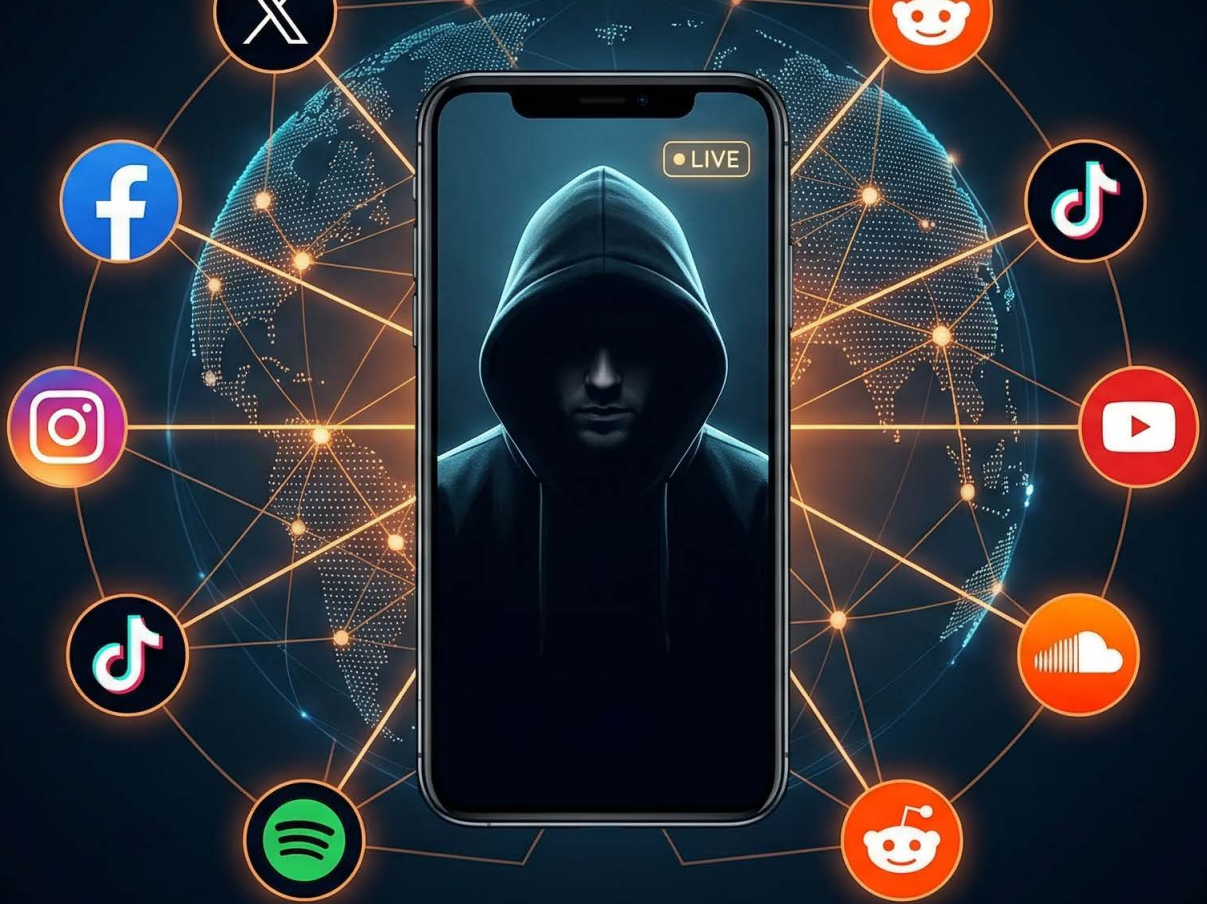
But even without sophisticated strategies, media coverage of terrorist attacks can have significant social impact. The October 2002 DC sniper attacks generated a sense of panic simply by their momentum, while the mystery surrounding the attackers and their motives created an amount of coverage that by some measures rivaled 9/11.⁴

In turn, the spread of Internet and World Wide Web access since the 1990s gave terrorists far greater opportunities to distribute messages and images to global audiences. The same dynamics that gave rise to “citizen journalism” and disrupted traditional news practices applied. Terrorists no longer needed to rely on media gatekeepers to spread their messages but could appeal directly to people anywhere in the world. Extremist groups began posting manifestoes and videos in Internet chat groups and on websites and disseminating them via email.

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE NEXT STAGE

The subsequent advent of social media platforms in the 2000s, coupled with the widespread adoption of smartphones, boosted the power to pursue and achieve narrative dominance exponentially. Social media networks reach people directly, wherever they are, 24 hours a day. Terrorists can supply unlimited, dramatic imagery and messaging on free or low-cost publishing platforms in multiple languages with no requirement to host a server or even a website. These services are all maintained by others, for free, forever, and are relatively (though not entirely) secure for the terrorists themselves. The media dynamic changed from passive distribution to active participation. The result has been an expanding ecosystem of social media, alternative websites, and legacy press outlets, the ultimate target being public opinion and more importantly policymakers.

Violent extremist groups now use a wide variety of interconnected social media and digital platforms, combining mainstream networks, encrypted messaging apps, fringe platforms to maximize reach. Popular platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Spotify, Soundcloud and Reddit are used for visibility, virality, and agenda-setting, while encrypted and lightly moderated services, especially Telegram but also WhatsApp,



Signal, and similar apps, function as primary hubs for official messaging and content control. Access to social media allows for agile and rapid message response, so terrorists can shape narratives in real-time.

Moreover, unlike traditional media, the social media ecosystem has very little curation and editorial gatekeeping. When groups are identified and banned on social outlets, extremists can shape-shift by opening new accounts under different guises or migrate to “alt-tech” platforms like Odysee, Rumble, Gab, Gettr, or BitChute, which offer even more permissive moderation. Gaming and social-interaction platforms such as Discord are used opportunistically to reach younger audiences, and extremists increasingly incorporate emerging tools such as AI-generated media to enhance emotional impact. The result is a layered, redundant communication system in which encrypted platforms anchor the network, websites and file hosts provide durability, and mainstream platforms serve as amplification channels, making extremist messaging difficult to suppress through platform-specific measures alone.

Social media amplifies impact not only by increasing reach but by energizing dispersed supporters, who become part of a widespread online community of ideological fellow-travelers. Social media, by its nature, facilitates creating these dispersed networks of interest through existing friends groups, followers lists, fan communities and related groupings. Its interactive nature, meanwhile, bolsters recruitment, indoctrination and mobilization.

Terrorist groups exploit built-in features that reward engagement and attention. Virality mechanisms such as likes, shares, retweets, and trending topics allow extremist content to travel far beyond its original audience, while recommendation algorithms can inadvertently steer users toward progressively more extreme content clusters once initial engagement

occurs. Hashtag hijacking further enables these groups to insert their narratives into mainstream conversations, allowing propaganda to circulate within broader political, humanitarian, or cultural debates that would not otherwise engage with extremist messaging.

Rather than building independent digital infrastructure, terrorist organizations leverage these platform features as force multipliers. At the same time, they adopt adaptive counter-moderation tactics to ensure continuity of messaging, including masking content through filters, emojis, coded language, euphemisms, or visual symbols that evade automated detection.

In this way social media users become casual enablers and amplifiers of extremist narratives simply by sharing compelling images, messages, memes, slogans, disinformation and other propaganda, whether the users understand the message or not. They are assisted by algorithms that prioritize emotional reactions, such as Facebook giving greatest algorithmic weight to the “anger” emoji.⁵ This type of low-effort interaction allows people to claim to be supporting the cause without encouraging violence, which is an easy mental disconnect in a screen-based reality. Thus, extremist groups enjoy cost-free collaboration with people they have never met and who may not even understand the impact of their actions.

But extremist messaging does not always seek to incite anger or negative emotions. There can also be “soft power” social messaging. For example, Taliban officials welcomed American adventure YouTuber Jake Youngblood to Afghanistan, where he posted a viral 55-minute travel vlog showing him “wandering through Kabul, meeting Taliban guards, swimming in lakes, and sharing meals with locals.” Youngblood tells his viewers, “It’s safe. It’s beautiful. It’s not what you think,” and reframes Taliban-dominated Afghanistan as “a haven of hospitality and calm.”⁶

A VERSATILE MEDIUM

Indeed, extremist groups use social media not only to communicate but to manufacture the appearance of influence, authority, and momentum far beyond their actual capabilities. Apparent online followings are often illusory, inflated through bots, paid supporters, and sock-puppet accounts that create the impression of a vibrant, disciplined, and powerful movement, an effect that matters because terrorism is as much about perception as it is about violence. These groups and their sympathizers deliberately cultivate the image of a functioning political or social organization by posting “governance” content such as community events, social services, and ideological lectures; showcasing internal cohesion and operational competence to attract donors or foreign sympathizers; and operating pseudo-media outlets that mimic professional journalism in order to project credibility.

For example, Drop Site News was funded by George Soros’ Open Society Foundations to help “bridge a crucial information gap in independent journalism” in the Middle East.⁷ In practice, this meant amplifying Hamas narratives and disinformation about the Gaza War. Instagram later removed reposted reportage from Drop Site News, citing a policy against posting “symbols, praise, or support of people and organizations we define as dangerous.”⁸

Terror groups further expand their reach through hashtag and account hijacking, inserting propaganda into trending conversations or established networks that would not

otherwise encounter extremist messaging. While this activity may generate only “soft” support that rarely translates into direct operational assistance, it nonetheless normalizes extremist presence and narratives in the broader information environment. Emerging technologies, particularly AI-generated imagery and deepfake video, are likely to intensify these dynamics by making manufactured legitimacy, scale, and authenticity even easier to produce and harder to detect.

Social media also expands the capabilities of extremist groups to radicalize and recruit. The interactive nature of social media gives extremists direct, two-way communication with self-selected groups of individuals who may be attracted to or curious about their messages and primed for further radicalization, and eventually recruitment as active supporters.

Terrorists can seek out and actively target affinity groups with carefully crafted appeals based on pre-existing group interests. These could be based on identity-driven affiliations, where people seek belonging, nurture grievances, and look for heroes to represent them. Terrorists can engage in selective storytelling and narrative-building that highlights perceived past injustices and glorifies participation in acts of resistance or revenge. They utilize standard emotional hooks to target individuals who feel alienated, angry, or ideologically aligned with extremist worldviews.

Prolonged exposure to such tailored content creates a psychological environment where the most vulnerable recruits eventually make themselves known to the terrorists, who can then engage in more individualized recruitment.⁹ Given the international nature of this recruitment activity, it can build highly dispersed cells inside target countries that may be difficult to detect and counter.

Terrorists also use social media for fundraising, where people sympathetic to the cause but not interested in being recruited are offered easy means of providing monetary support. Social media platforms are ideal for soliciting donations, facilitating crowdfunding, and directing users to resources that support terrorist operations. Furthermore, the extremist groups can hide their true intent behind fronts requesting support for humanitarian and other nonviolent efforts. These transactions may be difficult to detect and trace, and extremists actively make use of cryptocurrency transactions with the belief that this guarantees privacy and anonymity. This, however, is a double-edged sword; the digital – and thus trackable – nature of these financial tools can also easily lead to extremist financial networks being exposed and taken down.¹⁰

THE NEXUS WITH TERROR OPERATIONS

Social media is increasingly used to support and execute terrorist operations as well. Given its inherently dispersed and wide-area nature, social media is a natural tool for terrorist action. At the dawn of the social media age, Syrian *jihadi* theorist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri advocated the development of decentralized, leaderless resistance around common themes and objectives, to facilitate widely dispersed lone wolf and small cell actions.¹¹

The nature of social media is tailor-made for this model. Social media platforms are ideal for instruction, education and training in terror methods. Mainstream and niche platforms often provide ready-made “how-to” videos and manuals, ranging from cyber-crime methods to bomb-making guides. Terrorists can make their own such content posted

anonymously or under fake accounts to avoid detection. These could be used to facilitate and inspire lone wolf terror attacks, particularly inside a well-defended target country such as the United States. Al Qaeda's online *Inspire* magazine, for example, is focused on encouraging this precisely this type of individual terrorist action.

Social media and the Internet in general also provide ample resources to support terrorist attacks. The vast amount of information shared on social media channels is ideal for intelligence gathering. Terror organizations can browse this wealth of public information for targeting and planning purposes, or to create fake profiles and exploit users' openness to gather personal, military, and political information for operational use. Encrypted chat platforms such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp can be used for secure communication during operational planning, for making travel and meeting arrangements, establishing logistics, and during attacks.

A STUDY IN SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLOITATION

The horrific events of October 7, 2023 provide a case in point. Social media was central to the conceptualization, planning and execution of the massacre perpetrated by Hamas against Israel that day. Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar drew up precise orders for attackers to record and quickly publish shocking imagery of the attacks aimed at maximum operational impact. In a captured operations order, Sinwar instructed his men to "make sure to produce images that spark a frenzy, madness and an outburst among our people" and to "instill terror and fear in the enemy."¹² He believed that such images would foment a mass uprising of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and elsewhere.

Sinwar directed his commanders to think deliberately about the media impact. "Plan in advance events that will yield terrifying images," he ordered, "several burning car bombs exploding at an outpost or building and creating horrific destruction, heart-rending scenes, terrible fires. Five or ten such images will sow mortal fear in [the Israelis]." He gave several suggestions, including "burn down an entire neighborhood or kibbutz — pour gasoline or diesel from a special tanker, set it alight and broadcast the images." He urged his teams to "broadcast the footage as quickly as possible: soldiers' heads being stepped on, point-blank shootings, stabbing several people with knives, tanks exploding, soldiers kneeling with their hands on their heads, and the like."¹³

Intercepts during the attack show how Hamas commanders coordinated the information strategy. Hamas commander Abu al-Baraa told operatives in the area of Kibbutz Sa'ad to "Slaughter them. End the children of Israel" and "document the scenes of horror, now, and broadcast them on TV channels." Another commander, Abu Muath, said, "It is essential that you bring the drone in so it films for the entire Islamic world."¹⁴

By one analysis, Hamas was also using these images to push back against criticism from ISIS and al Qaeda that they were weak in bringing the fight to Israel. Terrorism expert Daniel Byman noted that "Hamas wants genuine images of itself as resistance," and not as a mainly political, often compromising and ineffective resistance group.¹⁵

Sinwar's concept shows heightened awareness of the potential of social media-enabled terrorism. But it also underscores the pitfalls of this approach. The hoped-for mass uprising in support of what Sinwar optimistically called Operation Al Aqsa Flood never

materialized. And, far from demoralizing the Israelis, the brutal images that Hamas terrorists broadcast engendered in Israelis a burning sense of mission and desire for payback. Scenes of barbaric killings, sounds of women and children pleading for their lives before being butchered, and images of hostages being dragged into captivity had much to do with the scope and nature of Israel's response.

Nevertheless, Hamas demonstrated a sophisticated, platform-specific social media strategy that adapted rapidly to different digital environments to maximize reach and emotional impact. Telegram emerged as the central hub for official messaging, serving as the primary channel for initial attack announcements and the distribution of graphic content, which helped the group rapidly expand its following in the hours and days after major events.

On X, networks of coordinated accounts amplified Hamas propaganda and disinformation, at times exploiting premium features to boost the visibility of video content and shape real-time narratives. Meanwhile, TikTok and Instagram were used to circulate emotionally charged imagery and trending hashtags, particularly content exaggerating civilian suffering in Gaza, as well as hostage videos, aimed at mobilizing sympathy and influencing global public opinion. Hamas celebrity spokesman Abu Obeida was an omnipresent, authentic and charismatic voice until he was tracked down and eliminated by the IDF in September 2025.¹⁶

Taken together, these practices illustrate a multifaceted digital strategy that leverages platform dynamics, emotional storytelling, and selective distortion to project influence and shape international perceptions well beyond Hamas's material capabilities.¹⁷ Hamas's media campaign is not solely about broadcasting violence, but about constructing legitimacy—presenting itself as a credible resistance movement rather than merely a terrorist organization, particularly to audiences already sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. And even though Hamas was banned on many platforms, the group got a huge spike in followers and benefitted from a continued social media presence from supporters who spread their narratives.¹⁸ Israel, the U.S. and European states were powerless to counter this dynamic.

COUNTERING TERRORIST EXPLOITATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Effective policy responses to the terrorist use of social media must be comprehensive, coordinated, and adaptive, reflecting the scale and complexity of the digital information environment in which extremist actors operate. Meaningful mitigation requires an integrated approach that combines regulatory frameworks, proactive platform governance by social media companies, close collaboration with law enforcement, and sustained strategic communication efforts aimed at reducing vulnerability to radicalization and strengthening community resilience.

Regulatory measures play a foundational role, by establishing clear expectations and accountability for technology companies. In the European Union, the Regulation on Terrorist Content Online represents one of the most assertive attempts to impose legal responsibility on platforms, including the possibility of significant fines for failing to remove terrorist material within prescribed time limits.¹⁹ Similar national approaches, such as the United Kingdom's code of practice, require platforms to proactively identify

and prevent the upload of terrorist content through a combination of automated detection systems and human moderation.

In the United States, while direct content mandates are more limited due to legitimate concerns over infringement on civil liberties, legislation and oversight mechanisms increasingly require federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security to conduct regular threat assessments and report on how terrorist organizations exploit online platforms. Together, these measures aim to shift platforms from reactive takedowns toward more systematic risk management.

Platform-level action remains the most immediate line of defense. Social media companies enforce community standards that explicitly prohibit terrorist content, but the effectiveness of these policies depends on consistent and context-aware enforcement. This has driven investment in artificial intelligence–based detection tools capable of identifying known extremist material at scale, along with the hiring of local-language moderators who can assess nuance, symbolism, and coded messaging. At the industry level, collaboration has become increasingly important. Initiatives such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) facilitate information sharing, coordinate responses to emerging threats, and maintain shared databases of known terrorist content, enabling faster cross-platform removal and reducing the ability of extremist groups to migrate seamlessly from one service to another.

Law enforcement cooperation is equally critical, particularly in time-sensitive or high-risk situations. Formalized channels between platforms and security agencies allow for rapid response to accounts promoting terrorism, coordinated disinformation campaigns, or livestreamed violence. Beyond enforcement, multi-stakeholder partnerships that include non-governmental organizations, academic researchers, and community groups enhance situational awareness and improve reporting mechanisms. These actors often possess localized expertise and cultural insight that neither governments nor platforms can easily replicate, helping to identify emerging narratives and vulnerabilities before they escalate.

Strategic communication and counter-narrative efforts address the longer-term challenge of radicalization. Rather than focusing solely on removing content, the most effective approaches seek to undermine the appeal of extremist ideologies by promoting credible alternative narratives using the same social media tools, inclusive identities, and social cohesion. Evidence suggests that messages delivered by trusted community voices are more persuasive than overt government campaigns. Community resilience initiatives, such as mentorship programs, dialogue forums, and support networks, help to insulate individuals from extremist recruitment by addressing underlying grievances and social isolation.

Taken together, these policy responses reflect a growing recognition that terrorist exploitation of social media is not merely a content problem. Rather, it is a systemic challenge rooted in platform design, regulatory gaps, and social vulnerability. Addressing it effectively requires sustained cooperation across sectors and a shift from episodic crisis response to durable, preventive governance of the digital public sphere.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The mass, near-simultaneous PFLP hijackings presaged the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks. Four hijackings were attempted on September 6, 1970, three of which succeeded. An additional successful hijacking took place on September 9 of that year.
- 2 Abraham H. Miller, "Terrorism the Media and the Law: A Discussion of the Issues," in Abraham H. Miller, ed., *Terrorism the Media and the Law* (Dobbs Ferry: Transnational Publishers, 1982), 13.
- 3 Marc Lynch, "Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies," *The National Interest* no. 83, Spring 2006, 50-56.
- 4 See James S. Robbins, "Terrorism, the Media, and Homeland Security," in Russel Howard, James Forest, and Joanne Moore, eds., *Homeland Security and Terrorism: Readings and Interpretations* (Guilford, CT: McGraw Hill Publishers 2006).
- 5 Shirin Ali, "Facebook's formula prioritized anger and ended up spreading misinformation," *The Hill*, October 27, 2021, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/578724-5-points-for-anger-1-for-a-like-how-facebooks/>
- 6 See Lamia Zia, "YouTube as a Tool of Soft Power in the Digital Age," Center on Public Diplomacy, November 13, 2025, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/youtube-tool-soft-power-digital-age>; See also Jake Youngblood, "American Lives With The Taliban For 7 Days," Youtube, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvA7iFzc_x0
- 7 Chuck Ross, "Soros Bankrolling Anti-Israel Drop Site News," *Washington Free Beacon*, November 13, 2025, <https://freebeacon.com/media/exclusive-soros-bankrolling-anti-israel-drop-site-news/>.
- 8 Max Tani, "Instagram removes Gaza posts from lefty news org Democracy Now," *Semafor*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.semafor.com/article/07/09/2024/instagram-removes-gaza-posts-from-lefty-new-org-democracy-now>.
- 9 A study from the University of Haifa found that "groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda actively recruit members internationally via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and encrypted messaging apps, often targeting young people with curated propaganda." Even YouTube is used for active recruitment. "Terrorist groups recruiting through social media: Facebook, Twitter also used to gather intelligence," *CBC News*, January 10, 2012, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/terrorist-groups-recruiting-through-social-media-1.1131053>
- 10 Clara Jammot, "Cryptocurrency and Extremism: How Social Network Analysis is Used to Track Extremist Cryptocurrency Donations," *GNET Research*, March 24, 2025, <https://gnet-research.org/2025/03/24/cryptocurrency-and-extremism-how-social-network-analysis-is-used-to-track-extremist-cryptocurrency-donations/>.
- 11 See, for instance, Levi J. West, "#jihad: Understanding Social Media as a Weapon," *Security Challenges* 12, No. 2, 2016, 9-26.
- 12 Ronen Bergman and Adam Rasgon, "A Memo in a Bunker, Intercepted Communications and Hamas's Oct. 7 Plans," *New York Times*, October 11, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/11/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-plans.html>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibidem.
- 15 Eric Cortellessa, "The Oct. 7 Massacre Revealed a New Hamas Social Media Strategy," *TIME*, October 31, 2023, <https://time.com/6330005/the-oct-7-massacre-revealed-a-new-hamas-social-media-strategy/>.
- 16 Stav Levaton, "Recent killing of Hamas's masked spokesman won't silence its propaganda war, expert warns," *Times of Israel*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/recent-killing-of-hamass-masked-spokesman-wont-silence-its-propaganda-war-expert-warns/>.

THE INFORMATION FRONT IN MODERN TERRORISM

- 17 See Emerson T. Brooking, Layla Mashkoor, and Jacqueline Malaret, “Distortion by design: How social media platforms shaped our initial understanding of the Israel-Hamas conflict,” The Atlantic Council, December 21, 2023; see also Steven Overly, “ Hamas uses social media to incite fear, researchers find,” Politico, October 11, 2023.
- 18 Donie O’Sullivan Brian Fung, “ Hamas’ social media following has skyrocketed since its attack. America is powerless to stop it,” CNN, October 17, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/16/tech/hamas-telegram/index.html>.
- 19 “Fight against terrorism — dissemination of content online,” EUR-Lex, n.d., <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/fight-against-terrorism-dissemination-of-content-online.html>

Blacklisting the Brotherhood

BY JONATHAN SCHANZER

The Trump administration made history on November 24, 2025, when it issued an executive order calling for the U.S. government to designate “certain Muslim Brotherhood chapters as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists.”¹ It made history again when it followed through and, in early 2026, formally designated three chapters of the global Islamist network.

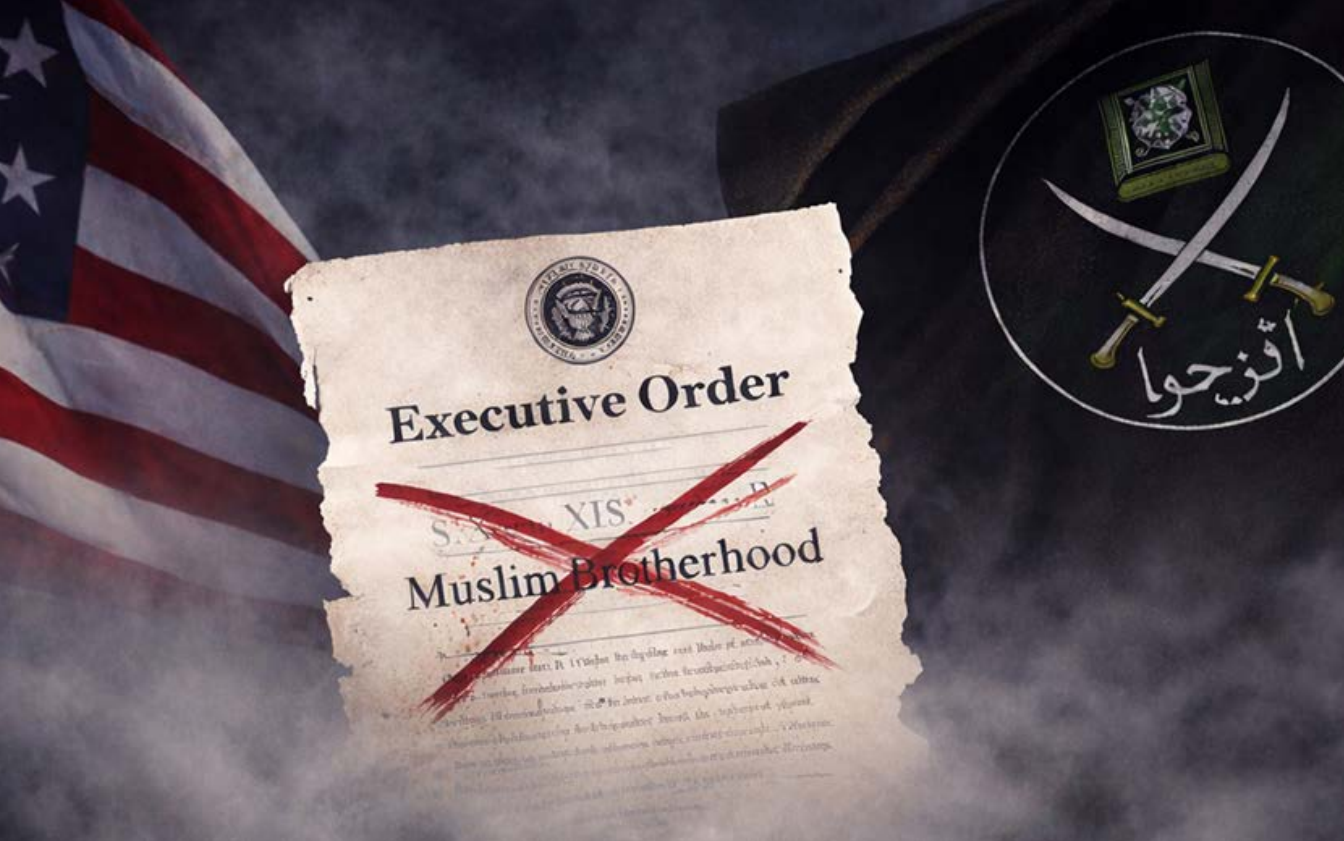
Arriving at this moment was not easy. Previous attempts to place targeted financial sanctions on the world’s most influential Islamist organization had failed at the height of the “War on Terror.” Similar efforts, launched during the first Trump presidency, also sputtered. The problem was rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood’s lack of homogeneity. The modern Brotherhood is a sprawling network of national branches and affiliated groups that share a common lineage but not a unified chain of command. Some of its branches are violent. Others are patient, pragmatic, and inclined to accept the authority of their respective national governments. As a result, a “one size fits all” approach was rejected by the U.S. government’s scrupulous lawyers.

The new Trump administration effort is already more successful, because it is more modest in scope. Admittedly, questions remain as to how effective a step-by-step process can be over time. Much will depend on how the Administration follows up on its first tranche of designations – and how aggressive it will be as it widens the aperture.

EMERGENCE IN EGYPT

The Muslim Brotherhood is the ideological progenitor of nearly every violent *jihadi* group in recent decades. And while Islamist groups operate the world over, few have the influence of this radical network.

Jonathan Schanzer is executive director of Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He is a former terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of the Treasury.



Founded in Egypt in 1928 by schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood emerged in response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rapid spread of Western culture that resulted from successive Western interventions — France (1798-1801) and then Great Britain (1822-1936) — in its internal affairs. The Brotherhood sought to combat these unwelcome changes by stressing the need for the return of Islam as the dominant driver of Egyptian domestic culture, and for the defeat of the West.

Soon enough, the Brotherhood would spread its ideology beyond its own borders. But in the early years, the battle was largely domestic. In 1940, authorities arrested al-Banna in response to the activities of his organization’s “Secret Apparatus,” which carried out violence against the regime.² By 1948, the group had assassinated a judge and a police chief. That same year, a member of the Brotherhood succeeded in killing Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Naqrashi after he formally outlawed the group and ordered the seizure of its assets.³ The regime responded with a nationwide crackdown, including the assassination of al-Banna himself.

Relations between the Brotherhood and the regime improved with the rise of the Free Officers group, which came to power by overthrowing the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. In fact, the MB was the only political group permitted to operate freely after the Free Officers’ rebellion. The movement was outlawed in 1954, however, following a failed attempt on the life of future president Gamal Abd al-Nasser, then the *de facto* leader of the Free Officers *junta*. In 1955, Nasser had six Brotherhood leaders executed, and he ordered the imprisonment of hundreds of others. Many Brotherhood operatives fled Egypt for other locales, where new chapters emerged.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Brotherhood came under the sway of Islamist educator and political theorist Sayyid Qutb. Qutb argued that secular Arab rulers who claimed to be

Muslims were apostates and that governments that failed to conform to the Brotherhood's ideological standards were un-Islamic.⁴ He suggested that *jihad* was the proper path for overthrowing what he deemed to be heretical regimes living in *jahiliyya*, or pre-Islamic ignorance. Today, this is a common theme among *jihadists*. However, at the time, Qutb was breaking new and dangerous ground. In 1966, he was tried and hanged for opposing the regime.

In 1967, after Egypt's devastating loss to Israel in the Six-Day War, Nasser's pan-Arabist ideology lost legitimacy, creating an opportunity for the Brotherhood to fill the void. In 1970, after Anwar Sadat came to power, he released many Brotherhood figures from prison. Sadat's government allowed the movement greater freedoms and even encouraged Islamic groups to combat leftists and Nasserite organizations. The Brotherhood soon established its own financial institutions, social welfare organizations, publishing houses, and newspapers.

In the 1970s, the Brotherhood opposed Sadat's liberal approach to women's rights, the increase in nightclubs, prostitution, gambling, alcohol consumption, and other non-Islamic activities, as well as his outreach to Israel. In response, Sadat banned Brotherhood publications in September 1981 and ordered the arrest of approximately 1,000 of its members. The following month, Sadat fell to the bullets of an assassin from the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, whose extremism bore the direct imprint of Brotherhood ideology. The conspirators included Omar Abdel Rahman, the "blind sheikh" who later relocated to New Jersey and play a key role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, a physician and Brotherhood member who – alongside Osama bin Laden – later founded al-Qaeda.

THE BROTHERHOOD GOES GLOBAL

The Brotherhood was far from simply a local phenomenon, however. Following its entrenchment in Egypt, the movement's influence spread throughout the region – and beyond.

In 1946, Mustafa al-Sibai, an associate of al-Banna's, became the first leader of the Brotherhood in Syria. Like its Egyptian counterpart, the Syrian branch subsequently dispatched volunteers to fight in the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948.⁵ For multiple reasons, the Brotherhood went on to oppose the rise of Syria's Baathist regime in the 1960s. First, it resisted the regime's inclination to westernize and secularize. Second, the Brotherhood was against the socialist nature of the regime. Third, it chafed at the minority rule of the Alawite sect. And lastly, it opposed the authoritarian rule of Hafez al-Assad.

What followed was a decades-long campaign of assassinations and bombings aimed at weakening the regime, culminating in the group's attempted June 1980 assassination of Assad himself. The regime exacted immediate revenge by killing up to 1,000 Brotherhood prisoners, and conducting surprise searches and roundups in Hama, Aleppo, and other Sunni Arab strongholds. The Brotherhood responded on November 29, 1981, with a car bomb in Damascus, killing 64. The last straw came in early 1982, when a plot was uncovered within the Syrian air force to topple the regime. In response, Assad ordered his troops to enter the Brotherhood stronghold town of Hama. The battle lasted for 18 days, and the government leveled the city with no regard for civilians. Anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 Syrians died. Even the survivors did not last long, as "virtually the entire Muslim religious

leadership in Hama — from Sheiks to teachers to mosque caretakers — who survived the battle for the city were liquidated afterward in one fashion or another.⁶

Five years after the devastation in Syria, the Brotherhood reemerged with new vigor in the Palestinian territories. The 1987 Palestinian *intifada*, or armed uprising, birthed a new violent faction of the movement. Of course, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood itself was not new. The first branch was formed in 1946 in Jerusalem, and the group was part of the patchwork of Palestinian groups struggling to establish a national identity in the early decades of the conflict.

In what would be later seen as a blunder of epic proportions, the Israeli military provided Ahmed Yassin, the eventual founder of Hamas, with a license to establish *al-Mujamma' al-Islami* (the Islamic Center) in 1978. At the time, Yassin and his followers rejected the “external jihad” against Israel as impractical, choosing to focus on the “internal jihad” of building their influence within Palestinian society. This led Israel to view the group as an ally of convenience in a mutual struggle against Yasser Arafat’s secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Yassin’s movement boasted a network of health services, day cares, youth activities, and food services that won the support and loyalty of the destitute Palestinians in Gaza’s refugee camps.

In December 1987, the First Intifada erupted. Elements of the Muslim Brotherhood quickly embraced a more aggressive role in the “Palestinian resistance.”⁷ In January 1988, weeks after the outbreak of the unrest, members of the Brotherhood splintered from the movement, creating the Islamic Resistance Movement, *Harakat al-Muqawamma al-Islamiyya*, whose acronym is Hamas. The group emerged as the military arm of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and extended its influence from Gaza into the West Bank. By the end of 1988, Western and Israeli observers speculated that Hamas was on the verge of replacing Fatah and the PLO as the leading power in the territories.⁸ Hamas went on to become the most violent and powerful of the Muslim Brotherhood’s various chapters and arms.

The rise to power of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan in 1989 marked another milestone in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood: the creation of the first government that embraced the Brotherhood’s ideology and strategy.

Admittedly, the Brotherhood was not a new phenomenon in Sudan either. The movement established one of its first chapters there in 1949, and it played an important role in Sudanese politics for decades – most notably after the rise of Islamist ideologue Hassan al-Turabi in the 1960s. Turabi created the Islamic Charter Front, a coalition of Muslims opposed to communism and seeking the adaptation of *Shari’a* as the basis for the country’s legal system.

In 1989, al-Bashir joined forces with Turabi, and the resulting government emerged as the world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism, hosting groups like al-Qaeda and Hamas. In fact, in 1995, Bin Laden teamed up with his Sudanese hosts to launch a failed assassination attempt on then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.⁹ Subsequently, in 1998, the United States attacked Sudan in response to the twin embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania earlier that year, which were attributed to al-Qaeda.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent “war on terror” placed enormous pressure on the Bashir regime to cut its ties with terrorist groups. By then, Bin Laden had already relocated to Afghanistan, and Sudan mostly complied with subsequent American demands as a means to survive. Bashir’s regime was thus neutered ideologically but nevertheless held on for a time, eventually collapsing in 2019.

The Muslim Brotherhood experienced a resurgence during the “Arab Spring.” In the wake of the unrest that began in Tunisia in late 2010, Brotherhood factions enjoyed an increase in power and influence in Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and beyond. Egypt, for a brief period, was even led by an elected Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Morsi, before a military *coup d’etat* toppled him. The Brotherhood-affiliated regimes of Turkey and Qatar were overt sponsors of these movements, and they remain pivotal supporters of the network today.¹⁰

The Arab Spring sputtered quickly, leaving behind mostly chaos and unrest. But the Brotherhood remains a powerful force. In fact, it maintains a presence in no fewer than 92 countries.¹¹ And while not all these chapters are violent, many are. In recent years, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood resurfaced and carried out terrorist attacks that caught the government off guard. Libya has experienced similar challenges since the fall of long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi. In Jordan, the government disrupted a violent Muslim Brotherhood plot in April 2025, prompting an all-out ban on the group. Meanwhile, Hamas launched a brutal assault on Israel in 2023, sparking a wider regional war on seven fronts.

In 2025, when Donald Trump returned to the White House for a second term, it was clear that the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood had not abated. But with so many other conflicts around the world, the network seemed a relatively low priority. Nevertheless, within his first year, the president took unprecedented steps.

TWO TRUMP ACTIONS

The November 2025 executive order was bold in vision, yet modest in scope. Rather than attempting a blanket designation of the global Brotherhood network, the White House called upon the U.S. government to assess the viability of sanctions against individual foreign chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Specifically, it called on the State and Treasury Departments to examine the chapters in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Egypt was a slam dunk. The United States had acted against the Brotherhood there in 2018 by imposing sanctions on two splinter groups: HASM and Liwa al-Thawra. Indeed, there was already a body of evidence against Muslim Brotherhood offshoots in Egypt, and the government in Cairo claimed to possess ample proof that the group was a threat in other ways. Indeed, the government of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi had declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be an enemy of the state back in 2013.

Similarly, the case for designating the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan was not a complicated one. The planned attack in April 2025 made clear the Brotherhood had abandoned its previous position of respecting the established order in the Hashemite Kingdom.¹² While the Brotherhood had been technically illegal in Jordan since 2020, this represented a ban in name only. For decades, the government in Amman had preferred to manage the threat rather than risk a confrontation. But that was before authorities thwarted the April 2025 plot.

BLACKLISTING THE BROTHERHOOD

Finally, there was the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon, where the local branch is known as the Islamic Group. The real threat there, of course, is Hezbollah. But the Islamic Group has an armed wing known as Quwwat al-Fajr that reportedly attacked Israel with rockets multiple times in 2023 and 2024.¹³ Thanks to the peculiarities of Lebanon's sectarian politics, the Islamic Group is fully legal and operates in the open – for now.

Not surprisingly, these branches met the criteria for designation, and on January 13, 2025, the Administration sanctioned all three. The U.S. government can now sanction the people, businesses, nonprofits, and networks that support these banned groups.

WIDENING THE LENS

These moves are hopefully just the beginning. After a successful first tranche of sanctions, Washington can now widen the lens to target other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Libya's Hizb al-Watan is one possible target. Translated as either the Homeland Party or the National Party, Hizb al-Watan is led by Abdelhakim Belhaj and Salafi cleric Ali al-Sallabi. Prior to 2011, Sallabi had lived in Qatar and studied under the late Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was regarded as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Belhaj, also known as Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq, previously led the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which the U.S. Treasury Department and UN Security Council both designated in 2001. During the 2011 uprising against Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Sallabi's cadres reportedly received assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and military training from Qatar.¹⁴

After the toppling of Gaddafi, Sallabi formed the National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development party, which aimed to make Islamic law the basis of Libya's constitution. In 2011, Belhaj announced the launch of Hizb al-Watan. The group subsequently joined other Islamist militias in the 2014 "Libya Dawn" movement which drove the elected and internationally recognized government from Tripoli.¹⁵ Sallabi and Belhaj appear on a list of 59 people that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain accuse of having links to terrorism and enjoying Qatari support.¹⁶

Yemen's al-Islah is another option. This is Yemen's local Brotherhood affiliate, with its membership consisting of Brotherhood supporters, Salafists, and tribal figures (who have more reach and influence with the rural Yemeni population). Islah's recent history is filled with ties to terrorism. One co-founder was the late Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, whom a federal lawsuit identifies as a coordinator of the 2000 attack on the *USS Cole* that killed 17 U.S. Navy sailors.¹⁷ The United States designated Zindani in January 2004 as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, describing him as a "spiritual leader" of Osama bin Laden and playing "a key role in the purchase of weapons on behalf of al-Qaeda and other terrorists."¹⁸ The United Nations followed suit a month later.

In 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department noted that Zindani, along with another designated terrorist, had "issued religious guidance in support of AQAP [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] operations."¹⁹ In 2006 — two years after being designated — Zindani led a fund-raising campaign for Hamas in Yemen, reportedly collecting over \$279 million from 50,000 mosques for the terrorist group.²⁰ Zindani was likewise a board member of the Union of

Good, an umbrella organization the U.S. designated for financing Hamas. Zindani also founded al-Iman University, which has served as a *jihadist* recruiting hub.²¹ Senior Islah Party members reportedly harbored senior al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki prior to his 2011 death in a U.S. drone strike.²²

Today, Islah is part of the anti-Houthi coalition, with two of its members sitting on Yemen's internationally-recognized Presidential Leadership Council. But this does not make Islah moderate. Critics charge that Islah quietly collaborates with the Houthis, and Islah leaders endorse Houthi attacks on Israel.²³

The Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam SeMalaysia) or PAS is yet another option. PAS is the country's oldest and largest opposition political party, advocating the establishment of Malaysia as an Islamic state.²⁴ PAS has a history of strong ties to the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement, and today Malaysia plays host to some of the movement's top figures.²⁵ PAS has troubling ties to terrorism. Specifically, the group may be providing in-country assistance to the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas, dating back to 2002.²⁶ In 2012, at least 10 Hamas members traveled to Malaysia for training to prepare for a cross-border attack against Israel. The group reportedly trained for kidnapping soldiers, anti-tank ambushes, and sniper attacks.²⁷ In 2014, Israel conducted a sweeping raid in the West Bank during which it captured one Majdi Mafarja, who admitted to training in message encryption and computer hacking for Hamas in Malaysia.²⁸

In 2015, Israeli media reported that at least two senior Hamas officials – Ma'an Hatib and Radwan al-Atrash – were operating out of Malaysia.²⁹ Hamas has also operated a cultural organization in the country called Rabitat Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria Association).³⁰ In 2013, a Hamas delegation led by then-politburo chief Khaled Meshaal visited Kuala Lumpur. Meshaal returned in 2015 and openly advocated for violence against Israel.³¹ More recently, in 2018, the Israeli spy agency Mossad tracked and assassinated Fadi Mohammad al-Batsh, a Hamas member operating out of Kuala Lumpur. Al-Batsh was reportedly involved in developing drones, rockets, and other weapons for the group, and may also have been negotiating arms deals with North Korea.³²

Assuming these branches of the Muslim Brotherhood meet the criteria, the U.S. government would be able to sanction the people, businesses, nonprofits, and networks that support them. The network of sanctioned Muslim Brotherhood entities would grow, thereby restricting the ability of the wider network to access the formal banking sector.

Assessing these and other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood will likely also highlight bridgeheads that the movement established in the West. Many Brotherhood figures who fled their home countries in the Middle East are now based in Europe, where the organization enjoys mostly free reign (the only European country that currently outlaws the Brotherhood is Austria).

One jurisdiction to watch in this regard is the UK. London is a notorious haven for Egyptian Islamists. Now that the United States has determined that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization, it may now generate intelligence on certain

Brotherhood figures in the UK – something which could, in turn, further spur debate already taking place in the United Kingdom about proscription.

BATTLES NOT YET JOINED

Absent in the Trump executive order was any mention of the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States, where it has had a presence since the 1960s. In the U.S., as in most of Europe, the Brotherhood rarely announces itself publicly but rather acts through a network of organizations it controls informally. These bodies range from student groups to businesses to advocacy organizations. Substantial information about this network became public through the 2008 Holy Land Foundation terror financing trial, in which prosecutors presented evidence that the foundation had funneled more than \$12 million to Hamas before being shuttered in 2001.³³

From a policy perspective, it is important to understand that the U.S. government is unable to impose sanctions on domestic persons or entities. Whereas the Treasury had the authority to do so in the early 2000s, that power has since been curtailed. The reason is simple: sanctions are a tool for imposing costs on those beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement. If citizens of the United States, or resident non-citizens, are guilty of supporting terrorism, they should be arrested and tried. This approach has occasionally led to the arrest and conviction of major terror financiers, and should remain the U.S. government's approach.

Moreover, the battle against domestic extremists may not be one that the White House wishes to fight – at least for now. After amassing more evidence on the wider network of Muslim Brotherhood chapters worldwide, there may be clearer indications of domestic actors' support for terrorists abroad. In turn, this evidence could help build a case against American extremists. Such things take time, but should not be ruled out.

Another fight that the Trump administration has deferred, at least for the moment, surrounds state sponsors of the Muslim Brotherhood. The tiny Gulf emirate of Qatar possesses bottomless energy wealth and spends a great deal of it promoting the Brotherhood worldwide. This is done through soft power tools like the pro-Islamist *Al Jazeera* television network and the direct funding of various Muslim Brotherhood groups, including Hamas. The Republic of Turkey is another sponsor – one that, despite lacking the wealth of Qatar, engages in a wide range of outreach to empower Brotherhood chapters across the Middle East. Indeed, the Brotherhood is an important vehicle for advancing Ankara's neo-Ottoman ambitions across the Middle East. Together, Qatar and Turkey represent a dangerous axis in the promotion of Muslim Brotherhood ideology worldwide.

Inexplicably, despite the Trump administration's recognition of the Muslim Brotherhood threat, these two countries are still viewed by the White House as allies. In fact, the level of bilateral engagement with each is now at an all-time high. Trump's personal relationships with Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani and Turkish strongman Recep

Tayyip Erdogan remain warm, and they have received zero admonition for their continued nurturing of the Brotherhood. This will need to change if there is to be a meaningful effort to curb the growth of the global Islamist movement.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Given the failure of past efforts to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, the step-by-step approach adopted by the Trump administration is likely a wise one. This approach, which will enable the Administration to defend the evidence it compiled on the clearest examples of Muslim Brotherhood violence, is likely to ensure lasting progress on this issue.

Moreover, if the Trump administration stays focused on addressing issues such as state sponsorship of the global network, as well as designating other Muslim Brotherhood branches and their enablers abroad, the process could lead inexorably to a blanket designation of the Brotherhood as a whole. That could include the domestic branches, as well. All of which would be a remarkable, and surprising, achievement, and a lasting counterterrorism legacy.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The White House, “Designation of Certain Muslim Brotherhood Chapters as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” November 24, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/11/designation-of-certain-muslim-brotherhood-chapters-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists>.
- 2 Abd al-Monein Said Aly and Manfred W. Wenner, “Modern Islamic Reform Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt,” *Middle East Journal*, Summer 1982, 341.
- 3 Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 67.
- 4 Qutb expounded upon these subjects in his book *Milestones*. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* [Ma’alim Fi’l-Tareeq] (Egypt: Kazi Publications, 1964), <https://ia802803.us.archive.org/3/items/milestones-syedqutb/milestones-fl.pdf>.
- 5 Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 152-162.
- 6 Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1989), 86.
- 7 Glenn E. Robinson, *Building A Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 148.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 9 John Lancaster, “Gunmen Try To Kill Mubarak,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/27/gunmen-try-to-kill-mubarak/19f4d0db-a1ca-4011-95cc-1003951a929a>.
- 10 Natalie Ecanow and Mariam Wahba, “Qatar Tacitly Approves Muslim Scholars’ Call for ‘Armed Jihad’ Against Israel,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 11, 2025. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy_briefs/2025/04/11/qatar-tacitly-approves-muslim-scholars-call-for-armed-jihad-against-israel)
- 11 Jane Arraf, “Muslim Brotherhood, Mainstream in Many Countries, May Be Listed as Terrorist Group,” *NPR*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/02/22/516437938/muslim-brotherhoodmainstream-in-many-countries-may-be-listed-as-terror-group>.
- 12 Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Jordan says it has foiled attacks by Muslim Brotherhood,” *Reuters*, April 15, 2025, (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordan-foils-plot-involving-rockets-drones-source-says-suspects-linked-amas-2025-04-15>).
- 13 David Adesnik, Mariam Wahba, Ahmad Sharawi, David Daoud, Natalie Ecanow, Hussain Abdul-Hussain, and Bridget Toomey, “Patient Extremism: The Many Faces of the Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/10/27/patient-extremism-the-many-faces-of-the-muslim-brotherhood>.
- 14 Sam Dagher, Charles Levinson, and Margaret Coker, “Tiny Kingdom’s Huge Role in Libya Draws Concern,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204002304576627000922764650>.
- 15 Chris Stephen and Anne Penketh, “Libyan capital under Islamist control after Tripoli airport seized,” *The Guardian*, August 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/24/libya-capital-under-islamist-control-tripoli-airport-seized-operation-dawn>.
- 16 “Qatar-linked people, groups on terror list,” *Reuters*, June 9, 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatarlinked-people-groups-on-terror-list-1.2040686>.
- 17 *Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act of 2015*, H.R. 389, 114th Congress (2015), <https://www.congress.gov/114/bills/hr3892/BILLS-114hr3892ih.pdf>.

BLACKLISTING THE BROTHERHOOD

- 18 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist," February 24, 2004, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/js1190>.
- 19 U.S. Treasury Department, "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen," December 18, 2013, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl2249>.
- 20 Amani al-Soufi, "يمني يجمع تبرعات لصالح حماس عبر حسابات رسمية" [Yemen collects donations for Hamas via official accounts], Elaph, March 22, 2006, <http://elaph.com/Web/Politics/2006/3/136831.htm?sectionarchive=Politics>.
- 21 Thomas Joscelyn, Testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 9, 2017, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/030917_TJ_Resolving_Conflict_Yemen.pdf.
- 22 Bill Roggio, "Anwar al Awlaki sheltered in homes of senior Islah party members," FDD's Long War Journal, October 6, 2011, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/10/anwar_al_awlaki_shelter_in_hom.php.
- 23 Adesnik et al., "Patient Extremism: The Many Faces of the Muslim Brotherhood."
- 24 Amy Chew, "The rising force in Malaysia's opposition," Al Jazeera, February 10, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/02/201321092433869462.html>.
- 25 "Expelled Muslim Brotherhood leaders may head to Malaysia, says report," The Star, September 17, 2014, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/09/17/muslim-brotherhood-leaders-expelled-from-qatar-malaysia>.
- 26 "Hezbollah, Hamas Speakers Address Malaysian Opposition Conference," Associated Press, May 30, 2002, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5179792>.
- 27 Adiv Sterman, "Malaysia Denies it Trained Hamas Operatives," Times of Israel, July 31, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/malaysia-denies-it-trained-hamas-operatives>.
- 28 Mitch Ginsburg, "Abbas Orders Probe into Hamas Coup Plot Revealed by Israel," Times of Israel, August 19, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-orders-investigation-into-hamas-coup-plot-revealed-by-israel>.
- 29 Amos Harel, "Shin Bet: Hamas training Palestinian Students in Malaysia," Haaretz, April 28, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/premium-shin-bet-hamas-training-palestinian-students-in-malaysia-1.5355790>.
- 30 "Hamas Activity in Malaysia," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, May 6, 2015, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20805/>.
- 31 Stuart Winer, "Hamas Political Leader: Stabber are the' most exalted, noblest of people," Times of Israel, December 15, 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-political-leader-urges-more-stabbing-attacks>.
- 32 Jonathan Schanzer, "How Malaysia Became a Training Ground for Hamas," Tablet, May 4, 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/how-malaysia-became-a-training-ground-for-hamas>.
- 33 Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Chapter 7.

Europe's Changing Counterterrorism Challenge

BY HANS JAKOB SCHINDLER

Today, Europe is facing a resurgent and increasingly complex terrorism threat. Between 2022 and 2024, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL) reports that 206 terror attacks—both foiled and successful—were recorded on the continent, and 1255 individuals were arrested on terrorist-related charges.¹ Put another way, Europe as a whole is experiencing more than one terror attack per week, on average; slightly less than six per month. Moreover, those statistics are assuredly incomplete, since EUROPOL only collates data that is forwarded by its member states.

The figures above reflect a structural challenge to Europe's security environment. The continent now confronts the convergence of multiple external conflicts, accelerating radicalization dynamics, and institutional constraints that have hampered the ability of its governments to respond effectively.

Yet, although the current threat landscape is serious, it is not insurmountable. Addressing it, however, will require sustained reforms across the legal, financial and technical frameworks that the continent's member states have marshalled in the fight against terrorism. And the continent's current, heightened focus on defense and security provides a window of opportunity to do so.

EXTERNAL SHAPING FORCES

Europe's internal security challenges cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, they are directly linked to instability on the continent's periphery, where terrorist networks, proxy conflicts and state adversaries are now increasingly active.

Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler is the Senior Director of the Counter Extremism Project (CEP), as well as the Auschwitz Center on Hate, Extremism and Radicalization (ARCHER), and is a member of the advisory board on Islamism prevention and combating Islamism of the Interior Ministry of Germany. He also sits on the advisory boards of a range of multilateral organizations. He previously served as the Coordinator of the UN Security Council's ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, and in various positions in German's security establishment.

One of the principal drivers of this disorder is the Islamic State. Since the 2021 withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the return to power of the Taliban there, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State's regional franchise, has flourished in the Southwest Asian state. While ISKP initially focused on destabilizing Taliban rule, it has increasingly turned its attention abroad – including toward Europe. The March 2024 attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall was only the most striking example of this activism and reach. ISKP has also been involved in guiding extremist actors in Europe; for instance, in September 2022, German authorities arrested an underaged ISIS sympathizer who had been instructed (via social media app Telegram) to establish a terror cell in the country and prepare a terror attack there.² Even when direct operational control is absent, ISKP propaganda has demonstrated the ability to inspire a range of hostile acts, from the successful knife attack in Solingen, Germany that took place in August 2024 to the foiled attack on a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, Austria the same month.³

In the wider European neighborhood, other ISIS affiliates (and those of al-Qaeda) are growing as well. These include Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the al-Qaeda affiliate in West Africa, and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), ISIS' regional franchise, both of which control substantial territory in Burkina Faso and Mali and have extended operations into an increasing number of countries, including Niger, Chad and Cote D'Ivoire.⁴ Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the IS affiliate in Nigeria, has likewise increased its operational capabilities, conducting terror attacks beyond its traditional area of operations in the northeast of the country. Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), for its part, continues to operate in Congo, Uganda and Mozambique, while the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab has gained ground in Somalia in recent years. Cumulatively, these groups now operate across a nearly continuous band of instability stretching from West Africa to the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, despite the destruction of its self-declared *caliphate* in 2019, ISIS in Syria has been able to rebuild increasingly capable clandestine networks, and to significantly increase the tempo of its attacks in the country.⁵ It remains to be seen whether the new government of one-time *jihadi* Ahmed al-Sharaa can effectively contain this threat, now that it is in power in Damascus. But continued instability in the country—including sectarian violence as well as the presence of several thousand radicalized foreign terrorist fighters, among them individuals from Türkiye, the Caucasus and Europe⁶—does not bode well in this regard.

These extremist advances, in turn, have served to inspire sympathizers in Europe, and to at least partially reverse the ideological setback suffered by Islamist forces as a result of the destruction of ISIS' physical *caliphate* nearly seven years ago.

A second challenge to the European order is the one posed by Russian hybrid warfare. Since its second invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022, Moscow has dramatically expanded its use of hybrid warfare against the countries of Europe. In addition to espionage and sabotage operations against military and critical infrastructure, the Kremlin's



asymmetric toolkit also includes assassination plots, including against leading members of the European armaments industry, which is now heavily involved in assisting Ukraine in countering Russia's war of aggression.⁷ Notable, too, is the larger Russian assault on Europe's democratic system. Targeted disinformation campaigns have become a central part of the Russian hybrid warfare playbook, with the aim of undermining trust in governmental institutions and sowing discord in European societies. Collectively, this hybrid warfare campaign has imposed new and growing demands on Europe's already strained internal security services.

Finally, Europe has been buffeted by the effects of the latest conflict in the Middle East. The terror campaign carried out by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war in Gaza as well as in Lebanon, with the Houthis and Iran, led to a significant radicalization of individuals across the Islamist spectrum. It also resulted in a strengthening of alliances between Islamist extremists and left-wing ones, based around a shared rejection of the State of Israel—with ominous results.

The conflict likewise exposed Hamas's years-long attempts to establish a clandestine terror infrastructure on the continent, as subsequent arrests in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere uncovered networks tasked with procuring weapons and preparing for potential attacks.⁸ These apprehensions highlighted that, in the years before Oct. 7, 2023, the Palestinian movement had succeeded in erecting a terror infrastructure that would have allowed it to carry out attacks on targets in Europe at will.

Other parts of Iran's extensive proxy network also represent significant threats. For instance, Lebanon's Hezbollah militia is known to have an extensive presence on the

continent (and in Germany in particular), with its operatives continuing to use this beach-head to raise funds and prepare attacks, such as the 2012 assault on Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria.⁹

Meanwhile, Iran itself has become entrenched on the continent, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) developing connections to European organized crime groups that have enabled the regime to conduct attacks not only against Iranian dissidents abroad but also against Jewish and Israeli targets. Plots have been discovered primarily in Sweden, Germany and France, with a noticeable uptick between 2021 and 2024.¹⁰

Thus, while Europe has only limited ability to shape events in the Middle East, the continent is nevertheless forced to contend with the consequences of conflicts there.

A GRIM INTERNAL PICTURE

The external threats noted above intersect with internal vulnerabilities within Europe itself – vulnerabilities that have become increasingly pronounced in recent years.

Like the United States, Europe has experienced a significant uptick in antisemitic incidents in the wake of Oct. 7, 2023. Notably, these incidents have been driven not only by spontaneous radicalization, but by organized and increasingly effective antisemitic networks.¹¹ They have likewise been aided by newfound alliances between extremists of various ideological milieus – in particular, a growing interplay between Islamist extremists and left-wing radicals.

Such developments underscore a critical institutional failure. By and large, European governments have responded by punishing individual antisemitic incidents, without a focus on the underlying organizational networks enabling them. Moreover, European authorities have to date treated antisemitism as a derivative phenomenon, a unifying narrative that can bring together various extremist milieus, rather than recognizing it for what it is: a separate and distinct category of extremism.

At the same time, Europe faces extremist violence from across the ideological spectrum. Left-wing extremists have carried out a growing number of terrorist attacks; according to EUROPOL, since 2022 left wing violence has overshadowed that which has emanated from the European political right (71 terror attacks to 7).¹² Nevertheless, the latter cohort continues to be responsible for a significant amount of low-level violence that does not rise to the level of a terror attack.¹³ During the same time period, EUROPOL registered 44 terror attacks by Islamist extremists in Europe.¹⁴

The heightened activism by all three ideological groups, meanwhile, has been augmented by new forms of extremist violence, with some primarily driven by a strong online component. One is conspiratorial or anti-government extremism, manifested in groups such as Germany's Reichsbürger movement, which fundamentally reject the existing political order and have sought to subvert it.¹⁵ Nihilistic extremist violence is an emerging

issue as well, and the first court case against such a perpetrator is currently underway in Hamburg, Germany.¹⁶ This loosely organized international network and focuses on promoting self-harm as well as inflicting serious harm on others, with a worldview that displays a deep rejection of the existing political and social order and promotes criminal acts.¹⁷ And because this milieu is driven by individual connections online, without identifiable command and control structures, detection is challenging for security services. Perpetrators can consequently operate for prolonged periods of time before being detected.

Among the most troubling recent phenomena is the rise of individualized extremist violence. Increasingly, attackers combine various extremist narratives and personal grievances into an individualized worldview that lies outside known ideological strands. These actors often operate alone, requiring minimal logistical support, and can execute attacks with little warning. That was the case with the 2024 Christmas Market terror attack in Magdeburg, Germany, the perpetrator of which combined strong anti-Islamist views with a deep-seated hatred toward a range of German officials and institutions while not being connected to any wider ideological network or milieu.¹⁸

These extremist phenomena are both driven and accelerated by the existing social media landscape, which allows instantaneous, cost-free and international communication and thereby reduces operational costs for violent individuals, groups and networks. At the same time, the nature of social media platform algorithms, which are geared toward maximizing user engagement and therefore deepen personalized information bubbles, are accelerating radicalization.¹⁹

To date, this threat vector has received insufficient attention. Across Europe, security services are navigating the tension between operational efficiency and the protection of personal data and fundamental rights. Austria, for instance, is now debating the complicated issue of messenger monitoring capabilities, including the tracking of encrypted messages, with suggested upgrades hampered by political and legal challenges.²⁰ Similarly, Germany intends to expand the capabilities of its security and intelligence services, with an emphasis on bolstering their cyber capabilities.²¹ But if the past is any guide, these planned upgrades will be met with fierce resistance. The latest legal reform of the German security and intelligence services even encountered challenges in Germany's constitutional court which resulted in the introduction of new and restrictive data protection measures.²² The list goes on. Given this pattern, it is unlikely that European security and intelligence services will be granted the technical capabilities to effectively monitor the current mass data environment—at least in the short to medium term. Nor would extensive monitoring necessarily be desirable, given the significant infringement on fundamental rights that it would entail. Rather, combining an upgrade of capabilities with an effective and legally mandated mechanism for cooperation with platform providers is far and away the more efficient way to proceed.

WHAT EUROPE MUST DO

The persistence and evolution of the terrorist threats confronting Europe represent a clear challenge to continental authorities. Addressing them requires European governments – both individually and collectively – to take a series of concrete steps.

First, Europe must strengthen its internal security capabilities. Resources for security and intelligence services should be increased to enable an expansion of both personnel and technical means. Hikes in European defense spending, now underway as part of Europe's new, more fractious relationship with the United States, should include sustained investments in intelligence, law enforcement and counterterrorism infrastructure.

Second, European governments must modernize their analytical frameworks. The rise in antisemitic incidents in Europe, and the diversification of extremist ideologies, has presented a much more complex threat environment – one in which traditional models that categorize extremist threats along rigid ideological lines are increasingly inadequate. Administrative reforms are necessary to ensure more flexible and timely approaches that are better able to address new ideation, temporary ideological alliances, and nihilistic extremism in its various forms. Traditional approaches are clearly no longer adequate.

Third, European states need to deepen their intelligence cooperation. The area of the European Union and United Kingdom encompasses 28 separate governments and a multitude of different national security and intelligence authorities. Enormous financial, human and technical capabilities exist, but are fragmented across national systems.

Terrorist and violent extremist threats, however, are inherently transnational in nature, and require closer collaboration between Europe's constituent parts. Stepped-up information exchanges and cooperation is necessary, while burden sharing in areas like online monitoring and detection, as well as joint investigations, can enable authorities across the continent to more efficiently utilize the resources they have.

Finally, Europe must establish mandatory cooperation frameworks with technology platform providers. These entities are key; they are both the generators and managers of the current mass data environment. The online sphere has emerged as a key battleground for countering violent extremism and terrorism. Yet by and large, these commercial entities are not legally required to proactively cooperate with European security and intelligence services at present. Sadly, voluntary cooperation based on corporate social responsibility has proven not to be a reliable system. Legal mechanisms are required to compel platforms to identify and report credible threats and indicators of radicalization, much the same way such requirements currently inform the functioning of the financial sector with regard to suspicious transactions. Simply put, the custodians of data should be obligated to ensure that it does not create harm.

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The security challenges currently facing Europe are multifaceted, complex, and evolving. That, however, does not mean they cannot be addressed more effectively and efficiently. Doing so, however, will require an overhaul of existing legal, financial, administrative and technical systems.

EUROPE'S CHANGING COUNTERTERRORISM CHALLENGE

Today's continental debates about defense and security are driven by factors such as Russian aggression and an increasingly uncertain Transatlantic relationship. These are challenging dynamics, to be sure. But they also present a chance to revamp the way in which Europe responds to the persistent threat posed by violent extremism and disruptive ideologies. As German chancellor Friedrich Merz made clear during his opening speech at the recent Munich Security Conference, Europe must preserve its own values, protect its freedom and build on its strengths.²³ The continent should not squander the opportunity this moment presents.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Europol, "TE-SAT. European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2025," 2025, 15, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU_TE-SAT_2025.pdf
- 2 Federal Attorney General, "Anklage gegen ein mutmaßliches Mitglied sowie einen mutmaßlichen Unterstützer der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Islamischer Staat (IS) [Charges filed against an alleged member and a suspected supporter of the foreign terrorist organization "Islamic State (IS)]," March 16, 2023, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2023/Pressemitteilung-vom-16-03-2023.html>
- 3 Dino Krause, "The Islamic State's Khorasan Province Terror plots in Europe," Danish Institute for International Studies, September 2025, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/27802520/ISKP_terror_plots_in_Europe_DIIS_Report_2025_09.pdf
- 4 For an overview, see Counter-Extremism Project, "CEP-KAS West Africa," n.d., <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/cep-kas-west-africa>
- 5 Adrian Shtuni, "The Islamic State in 2025: an Evolving Threat Facing a Waning Global Response," International Center for Counter Terrorism, July 11, 2025, <https://icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-2025-evolving-threat-facing-waning-global-response#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20attacks%20in%20Syria%20in,the%20number%20was%20almost%20three%20times%20smaller.>
- 6 Joseph Röhmel, "Gefährliches Erbe – Deutsche Dschihadisten in Syrien, Bayerischer Rundfunk [Dangerous heritage – German jihadists in Syria]," May 30, 2025, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/deutsche-dschihadisten-in-syrien-hts,Um2UI11>
- 7 "Germany decries Russian plot to assassinate Rheinmetall boss," Deutsche Welle, July 12, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-decries-russian-plot-to-assassinate-rheinmetall-boss/a-69641234>
- 8 Federal Public Prosecutor General, "Four Suspected Members of the Foreign Terrorist Organisation 'HAMAS' Arrested," December 14, 2023, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2023/Pressemitteilung-vom-14-12-2023-Nr-57-Englisch.html>; "Fifth Terror Suspect Arrested in Germany in Connection With Wider Hamas Europe Plot," Foundation for Defense of Democracies Flash Brief, November 13, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/11/13/fifth-terror-suspect-arrested-in-germany-in-connection-with-wider-hamas-europe-plot/>
- 9 "2012 Bulgaria bus bomber buried at Hezbollah cemetery in Lebanon," Times of Israel, April 12, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/2012-bulgaria-bus-bomber-buried-at-hezbollah-cemetery-in-lebanon/>
- 10 Swedish Security Service, "Iran is using criminal networks in Sweden," May 30, 2024, <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/other-languages/english-engelska/press-room/news/news/2024-05-30-iran-is-using-criminal-networks-in-sweden.html>; Matthew Levitt and Sarah Boches, "Iranian External Operations in Europe: The Criminal Connection," International Center for Counter Terrorism, October 16, 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/iranian-external-operations-europe-criminal-connection#:~:text=In%20Germany%2C%20the%20IRGC%20hired,other%20in%20Essen%20in%202021.>
- 11 Alexander Ritzmann et al., "The Role of Antisemitism in the Mobilization to Violence by Extremist and Terrorist Actors," Counter Extremism Project, February 2025, <https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2025-04/CEP%20Transnational%20Antisemitism%20Study%202025.pdf>
- 12 Europol, "TE-SAT. European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2025."
- 13 Bundesministerium des Innern, "Verfassungsschutzbericht 2024," June 2025, 27, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/DE/verfassungsschutzberichte/2025-06-10-verfassungsschutzbericht-2024.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=9

EUROPE'S CHANGING COUNTERTERRORISM CHALLENGE

- 14 Europol, "TE-SAT. European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2025," 15.
- 15 For example, a network of Reichsbürger and right-wing extremists attempted a coup d'état in Germany in December 2022, including organizing armed groups across the country and a planned armed attack on the federal parliament of Germany, the Bundestag. Federal Attorney General, "Anklage gegen neun Personen u.a. wegen Mitgliedschaft in einer terroristischen Vereinigung, Vorbereitung eines hochverräterischen Unternehmens sowie versuchten Mordes vor dem Oberlandesgericht Stuttgart erhoben [Charges against nine people filed before the Stuttgart Higher Regional Court, including membership in a terrorist organization, preparation of a highly treacherous enterprise and attempted murder]," December 12, 2023, https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2023/Pressemitteilung-vom-12-12-2023-Nr-54_.html
- 16 "Anklage im Hamburger 'White Tiger' Prozess zu Ende verlesen [Charge in Hamburg's 'White Tiger' trial to end]," Die Zeit, January 13, 2026, <https://www.zeit.de/news/2026-01/13/anklage-im-hamburger-white-tiger-prozess-zu-ende-verlesen>
- 17 Felix Neumann, "Terrorismus ohne Ziel? Die Entwicklung nihilistischer Gewalt," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, January 2026, 10, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/40211523/Terrorismus+ohne+Ziel+-+Die+Entwicklung+nihilistischer+Gewalt.pdf/38be0c07-90f4-5b36-b88b-800403f4ab16?version=1.1&t=1767863232346>
- 18 Marcel Fürstenau, "Weihnachtsmarkt-Prozess: 'Dann habe ich einfach Gas gegeben' [Christmas market trial: 'Then I just gave gas']," Deutsche Welle, November 11, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/de/magdeburg-weihnachtsmarkt-anschlag-prozess-anklage-amok-taleb-a/a-74663473>
- 19 Donghee Shin and Kulsawasd Jitkajornwanich, "How Algorithms Promote Self-Radicalization: Audit of TikTok's Algorithm Using a Reverse Engineering Method," Social Science Computer Review 42, iss 4, July 30, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08944393231225547>
- 20 Parlament Österreich, "Nationalrat: Messenger-Überwachung sorgt weiter für Aufregung [National Council: Messenger surveillance continues to cause excitement]," January 21, 2026, <https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/news/in-einfacher-sprache/Nationalrat-Messenger-Ueberwachung-sorgt-weiter-fuer-Aufregung-00001>
- 21 "Aufrüstung des Bundes-Nachrichtendienstes: Kanzler Merz fordert Befugnisse für mehr Sabotage, Spionage und Cyberaktionen [Rearmament of the Federal Intelligence Service: Chancellor Merz demands powers for more sabotage, espionage and cyber actions]," Die Weltwoche, February 18, 2026, <https://weltwoche.ch/daily/aufruestung-des-bundesnachrichtendienstes-kanzler-merz-fordert-befugnisse-fuer-mehr-sabotage-spionage-und-cyberaktionen/>
- 22 Bundesverfassungsgericht, "Judgment of 19 May 2020," May 19, 2020, https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/EN/2020/05/rs20200519_1bvr283517en.html
- 23 Federal Government of Germany, "Speech by Federal Chancellor Merz at the Munich Security Conference," February 13, 2026, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/federal-government/speech-chancellor-msc-2407256>

THE BIG QUESTION

Is Europe Still A Durable Partner?

PRO: Europe Is Still Critical To U.S. Strategy

ANDREW A. MICHTA

For over a century, American national security strategy firmly depended on a transatlantic foundation. Since Woodrow Wilson's decision in 1917 to send U.S. troops to fight in World War I, our core geostrategic principle has been that no hostile power should be permitted to dominate the resources of Europe and Western Eurasia.

The logic was compelling. Such dominance, should it emerge, would trap the United States in the Western Hemisphere, thereby blocking its ability to project power across the World Ocean and to access vital trade routes and natural resources essential to the nation's prosperity and homeland security. The same reasoning led the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to prioritize Europe over Asia during World War II, even though it was Japan that directly attacked the United States. It was the same geostrategic principle that, having vanquished Germany, induced America to commit itself to the defense of Europe against the Soviet Union and led to the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

For half a century, the United States stood guard on the front lines of divided Germany, containing Soviet expansionism and, ultimately, contributing to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. During both World Wars and throughout the Cold War, American strategists understood this simple truth: a hostile power controlling Europe would possess the industrial capacity, population, and geographic position to threaten the U.S. directly. This understanding influenced

Andrew A. Michta is Professor of Strategic Studies at the Hamilton School at the University of Florida and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC. The views expressed here are his own.



U.S. involvement in World War I, the “Germany First” strategy in World War II, and the shaping of NATO’s structure and forward bases after 1945.

The United States established itself as a global power by first securing its immediate neighborhood in the Americas and then preventing any hostile power from controlling Europe and, by extension, the Atlantic routes to the Western Hemisphere. Despite pressures within the U.S. policy community after the Cold War to focus more on Asia – a strategy first voiced by Barack Obama in late 2011 and one that has gained supporters over the past decade – securing Europe remains vital today. In fact, the resurgence of great-power conflicts, the weakening of institutional structures, and the return of large-scale continental warfare in Eastern Europe have only heightened the importance of this strategy.

Today’s strategic discussion often views the Pacific as the main theater and Europe as a secondary, stabilizing front. While this shift may seem natural, it is misleading. It assumes that China is the only peer competitor capable of reshaping the global order; that geography in Asia is crucial, whereas in Europe it is less significant; and that the Atlantic alliance is fixed, requiring only maintenance instead of being a strategic priority. Each of these assumptions misses the mark. An Atlantic-first strategy—one that makes Europe the focus of American grand strategy—better protects the homeland, maintains the industrial and technological foundations of American power, and supports the alliance structure that enables U.S. global leadership.

The Pacific is indeed important. But America’s ability to compete effectively there first depends on ensuring that Europe and the Atlantic are secure. As the scholars Wess Mitchell

and Jakub Grygiel have argued, “Europe is the United States’ indispensable base in global geopolitics.”¹ This is true in terms of geostrategy, trade and investment flows, credibility, and political culture.

Indeed, Europe remains the world’s largest hub of advanced industrial economies outside North America. It spans the sea lanes and air routes that connect the United States to the rest of the world. The Atlantic remains the shortest and most secure communication line between the U.S. and its key allies, providing a pathway to project power into the Arctic, the High North, the Middle East, and Africa. Most importantly, Europe has the necessary material resources and manpower to serve as the core of NATO’s conventional deterrence and defense, with the United States offering the nuclear umbrella, high-end enablers, and logistical support. In short, the challenge for U.S. strategy in Europe is not to disconnect the Atlantic from the Pacific but to organize cooperation within NATO in a way that reduces costs while restoring deterrence and maintaining American influence on the continent.

Europe should remain a top priority because the United States is currently facing not just one major power adversary but an “Axis of Dictatorships,” including China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. Since taking office, Vladimir Putin has been challenging the settlement that ended the Cold War, aiming to restore imperial greatness by reducing American influence in Europe and negotiating spheres-of-influence arrangements with key European powers. A revanchist Russia, supported by China’s economic strength and Iranian and North Korean backing, is trying to reshape the European security order through force.

If Moscow succeeds in coercing or splitting Europe’s eastern NATO flank, the repercussions will go far beyond Ukraine or the Baltic region. It could lead to the first successful breach of the post-1945 security framework in Europe and signal to allies worldwide that American security guarantees are no longer credible. Such a development would have significant ripple effects in the Pacific and other regions, raising doubts about the U.S. security commitments and its overall resilience. Indeed, Beijing is closely watching NATO’s actions in Europe to gauge how the U.S. and its allies would respond in Asia. If the transatlantic alliance weakens or fractures altogether, China will likely interpret this as a green light to intensify pressure on Taiwan and to gain regional influence. Conversely, if the transatlantic alliance remains strong, China must reckon with a united democratic coalition that shows clear resolve.

The Pacific and the Atlantic are two very different theaters, each hosting distinct potential kinetic conflicts. The Pacific involves a long-distance maritime struggle across blue waters, while Europe features a close-quarters continental fight near Atlantic approaches. To understand the scale, projecting power across the Pacific requires the U.S. Navy to manage the “tyranny of distance.” In contrast, Europe’s distances are much shorter — it is only 20 miles from the Belarusian border to Vilnius, Lithuania’s capital, and just 130

miles from its border to Warsaw. In brief, securing the Atlantic has immediate implications for defending the American homeland, as shown by the recent dispute between the Trump administration and NATO allies over Greenland.

The problem confronted by NATO today is the three-decade-long “vacation from history” that Europe has taken, whereby – except for the countries in the Northeast Corridor (i.e., Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland) – the continent has effectively disarmed. Still, no theater in the world offers the United States the density of capable, interoperable, technologically advanced allies that Europe does and, provided they move with alacrity to resource their defenses, would allow America to transfer the burden of the conventional defense of Europe to its allies. Alliances serve as force multipliers, and a secure Europe frees up American resources. The NATO alliance is more than just a network of transactional partnerships; it is a deeply institutionalized military alliance that has evolved over 75 years through shared planning, logistics, intelligence sharing, and industrial cooperation. No similar structure exists in the Pacific, as U.S. alliances there are primarily bilateral and geographically dispersed.

Alliances are fundamentally built on shared threats and interests, but shared values help strengthen them and make them more effective during crises. European democracies remain America’s closest political allies, with a shared history and the common roots of our political institutions and culture. Public support for alliance cooperation, sanctions, and collective defense—although reduced by recent tensions in transatlantic relations—is still generally higher in Europe than in any other region.²

This transatlantic political alignment allows for a consistent strategy across U.S. administrations. Conversely, Indo-Pacific politics are diverse and often cautious. Many regional powers in Asia simultaneously balance relations with China and the United States, making complete alignment in a prolonged confrontation unlikely. In short, a U.S. strategy focused on Europe will leverage the most politically reliable coalition available to the United States.

To get there, Washington must continue pressing European capitals to meet their pledge to spend 5% of GDP on defense by 2035, and it should keep reforming its approach to working with NATO allies, with a renewed focus on the Northeast Corridor, which has become the new center of gravity for the alliance after Sweden and Finland’s accession to NATO. But if American strategy shifts away from Europe, it risks weakening the most developed alliance system in history at a crucial moment when cohesion offers a decisive edge in great-power competition and conflict.

Supporting this system isn’t just a sentimental attachment to legacy institutions. It’s a strategic necessity. Every European brigade, frigate, air wing, and cyber unit that contributes to collective defense reduces the burden on U.S. forces worldwide. Although it will likely take Germany and other Western European nations around a decade to rebuild their neglected military capabilities, Europe has the industrial capacity to move swiftly and take

on the primary role in NATO's conventional deterrence and defense. The European allies possess the financial resources to accelerate rearmament efforts.

The temptation to focus on the Pacific instead of the Atlantic, or even to declare the Pacific as the overarching priority, is understandable. China is rising, Taiwan is vulnerable, and the Indo-Pacific is changing fast. But our national security strategy must involve clearly defining and prioritizing national interests. It's about protecting the core sources of power that make all other U.S. efforts possible. Europe is that foundation, as a strong NATO provides the industrial strength, alliance unity, geographic advantage, and political legitimacy that support America's global strategy. Without Europe, the U.S. faces the Pacific challenge with fewer allies, weaker logistics, and higher strategic risks.

Prioritizing Europe, therefore, is not nostalgia. It is strategic realism. The Atlantic remains the key artery of American power, and Europe continues to be America's essential partner. The U.S. strategy for Europe should focus on enabling allies to assume greater responsibility for their defense by providing the resources required to implement the capabilities outlined in NATO's regional plans. We should also leverage Europe's industrial capacity through defense-industrial base integration, thereby boosting NATO's ability to produce weapons and munitions quickly and at scale. Improving stability in the European theater through continued U.S. presence and with greater contributions from allies will allow the United States to focus on projecting power in the Pacific to ensure the ongoing prosperity and security of the American Republic.

The Atlantic and the Pacific are not an either/or proposition. They are one problem set, and should be treated as such.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, “U.S. Strategy Should Be Europe First, Then Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/06/us-strategy-geopolitics-china-russia-europe-asia-threat/>.
- 2 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO public opinion research,” May 21, 2025), <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/nato-public-opinion-research>.

THE BIG QUESTION

Is Europe Still A Durable Partner?

CON: The Continent Is Still A Helpless Dependent

BY DOUG BANDOW

A century ago, Europe was the focus of global events. Two decades later, the continent was in ruins after six years of self-immolation. Even then, the Soviet Union forced a continuing focus on European affairs. However, with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, transformative international events quickly shifted the global focus elsewhere. Today, most Americans barely notice as Europe suffers through its worst war in eight decades. The continent no longer matters so much to the United States.

Europe's dramatic fade is unfortunate, since it could be – indeed, should be – a serious, even essential, partner for Washington. The shared historical ties remain deep. The shared democratic ideals remain enduring. The shared geopolitical interests remain important. Nevertheless, the continent falls far short of its potential.

Serious European leaders recognize this unfortunate reality. Last year, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk highlighted “a paradox” involving Europe's relationship with Washington. “500 million Europeans,” he argued, “[are asking] 300 million Americans to protect them from 140 million Russians.”¹ His numbers were slightly off, in terms of population (roughly 600 million Europeans are relying on 340 million Americans), but he was right to argue that Europe “must take greater responsibility for the continent's security.” Until it does, it will not be a serious partner for America.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon Press, 2006).

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Temporary European dependence on Washington was inevitable after the Soviet Union concluded World War II by occupying most of the eastern part of the continent. However, that did not necessitate enduring dependence. Indeed, U.S. officials insisted that the newly formed North Atlantic Treaty Organization was to be only temporary, a needed but limited shield behind which European nations could recover. Wartime commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served as NATO's first Supreme Allied Commander Europe before being elected president, explained that, "If in ten years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project will have failed."²

Fast forward eight decades. U.S. forces are still there, while European militaries remain notable for their lack of serious combat capabilities. America's allies are even unable to adequately supply weapons to Kyiv, instead agreeing to purchase U.S. arms for transfer. European governments have traded the essentials of statehood, most importantly the ability to protect their people, for a mess of pottage, indirect foreign subsidies underwriting generous welfare states for appreciative populations.

In defending this perceived bargain, European governments have remained steadfast in the face of increasingly angry, even querulous, American administrations. In 2011, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered what amounted to his valedictory address, arguing: "The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets."³

However, European governments remained loath to erode Washington's military domination, which allowed them "to spend a certain amount on butter that might otherwise have gone on guns," as *Financial Times* columnist Janan Ganesh has explained.⁴ The Europeans accurately judged their American guardians to be wanting, and did essentially nothing in response. For U.S. officials believed Washington's military domination gave them disproportionate influence over other European policies. Thus, no matter how vociferously Americans complained about European behavior, they would not take the one step that could force a change in continental policy: end the U.S. defense dole.

LESSON STILL NOT LEARNED

Ironically, Vladimir Putin did what Gates and a succession of other American presidents, defense secretaries, and secretaries of state could not: stimulate growth in European military outlays. Yet even after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and with five years of Donald Trump as president, Europe remains a largely hapless and hopeless military laggard. Last year, leading European governments staged an emergency summit in Paris, at which they agreed, again, that they should spend more on their militaries. Yet when it came to Ukraine, the dependency was still there. As British Prime Minister Keir Starmer argued,



tellingly: “Europe must play its role, and I’m prepared to consider committing British forces on the ground alongside others, if there is a lasting peace agreement, but there must be a U.S. backstop, because a U.S. security guarantee is the only way to effectively deter Russia from attacking Ukraine again.”⁵

Indeed, reported the International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The gaps in [the continent’s] military hardware and software are considerable, and the IISS estimates that replacing key elements of the U.S. conventional military capabilities assumed to be assigned to the Euro-Atlantic theatre could cost approximately USD1 trillion.”⁶ No one in America – or especially in Europe – imagines that European governments will come up with such a sum. “European NATO members took just over ten years to increase spending from an average of 1.4% to 2.1% of GDP, so the new commitment will require even greater uplifts and difficult policy choices, raising doubts as to whether it is achievable for all allies,” the IISS study politely observed.⁷

Nor have the Europeans been willing to step up on Ukraine, the survival of which matters far more to them than it does to Washington. Of course, there is much rhetoric about the need to act. Yet who in Europe is willing to do what would be necessary to yield “a just peace,” as advocated by The Telegraph’s Hamish de Bretton-Gordon?⁸ Greg Swenson, the chair of Republicans Overseas in the UK, was brutally honest when he noted that “it’s all talk. It all sounds great when you talk about democracy and defending Ukraine, but they’re just not willing to do it.”⁹

Alas, the issue is not simply feckless European leaders. Although there may be broad popular support for Ukraine versus Russia, there is little public willingness to sacrifice

wealth and lives on Kyiv's behalf. Indeed, one Pew Research Center survey found that most Europeans did not want even to fight for other NATO members, while assuming that Americans would rush to their defense.¹⁰ Only 25 percent of Greeks and Italians would defend their neighbors, the survey found. Just 32 percent of Slovaks and Turks would do so. The percentages for Hungarians, Germans, and Czechs were 33, 34, and 36, respectively. For Poles, French, and Spanish the numbers were 40, 41, and 41. Of Europeans questioned, only a majority of Lithuanians (51 percent), British (55 percent), and Dutch (64 percent) favored acting. Nevertheless, in all cases at least a plurality, and usually a majority, believed Washington would.

Alas, with the populist right generally on the rise, Europe is not likely to adopt a more responsible approach. Czechia, Italy, and Slovakia have moved toward nationalism and away from continentalism. Traditional ruling parties are under severe pressure in Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. Even more worrisome are the politics in France, Germany, and Great Britain. Last August, NBC reported: "For the first time in modern history, far-right and populist parties are simultaneously topping the polls in Europe's three main economies of Germany, France and Britain."¹¹

Although hardline nationalists could end up falling short in all three countries, ruling parties are more likely to accommodate than resist extremist demands in order to retain power. Worse, imagine a European Union with French President Marine Le Pen or Jordan Bardella, German Chancellor Tino Chrupalla or Alice Weidel, and British Prime Minister Nigel Farage, along with a gaggle of other European leaders twisting with the political winds.

Even if the establishment parties hang on in all three countries, their priority, along with that of the rest of Europe, is likely to be retaining American support, not developing a serious continental military capability. European officials, across individual governments, the European Union, and NATO, have relentlessly played Trump. During the latter's first term, observed Politico, NATO general secretary Mark Rutte leaned "heavily into public and private flattery."¹² After Trump's ostentatious state visit to Britain last year, Ganesh admitted the obvious: "the reason for courting Trump isn't (just) to puff up Britain on the world stage or to secure AI investments. It is to keep him engaged in Ukrainian and European security. Just be glad that he does respond to flattery and obeisance. Imagine if he didn't."¹³

This perspective was obvious at last June's NATO summit, when members approved the five percent of GDP to defense guideline. Sort of. Spain simply said no. Other governments emphasized that compliance would be difficult. Civilian projects will count as "military expenditures" up to 1.5 percent. Finally, the standard won't take effect until 2035, long after Trump's departure, leaving plenty of time to relax the requirement.

Indeed, Europe most clearly demonstrated its desperate desire to preserve American military domination of the continent when the European Union sacrificed its members'

economic strength to preserve Trump's favor – or, at least, reduce his previously expressed hostility. Originally, European officials appeared to gird for economic battle. However, what followed was almost complete, abject surrender.¹⁴

Why? Admitted Ganesh, the continent had to “assume the position” and sacrifice the “ultimately not existential matter of trade.”¹⁵ Similarly, explained Carnegie Europe's Stefan Lehne: “Faced with the double threat of a trade war and of the United States abandoning Ukraine, European leaders decided to bow to the wishes of the Trump administration.”¹⁶ European Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič forthrightly conceded that the trade pact “is not only about... trade: It's about security, it is about Ukraine, it is about current geopolitical volatility.”¹⁷

LOCKING IN DEPENDENCE

The Trump administration, or at least Donald Trump himself, appears to believe this is a good bargain for America. Despite years of complaining about allied fecklessness, he turns out to be more interested in using U.S. military power to squeeze economic concessions out of other nations than to reduce the military risk to Americans. Unfortunately, his approach is a fool's bargain. Trump's deals turn ever more of the international economy over to the U.S. government and especially the U.S. president, for the benefit most obviously of him, along with his family and supporters. His strategy, meanwhile, weakens friendly states economically while locking in their military inferiority.

In Europe's case, Washington is ensuring that the continent is not, and might never become, a serious and responsible partner for America. Thankfully, despite endless fear-mongering among the U.S. foreign policy elite, the world is not particularly dangerous for America, which enjoys enormous military, geographic, economic, technological, political, and cultural advantages. Nevertheless, Americans would be better off if their most obvious and enduring allies were both willing and able to protect themselves and contribute proportionally to global security, as well as cooperate with the U.S. on a range of other shared interests.

Paradoxically, the best strategy for encouraging Europeans to become such partners would be to end U.S. domination of continental decision-making, especially the provision of security. No doubt, American policymakers would be frustrated at the inevitable willingness of Europe to disagree more with Washington and even oppose its policies. Nevertheless, serious allies warn each other when one or the other is wrong. The U.S. needs precisely such a friend in Europe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 As cited in Mark Toth and Jonathan Sweet, “Europe’s thin red line in Ukraine,” *The Hill*, March 6, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/5178860-europes-thin-red-line-in-ukraine/>.
- 2 As cited in Farah Stockman, “NATO Has to Change. Here’s How,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/07/opinion/nato-europe-us-ukraine-defense.html>.
- 3 “Text of Speech by Robert Gates on the Future of NATO,” Atlantic Council NATOSource, June 10, 2011, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/text-of-speech-by-robert-gates-on-the-future-of-nato/>.
- 4 Janan Ganesh, “Europe must trim its welfare state to build a warfare state,” *Financial Times*, March 5, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/37053b2b-ccda-4ce3-a25d-f1d0f82e7989>.
- 5 Patrick Wintour, “US ‘backstop’ vital to deter future Russian attacks on Ukraine, says Starmer,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/17/starmer-urges-trump-to-provide-backstop-to-european-peacekeeping-force-in-ukraine>.
- 6 “Progress and Shortfalls in Europe’s Defence: An Assessment,” International Institute for Strategic Studies Strategic Dossier, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/pds-2025/complete-file/iiss_strategic-dossier_progress-and-shortfalls-in-europes-defence-an-assessment_092025.pdf.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, “Trump has failed to understand Putin’s warped psychology,” *The Telegraph*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/11/24/trump-putin-ukraine-peace-deal-psychology/>.
- 9 Tim Ross, Clea Caulcutt, Bjarke Smith-Meyer and Nette Nostinger, “Zelenskyy’s grim choice: Take Trump’s peace deal or rely on flaky European friends,” *Politico*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-ukraine-peace-vladimir-putin-troops-nato-ceasefire/>.
- 10 Moira Fagan and Jacob Pouloshter, “NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States,” Pew Research Center, February 9, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/>.
- 11 Alexander Smith, “Far-right populists top polls in Germany, France and Britain for the first time,” *NBC News*, August 13, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/europe/far-right-populists-top-polls-germany-france-britain-first-time-rcna224706>.
- 12 Sophia Cai and Eli Stokols, “NATO chief calls Trump ‘Daddy,’” *Politico*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/25/nato-chief-calls-trump-daddy-00423485>.
- 13 Janan Ganesh, “Europe’s necessary appeasement of Donald Trump,” *Financial Times*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/7d4866b6-28a9-4e69-9288-4e970447ffe7>.
- 14 See, for instance, “EU defends Trump trade deal after backlash from capital and businesses,” *Le Monde*, July 28, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/european-union/article/2025/07/28/eu-defends-trump-trade-deal-after-backlash-from-capitals-and-businesses_6743824_156.html.
- 15 Ganesh, “Europe’s necessary appeasement of Donald Trump.”
- 16 Rym Momtaz, “Taking the Pulse: With Trump, Has Europe Capitulated?” *Carnegie Endowment Strategic Europe*, August 28, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/08/taking-the-pulse-with-trump-has-europe-capitulated?lang=en>.
- 17 Antonia Zimmermann, “Europe’s ‘century of humiliation’ could be just beginning,” *Politico*, August 26, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-century-of-humiliation-could-be-just-beginning/>.

THE HOT SEAT

Crisis and Opportunity

INTERVIEW WITH THE HONORABLE NEWT GINGRICH

The Honorable Newt Gingrich is the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and one of America's most prominent public intellectuals. First elected to Congress from Georgia in 1978, Gingrich served for two decades in the House, rising to national prominence as the chief architect of the 1994 "Contract with America," which led Republicans to their first House majority in forty years. He was elected the 50th House Speaker in 1995. Both during his tenure in Congress and in the years since, Gingrich has been a leading voice in shaping conservative thinking on national security, foreign policy, and global competition.

In January, he sat down with *Statecraft & Strategy* Editor-in-Chief Ilan Berman to talk about the Trump administration's foreign policy priorities, America's unfolding great power competition with China, the course of the Ukraine war, and political turmoil in the Middle East.

Q: In recent years, the need for serious strategic competition with China has become increasingly well understood in Washington, to the point that it now ranks as one of the very few issues where Republicans and Democrats see eye to eye. You have been an advocate of such an approach for years. So far, though, we have not seen a transformation of industries or a national mobilization of the sort that would enable us to truly compete with the PRC. What, in your opinion, needs to be done in this regard?

The issue is less settled than it appears. There is currently a split in our approach to Communist China between three camps: the national security-focused (of which I'm one), the economically-focused (who seek benefits on the scale of Apple's investment in China, for instance), and what might be termed the "reality avoidance" wing, which is ignoring mounting evidence that China is a true long-term competitor. But Xi Jinping's aggressiveness, such as China's current military exercises around Taiwan) are gradually strengthening the national security wing and undermining the other two.

To truly compete, the United States has to develop an all of nation strategic approach to countering China. We have to mobilize on the entire range of functions which could break

down or be threatened by the PRC, including defense industry. We may need to spend as much on an all of society defense industrialization base as we currently spend on military threats to field the proper capabilities for true competition.

Q: In your 2019 book *Trump Versus China*, you laid out how, during President Trump's first term in office, the White House fundamentally shifted its view of the PRC toward one of competition. President Trump's second term foreign policy toward Beijing, however, appears to be very different. How do you explain this change, and what does it signify?

The biggest change in Trump's thinking seems to be – and here I emphasize “seems,” because I do not have unique information – that it has sunk in how truly devastating and potentially civilization-ending a nuclear war would be. This has affected the President's approach to both Russia and China, and it is making him much more tentative and cautious than he was in his first term. In addition, Trump is wrestling with how best to influence Xi Jinping without getting headlong into a war with China. At the same time, however, the Administration is rebuilding American military power and strengthening both Taiwan and Japan so as to make any foreign policy adventurism by Communist China more expensive to undertake and less likely to succeed.

Q: China's leaders are now making serious strategic investments in everything from artificial intelligence to supply chains to space development. What domains do you believe are most consequential, and which should the United States prioritize?

Quantum computing, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and space development are all so vital that none can be neglected. But simply investing in those areas is not sufficient. The United States also needs to go back and reread the dictums of Sun Tzu and realize just how many vulnerabilities there are in America's open culture and society. These represent critical vulnerabilities that could be exploited in the event of a conflict with China, with devastating effects. Imagine, for instance, a cyber-induced collapse of ATMs or electronic banking, and the societal chaos that this would create.

Q: Moving on to Russia, Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine is now four years old, and the Kremlin shows no signs that it is prepared to make a meaningful compromise in order to end the conflict. In your estimation, what is driving Putin – and what is he seeking to achieve?

In his own mind, Putin is the personification of Russian destiny. He has clearly stated that he believes the collapse of the Soviet Union represented the greatest disaster of the 20th Century. He has been methodically expanding Russian influence in Central Asia, and has tried to expand it in the West as well.

We're discovering in real time that economic sanctions have only a limited effect on a totalitarian state. Moreover, there is an assumption of pain and deprivation that is ingrained in Russian culture and Russian history, and it helps to inform why Putin is still so popular despite the country's current hardships. What this means for the current war is that it will probably take a substantial increase in Ukraine's military capabilities to finally force Putin to accept a truce on terms that the West can live with.

Q: You have been a vocal critic of arrangements that reward Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. As the Trump administration continues to attempt to negotiate some sort of settlement between the parties, what would be your advice to the White House for how best to do so?

My advice would be to dramatically increase the weapons available to Ukraine, and to support them with intelligence that would enable Kyiv to carry out a substantial logistics campaign inside Russia. Quite simply, every missile or drone attack on Ukraine should be met with a similar attack somewhere inside Russia as a way of raising the cost to the Kremlin for its war effort.

Q: Let's shift to the Middle East. America's participation in the "Twelve Day War" that targeted Iran's nuclear program last June was arguably President Trump's crowning achievement of 2025, because of the danger posed by Iran's atomic effort to America and its allies. That threat, though, hasn't gone away. The Islamic Republic is now making serious gains once again in terms of its ballistic missile capabilities and perhaps even its nuclear development. How serious is all this?

It's clear that as long as the Islamic dictatorship in Tehran survives, it will seek to acquire both nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them. The Islamic Republic has made clear that it is committed to the destruction of both Israel and the United States. America's goal, therefore, should be regime replacement, because anything short of a fundamental change in Tehran will eventually lead to a nuclear- and missile-armed Iran committed to destroying the U.S. and its allies.

Q: Does the White House share this perspective? President Trump's November 2025 National Security Strategy laid out a rather triumphant view of the Middle East, framing the region more as a zone of economic opportunity than one of security challenges. What does this formulation get right? What does it get wrong?

The White House and the U.S. government as a whole consistently underestimate how deep the dangers are. Our enemies are serious adults who actually mean what they say. Hamas has the goal of eliminating Israel embedded in its constitution. When a Hamas leader proclaims that not a single Jew will remain in "Palestine," it means precisely that – that the group is still committed to its eliminationist goals. That said, what Trump has achieved is remarkable in terms of bringing together moderate states into a collaboration with Israel. He now may be in the process of liberating both Lebanon and Syria in partnership with the Saudis and others.

These are enormous achievements. They represent big steps toward a more stable, prosperous and peaceful region. But there is still a lot of work to be done with regard to deterring and marginalizing hardline elements in the region (such as Hamas, the Houthis, and the Islamic Republic of Iran). So I would give President Trump enormous praise for progress, but wouldn't yet concede that peace is at hand.

GLOBAL VIEW: TAIPEI

Taiwan's Version Of Peace Through Strength

BY FEI-FAN LIN

Pease in the Taiwan Strait is not preserved by slogans. Nor is it kept by weapons alone. Rather, what is essential is to eliminate any expectation in Beijing that military coercion can achieve its goal at an acceptable cost. This is the logic of peace through strength for Taiwan: sustaining military denial, government continuity, and societal resilience so that China's coercion becomes too costly for it to endure.

Deterrence therefore extends beyond the military power. It rests on whether Taiwan can remain functioning under sustained pressure over time. Accordingly, Taiwan is integrating whole-of-society resilience into its overall defense concept as a core element of deterrence, enabling the nation to endure and adapt under coercion. In practice, this framework has two mutually reinforcing pillars.

MILITARY DENIAL

Taiwan remains steadfast in its commitment to self-defense, fast-tracking the development of an asymmetric military posture to counter China's rapid expansion of its kinetic assault capabilities. This strategy is engineered to deny a "quick seizure" of Taiwan, and prioritizes surviving initial strikes, disrupting landing operations, and sustaining combat power well beyond the opening phase of any potential conflict.

President Lai Ching-te has translated this strategic vision into decisive action with a record-breaking 2026 defense budget of \$31.1 billion. This fiscal expansion is further anchored by a landmark \$40 billion special budget dedicated to the development of the "T-Dome" – a multi-layered, AI-integrated air defense shield – and other asymmetric capabilities over the next couple of years. By pledging to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP by 2030, the Lai administration is signaling generational resolve to safeguard sovereignty through credible deterrence and resilient command-and-control.

Fei-fan Lin is the Deputy Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Taiwan.

Ultimately, Taiwan's defense concept prioritizes dispersion and mobility in order to minimize early losses. By deploying small, mobile, and widely distributed assets that are difficult for an attacker to target, Taiwan aims to amplify its defensive capabilities with the resources it has at hand. This approach, backed by a strengthened fuel, munitions, and repair capacity, ensures that Taiwan will be able to maintain operations even under the most intense pressure.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

But coercion rarely begins with amphibious landings. It begins with pressure designed to fracture society, disrupt governance, and erode the will to resist. Modern conflict focuses on society as much as on conventional battlefields. Energy, communications, logistics, healthcare, and public trust are all targets an adversary will seek to disrupt. As a result, Taiwan has been strengthening societal resilience so that schools, hospitals, transportation, and basic governance remain functional enough to prevent panic and paralysis.

This effort starts with continuity planning for critical infrastructure. Taiwan has been hardening and adding redundancy across essential systems, from the power sector to telecom to transportation. Taiwan has also treated medical and emergency services as stabilizers of daily life by improving surgery capacity, essential stockpiles, triage procedures, and coordination among hospitals and local authorities so disruption does not cascade into a broader public health breakdown.

Resilience likewise depends on whether supply chains can keep daily life steady by keeping materials supplied. Taiwan has been strengthening distribution through clear access points for essentials, reserve stocks, and coordination between central and local governments so execution remains coherent under pressure. Just as importantly, Taiwan has been expanding civic preparedness – including basic first aid and emergency response skills, community communication networks, and realistic exercises that make procedures familiar before a crisis.

This year, Taiwan is placing particular emphasis on civil-military integration to turn these separate efforts into a more integrated system. It is working on aligning national agencies, local governments, and critical infrastructure operators on shared procedures and clear responsibilities, so the country can absorb shocks, restore services, and sustain defense tasks. When coordination is rehearsed in advance, responses become faster and more synchronized even in the most emergent situation.

COLLECTIVE DETERRENCE NEEDED

But external responses are also critical. For Beijing, a successful invasion will look plausible only if it expects the international reaction to be slow and disjointed. That is why Taiwan and its partners need to make a quick grab implausible.

This, in turn, means routine coordination that builds shared assumptions, regular cooperation, and practical interoperability so that decisions can translate into action quickly. Taiwan and its international partners can also prepare clearly defined, trigger-based economic and political measures that can be activated rapidly, rather than negotiating



them from scratch in the middle of a crisis. Finally, partners should maintain crisis communication channels to coordinate in real time during fast-moving situations, when information is incomplete and misjudgments are most likely.

At the end of the day, partnership is a critical pillar of deterrence, and Taiwan has repeatedly demonstrated that it is a responsible, capable partner rather than a passive beneficiary of protection. Taiwan can contribute to the shared security of the global community, and it is ready to shoulder responsibilities alongside other democracies in defending the peaceful *status quo* against autocratic forces.

It brings frontline experience in countering cyber intrusions and information operations. It has deep competence in disaster response and civil coordination, along with hard-earned institutional knowledge of maintaining governance and social cohesion under persistent coercion. In addition, Taiwan helps sustain trusted technology ecosystems through world class engineering and reliable production. Recognizing these features strengthens the case for deeper coordination built in advance, rather than improvised in a crisis.

A NEW NATIONAL OPERATING MODEL

Peace through strength reduces the risk of miscalculation by removing Beijing's expectation that military coercion can deliver quick political results. For Taiwan, this is now a national model, the objective of which is a military is designed to deny aggression asymmetrically, a society able to sustain daily life under disruption, and a well-coordinated group of international partners willing and able to react quickly.

When these elements are credibly demonstrated through training, readiness, and visible execution, military operations to alter the *status quo* in Taiwan Strait becomes impractical. That, in turn, remains one of the most practical ways to preserve peace in the Taiwan Strait.

GLOBAL VIEW: KYIV

Trump's War, and What Putin Really Wants

BY OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK

President Trump has frequently argued that Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine is not his war. He has claimed that, had he been in the Oval Office in February of 2022 instead of President Biden, the war would never have started. But after a full year of futile American peace overtures toward Russia, the reality is undeniable: this is now well and truly Trump's war.

It is Trump's war not simply because he had promised to end it in twenty-four hours. It is so because Russian President Vladimir Putin has responded to every one of the White House's peacemaking efforts with intensified attacks on and the systematic destruction of Ukraine. If Trump fails in this peacemaking mission – or if he facilitates a “peace agreement” that paves the way for further Russian aggression – he will be etched into history as a weak President. Worse, he will be seen as a weaker leader than Putin, a dictator presiding over a country that has long fallen out of the rankings of successful economies. President Trump certainly cannot allow that to happen.

Over the past year, two irreconcilable realities have taken shape. In Washington, Geneva, Istanbul, and Miami, a series of international meetings has created the appearance of progress on the path to peace. But the reality on the ground tells another story. According to UN estimates, Trump's year of negotiations has become the deadliest period for civilians in Ukraine since 2022.¹ The number of those killed and wounded has surged 31 percent higher than in 2024 and 70 percent higher than in 2023. Russia has increased the number of its attacks, launching drones and missiles at peaceful cities far from the front lines. During Trump's year of negotiations, missiles and drones constantly terrorized the civilian population and deliberately destroyed civilian infrastructure across the country.

Oleksandra Matviichuk is a noted Ukrainian human rights lawyer and civil society leader. In 2022, her non-profit, the Centre for Civil Liberties, received the Nobel Peace Prize for its work on human rights relating to the Russia-Ukraine war.



In January, temperatures in Ukraine plunge to minus 20 degrees Celsius (-4 Fahrenheit). Ukrainian cities are literally freezing, and Ukrainians are struggling to survive without heat, water, electricity, and connection. UN experts have classified Russia's actions as crimes against humanity.²

Why have America's overtures not worked? The answer lies in Putin's goals. Putin did not launch a full-scale invasion simply to occupy more Ukrainian territory. It would be naive to think that hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers died so that the Kremlin could capture Avdiivka or Bakhmut – cities that most Russians cannot even find on a map. No, Putin launched a full-scale invasion in order to capture all of Ukraine, and then to move further still. To him, Ukraine is a bridge to Europe.

The logic is clear. War is beneficial to Moscow because it provides a simple answer to all of the country's current problems and cements Putin's personal power. Putin dreams about his legacy and seeks to restore the Russian empire.³ Europe's population is relatively safe only because the Ukrainian army is holding back the Russian advance. Like any dictator, Putin only understands the language of force. He is pretending to engage in peace talks in order to reduce international support for Ukraine, thus making it easier for him to achieve his goals.

When Putin occupied Crimea and part of eastern Ukraine in 2014, Ukraine had no way of reclaiming those territories. Consequently, Ukraine grudgingly signed two peace agreements with Russia (known as the Minsk Accords). Over the following eight years,

Russia transformed Crimea into a powerful military base, girded its economy for sanctions, produced artillery shells, increased the size of its army and reached a range of military agreements with China.

In January 2022, senior Russian officials dismissed talk of a full-scale invasion as nonsense. Yet the following month, that is precisely what their government launched. Consequently, one of the key issues in peace negotiations is the provision of security guarantees. Ukrainians have learned from history; they gave up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees in the early 1990s, only to find themselves facing renewed aggression from Moscow without adequate support from the West. Ukrainians do not need a third Minsk Agreement, or a second Budapest Memorandum. The words "Vladimir, stop!" alone will not protect them.

Rather, to truly halt Russian aggression, the cost of the war for Putin must exceed the cost of peace. There is no magic button: coordinated action by the U.S. and the EU is needed to reduce the ability of the Russian economy to finance this war. Officially, some 40 percent of the Russian budget now goes to military spending.⁴ But it's not just about curtailing the Russian government's ability to produce and purchase missiles and drones. It's also about changing the minds of ordinary Russians.

Here, an example from history is useful. After Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, families in the USSR began to receive coffins, which led to growing public discontent and, ultimately, to Moscow's withdrawal from the country. Now, Russian families are again receiving coffins, but they are also receiving money – even as many of their countrymen live in extreme poverty. As long as that money continues to flow, Putin will continue to have willing conscripts for his war of aggression. But if coffins are sent back to Russia without money, the population's attitude towards the war will change immediately. And that would make the price of continuing the war prohibitive for Putin's imperial ambitions.

Putin is trying to portray Ukrainian resistance to Russian occupation as actions that undermine peace. Consequently, we must constantly reiterate the obvious: the Ukrainian people want peace more than anyone else. This war is being waged on their territory and has knocked on almost every door. But occupation is not peace. Occupation is war in a different form. It's not just a change from one national flag to another. It means disappearances, rape, torture, the forced adoption of your children, the denial of your identity, filtration camps, and mass graves.

I should explain why a Russian victory would not be in the national interest of the United States. But I won't. We have become too preoccupied with a transactional approach. Over the past year, we have witnessed a return to a past in which the world is defined not by international law, but by the exercise of the will of the strongest. Let's be brutally honest: that past was not a great one. In such a world, even the strongest are not safe. A world with nothing to rely on is fragile. It is always a world of wars and mass violence. We should aspire to better.

ENDNOTES

- 1 United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “2025 Deadliest Year for Civilians Since 2022, UN Human Rights Monitors Find,” January 12, 2026, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/2025-deadliest-year-for-civilians-in-Ukraine-since-2022-UN-human-rights-monitors-find>.
- 2 United Nations Ukraine, “Russian authorities committed crimes against humanity targeting civilian populations through drone attacks, as well as war crimes of forcible transfer and deportation of civilians,” October 27, 2025, <https://ukraine.un.org/en/304119-russian-authorities-committed-crimes-against-humanity-targeting-civilian-population-through>.
- 3 This is made clear in Putin’s various pronouncements, such as his 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” Scholars like Timothy Snyder have argued that Putin’s ideology is explicitly imperial. See Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (Crown, 2018).
- 4 See, for instance, “Путин подписал закон о трехлетнем бюджете РФ. В 2025 году в нем заложены рекордные расходы на войну [Putin has signed a law on Russia’s three year budget. In 2025, it provides for record levels of spending on the war],” Meduza, December 1, 2024, <https://meduza.io/news/2024/12/01/putin-podpisal-zakon-o-trehletnem-byudzhete-rf-v-2025-godu-v-nem-zalozheny-rekordnye-rashody-na-voynu>.

GLOBAL VIEW: TEL AVIV

Making The (Moral) Case For Israel

ERAN ORTAL

As the blood-soaked year of 2023 gave way to 2024, neither the regional nor the global picture can be said to appear especially promising, as seen from Israel. In the Middle East, the war that erupted following Hamas's murderous rampage of October 7, 2023 may ultimately prove not to have ended at all, but merely to have entered a tactical pause. All the fronts of that war – Gaza, Lebanon, Iran, and Yemen – remain open as of this writing, and their re-activation seems not a matter of “if” but of “when.” As if that were not enough, the dynamics of confrontation continue to intensify as Turkey – previously a distant rival – now seeks to capitalize on new regional realities and establish a presence in both Syria and Gaza, thereby positioning itself as a leader of a hostile Islamist-Sunni axis opposed to Israel.

Moreover, Israel has come to realize that the war it waged for its survival for two years not only failed to generate waves of sympathy and solidarity in the West, but has in fact produced the opposite. Even before the last Israeli communities near the Gaza border were cleared of terrorists on October 8, 2023, demonstrations had erupted in Western capitals in which the victims were condemned as perpetrators of an imaginary genocide against their Palestinian murderers. Chants of “From the river to the sea” made clear that it was not Israeli government policy that was under attack, but rather the very right of the Jewish state to exist.

More than two years on, Israel continues to hold on to hope that all this has merely been a bad dream. But it is increasingly being forced to confront a bitter reality. Decades of quiet groundwork and mountains of Qatari money have transformed bastions of Western academia, as well as swathes of the media, into centers of anti-Western propaganda – undermining not only Israel's existence but the legitimacy of Western civilization itself.

Brig. Gen. (Israel Defense Forces, ret.) **Eran Ortal** is a Visiting Scholar at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.

MAKING THE (MORAL) CASE FOR ISRAEL

Decades of intensive immigration to Europe, meanwhile, have enabled anti-Western ideology to become a political force in its own right, shaping the policies of left-leaning governments across the continent. Those governments did not hesitate, at the height of the war, to join in the vicious anti-Israel propaganda and effectively deny the only Jewish state the right to defend itself.

As if all this were not enough, it is now becoming clear that antisemitism in the 21st century is no longer the exclusive domain of the pro-Islamist radical left. For those in Israel who took comfort in the support of right-wing movements, that complacency has been shattered by the recent, virulent spread of antisemitism on the American political right as well.

These trends, which are likely to intensify in the months ahead, are not merely alarming in terms of the age-old Jewish anxiety about recurring waves of antisemitism, or due to justified fears of collapsing global sympathy for Israel. They constitute a genuine cause for concern at the level of Israel's national security.

National security practitioners understand well that different types of states employ different types of security strategies. Great powers compete over spheres of influence, the setting of global norms, and the shaping of economic and international rules that best serve their interests. Small states, by contrast, compete not for influence but for survival. Faced with potential threats far larger and stronger than themselves, they have several possible strategies.

Collective security is one, and the growing interest in NATO exhibited in recent years by potential targets of Russian aggression is a prominent example. Neutrality is another, but it needs to be backed by a credible military deterrent and some form of incentive. This is how Switzerland and Sweden survived World War II – thanks to defensible topography, a reasonable military capability, and incentives in the form of Swiss banking and Swedish iron ore, both of which were vital to Nazi Germany.

Another strategy is exceptionally flexible political maneuvering. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, for instance, knew how to rely on Britain on the one hand while joining Nasser's Egyptian camp in 1967 on the other; how to receive Israeli support against a Syrian threat in 1970 and join the Yom-Kippur war against it three years later, in 1973; and how to back Saddam Hussein in 1991 and yet still remain in the pro-Western camp immediately after the Gulf war.

Israel, despite its military prowess, is ultimately a small state both geographically and demographically – as well as one surrounded by numerous hostile forces. From the outset, it has known that its survival depends on the combination of two basic principles. The first is its ability to defend itself, by itself. The second is clear, consistent, and practical support from a global great-power patron. Israel's situation simply does not permit a strategy of neutrality. And despite the impressive regional coordination against ballistic missiles, drones and cruise missiles during the June 2025 war against Iran, Israel also lacks



access to a meaningful collective-security framework. Nor does Israel have any great-power camp supporting it other than the West, led by the United States. It simply has no place in a pro-Chinese or pro-Russian bloc. Even its potential role in regional defense, particularly oriented around missile defense, stems first and foremost from the perceived closeness between Israel and the United States.

The rapid and profound erosion of Israel's standing in the West is therefore a matter of genuine existential concern. Israel is not a financial powerhouse like Qatar. The Jewish diaspora in the West has become numerically insignificant relative to the tens of millions of Muslims flooding Western capitals and campuses, and its ability to combat propaganda in international institutions – where an automatic political majority is aligned against it – is extremely limited. For this reason, Israel has always been preoccupied not only with being liked, but with being a tangible asset to its supporters. Even today, there is lively debate in Israel over the question of whether it is an asset to the United States in particular, and to the Western world more broadly.

For decades, Israel was commonly described as the West's aircraft carrier in a critical region – a forward operating base and a laboratory for testing weapons and tactics. In more recent years, Israel has also distinguished itself as a hi-tech powerhouse, one that not only exports technology and innovation but shares critical and unique military technologies with its allies. Western publics are less aware of a fact that is obvious to their leaders: Israel is also a critical asset in the intelligence domain, particularly in the context of counterterrorism.

This utility has always been a component of Israeli policy, in various ways. In the 1960s, Israel was active in providing agricultural assistance to many African nations. Today, even Israel's natural gas reserves have become a valuable policy tool, helping the United States stabilize the Eastern Mediterranean and improve its relations with Egypt.

MAKING THE (MORAL) CASE FOR ISRAEL

Israel's true value runs deeper, however. Because Israel has always been a moral asset. At its founding, Israel symbolized the ability of a people to rise from the ashes of the Holocaust and create a new, optimistic, and thriving nation. It is no coincidence that tens of thousands of young Europeans from the post-war continent flocked to Israel to volunteer on kibbutzim and be part of something greater than themselves.

This was made clear to me years ago, during a late-night conversation in a small Athenian taverna with a wise Greek professor. Despite a long tradition of pro-Palestinian sentiment, he explained to me, Greece has in recent years become a close friend of Israel. This was not just because of shared geopolitical interests in the Mediterranean, however. Nor was it solely because of Turkish aggression threatening both countries.

Look around you, he said. It is rare to see parents and children on the streets of Athens. Greece, like much of Europe, is a fading nation. In that context, Israel is not merely a regional ally. It is an example – a model – of a nation that manages to be Western, open, and liberal, while also being patriotic, growing, optimistic, and life-affirming. Hardened by war, yet life-loving. Secular and liberal, yet a young nation full of families, children, and demographic growth. A traditional society that respects religion, alongside vibrant technological innovation and rich social and cultural life. A state whose governance and social services are under strain, yet whose civil society has revealed immense strength.

All these features were apparent during Israel's most recent war. And they matter a great deal for the future.

Western civilization is currently experiencing a murky and dangerous wave, saturated with self-hatred masquerading as post-colonial critical discourse. Its toxic, polarizing politics erode social cohesion and undermine the foundations of collective existence. This phenomenon, in turn, is being fueled by external forces seeking to destroy Western civilization and undermine the values of freedom, democracy, and humanism that it embodies.

To be sure, Israel is far from perfect in this regard. It, too, is suffering from malaise born of an extreme ruling political coalition and social polarization on an epic scale. Nevertheless, it has a key role to play in the West's current identity crisis. For all its troubles and challenges, this is a nation to which its sons and daughters flock, rather than flee from, when battles break out. As intellectuals, social activists, military leaders and eventually even politicians awaken and seek a model through which the West can rediscover itself, Israel's true value will once again become apparent.

GLOBAL VIEW: LONDON

Envisioning A Different Direction For Britain

BY PRITI PATEL

The world as we have known it for most of our lives is over. The post-Cold War Era is well and truly dead. We are once again confronted by an axis of authoritarian states on an aggressive quest for global governance. This time, they are trying to tear down the international order on which the British and American economies, as well as their security, have rested for decades.

This contest has left today's world more volatile, more insecure and more threatening than at any time in recent memory. But it is also an opportunity. Many times before in Britain's history, it has fallen to Conservative governments to face off world-changing threats, and this one may turn out to be no different. So we are using our time in the political opposition to develop a hard-headed and serious plan to advance Britain's interests against an ever more challenging backdrop; to seize new opportunities that make our country stronger, and to make the British people more prosperous and secure.

The threats are clear. Here in our European neighborhood, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its persistent hybrid activity have demonstrated clearly that the Kremlin is committed to dividing and destabilizing the West. The Middle East is rife with instability and conflict. Wars are raging across Africa, while an aggressive China is seeking to rewrite the Indo-Pacific order.

In a much tougher world, we have no choice but to be tougher too. Yet Britain's current Labour government appears not to grasp the change that is happening all around us. It simply cannot break out of its comfort zone of vacuous internationalism, lecturing about international law and preaching to other countries.

That simply won't do. Today, Britain needs a serious foreign policy—one that is unashamedly based on advancing our national interest.

Priti Patel is Member of the British Parliament for Witham. She served as Home Secretary from 2019 to 2022 under the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. She is now the Shadow Foreign Secretary for the Conservative party.



A future Conservative government will have a harder edge. With our allies, our decision-making will be grounded in how to out-compete, out-cooperate and out-innovate our adversaries. Conservatives firmly believe in Britain's place in the world. We must build more strategic alliances wherever there is a need as well as reinvigorate old ones that have served us well in preceding decades. And we need to ensure that Britain is a far more ambitious foreign policy power. Because if recent years have shown us anything, it is that unless you try to shape the world around you, it will shape you.

Our politics has an unfortunate tendency to overlook Britain's agency in the world. All too often, it fails to notice the costs of inaction, with deeply unfavorable consequences. This is a grave error. We need the courage to defend the international order in ways that sustain our economy and security.

A serious British foreign policy – a conservative foreign policy – certainly doesn't mean isolationism, and most definitely doesn't justify exploiting others. It means working with other countries as much as we can, while always standing up for our national interest and being honest about doing so, both with our international partners and with the British people.

Indeed, we have already been making the case at home that Britain must spend significantly more on defense. The last Conservative government set us on a path to higher defense spending. We are now calling for defense spending of three percent by the end of the current Parliament. This should be funded not by borrowing more or raising

taxes, but through judicious reforms of things like our aid budget, welfare, and the civil service headcount.

In this vein, we have also pledged to create a Sovereign Defense Fund to help leverage private investment. This is partly because we need to be ready for continuous tension with Russia, with the ability to effectively deter threats like hybrid warfare, the sabotage of infrastructure and the manipulation of information. Simply put, if we don't put up these boundaries, Russia will come closer.

Britain also needs to be more far more assertive in response to the real and growing threats to our security posed by China. Rather than Labour's naïve and failing bid for greater economic integration and dependence in the vain hope that it will make China play by the rules, we need to find solutions that allow Britain to reduce its strategic dependency on the PRC.

Our alliances in the Indo-Pacific must go far deeper, too. This is not just about arrangements such as AUKUS or CPTPP, but about our whole network of bilateral security and defense, technology and economic partnerships. Post-Brexit, Britain has been much more active in the region. We need to take it to the next level.

As for the Middle East, Britain does have influence – not on a par with the United States, but still considerable for a power outside the region. A Conservative government would put its shoulder to the wheel to support a constructive direction for the region, including an expansion of the Abraham Accords and a more active role in securing the disarmament of Hamas and the rebuilding of Gaza.

We also need to develop strategic patience to see through long-term plans in other parts of the world, like Central Asia, Latin America and Africa. In those places, we must work to make our offer of partnership much more compelling than it is currently. We want countries there to see Britain and the West as natural partners for mutual benefit, and to steer clear of partnerships with authoritarian powers that only want one way extraction, closed trade and debt traps.

Britain already has all the capabilities it needs to be a significant global player. The question is whether we have the political will and the diplomatic firepower to deliver. Conservatives are unequivocal: we do, and we must.



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

509 C STREET NE | WASHINGTON, DC 20002 | 202-543-1006

www.afpc.org