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State Department *Country Report on Terrorism: 2001–2016* Trends

Overview

By April 30 of each year, the Secretary of State is required by law to provide Congress a *Country Report on Terrorism*. According to 22 U.S.C. §2656f, the report must contain “detailed assessments with respect to each foreign country in which acts of international terrorism occurred, which were, in the opinion of the Secretary, of major significance.” While the report does not speak to the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strategies, policies, or operations, it does offer a perspective of general trends of global casualties resulting from terrorist attacks. By law, the *Country Report on Terrorism* must include

- an examination of foreign counterterrorism efforts;
- any judicial responses of foreign countries regarding terrorism affecting American citizens or facilities;
- a list of countries that support terrorist groups;
- an assessment of countries in which terrorists operate, including actions taken by those governments;
- a report on terrorism-related deaths, injuries, and kidnappings;
- a strategy for addressing terrorist sanctuaries; and
- an analysis of international terrorism trends.

For a violent act to be designated as terrorism and included in the report, it must meet all of the following criteria:

- the attack was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;
- the attack demonstrated evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
- the attack was conducted outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law insofar as it targeted noncombatants.

The report defines casualties as “people killed and injured,” but does not specify the criteria used to determine whether casualties directly resulted from terrorist attacks. Casualty figures include perpetrator(s), when applicable.

Data Collection

Over the past 16 years, several different entities have been responsible for *Country Report on Terrorism* data collection. From 2001 to 2004, it was largely the responsibility of the State Department’s Coordinator for Counterterrorism. After it was established in 2004, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) assumed this responsibility and contributed data to the reports with the University of Maryland’s National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)

to collect data for the Country Reports using its unclassified Global Terrorism Database (GTD). GTD statistics are derived from open-source reporting and are available on START’s website.

The trends contained in this In Focus begin with the year 2001 due to the post-9/11 increased interest in the findings contained in the country reports. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, reporting requirements for the country reports changed. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-458) mandated assessments of countries with territory being used as terrorist “sanctuary,” and the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005 (P.L. 108-487) required a report on terrorist groups that possess or are attempting to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Although the statutory requirements have not changed since 2004, the reports have been adapted to include information on more recent phenomena, such as online recruitment by terrorist groups.

2001–2003

Data for 2001 reflect many casualties from the September 11 attacks in the United States. Over the next two years, attacks and casualties decreased. The 2002 report cited a decline in bombings of U.S.-protected oil pipelines in Colombia as an example of what the State Department assessed was a decrease in anti-U.S. attacks. In 2003, the State Department reported a low of 1,900 terrorism-related casualties (see **Figure 1**).

2004–2006

The period between 2004 and 2006, characterized by heavy fighting and increased violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, was associated with a steep increase in casualties. During this time, many viewed Al Qaeda (AQ) as a primary threat to international security. According to the State Department, after suffering losses in 2003, AQ focused on spreading its ideology to other countries and establishing affiliate groups. In doing so, AQ transitioned to “guerilla terrorism” and used propaganda to brand AQ as a sort of “global insurgency,” according to the State Department. The 2005 country report indicated an increase in suicide bombings, of which there was a “marked increase” in Afghanistan, and a concentration of terrorist attacks in Iraq (30% of worldwide attacks). In 2006, the State Department noted that AQ’s misinformation and propaganda efforts “accelerated” through its focus on “propaganda warfare.”

2007–2011

In 2007, the State Department reported a then-record high of 66,995 terrorism-related casualties. Trends in 2007 included continued AQ activity, including its “guerilla terrorism” strategy and affiliations with regional groups. That year, nearly 43% and 13% of attacks occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively. After 2007, attacks followed

a general downward trend and casualties dropped each year until 2012. The 2008 report stated that Al Qaeda “remained the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and its partners,” and the reports for 2009 and 2010 cited the continued challenge of Al Qaeda activity and safe havens in Pakistan. In 2011, the State Department reported the operational weakening of Al Qaeda in Pakistan and the death of several senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden.

2012–2016

From 2012 to 2014, attacks and casualties increased. During this time, the Islamic State (IS) expanded under the direction of its designated caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Nigerian terrorist organization Boko Haram operated using “brutal tactics,” including stoning and kidnapping, according to the State Department. In 2014, the State Department reported over 67,500 casualties, the highest in the 16-year period. Trends in 2014 included continued Boko Haram activity, instability in Syria, the Islamic State’s seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria, and the continued flow of foreign fighters travelling to join IS. In 2014, the United States began Operation Inherent Resolve to combat the Islamic State and formed the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS with international partners.

In 2015 and 2016, attacks and casualties declined. The 2015 report cited a weakening of AQ leadership and a loss of territory controlled by IS. In the 2016 report, released in July 2017, the State Department reported a recapture of IS-controlled territory and a decrease in foreign fighters travelling to join IS, which led to a reduction in the group’s battlefield strength. That year, IS remained “the most potent terrorist threat to global security” with its “central” social media recruitment campaign, according to the 2016 report.

General Trends

According to data from the country reports, there has been a general trend of increase in terrorist attacks and associated

casualties between 2001 and 2016. However, this trend is marked by numerous peaks and dips with respect to casualties. In some years, a majority of casualties resulted from few particularly destructive events and in other years, attacks were concentrated in certain geographic areas.

Other factors may have contributed to this apparent upward trend. These include new developments that have improved data collection and availability, including the growth of the internet and social media and a concentration of effort on discovering and reporting attacks. Improved technologies and increased awareness may be reflected in higher numbers, whereas data from earlier years may not be as complete or reflective of terrorism statistics at the time.

Congressional Concern

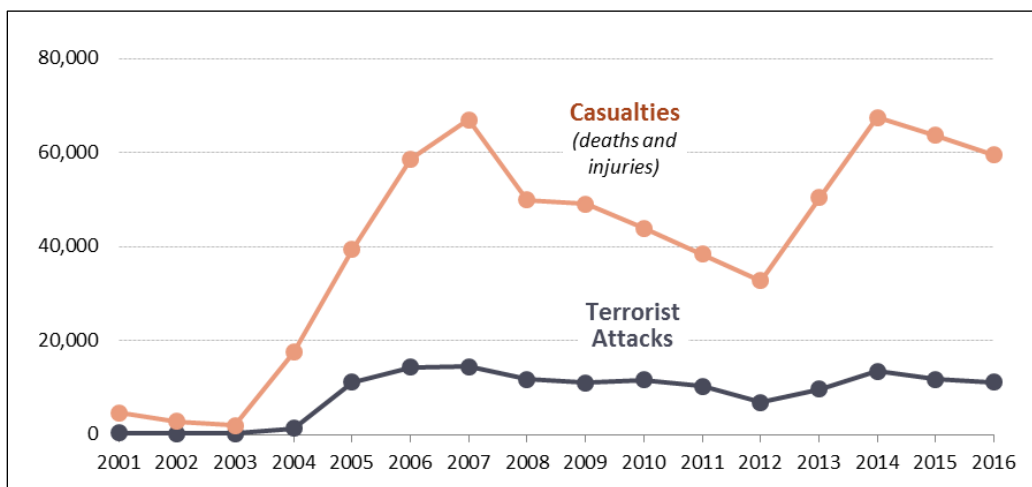
Congressional proceedings have referenced information from the country reports on several occasions, to include bills and resolutions. For example, in September 2016, country report language was quoted in the text of H.R. 5931, Prohibiting Future Ransom Payments to Iran Act (114th Congress).

While the country reports continue to be used by Congress, some observers have questioned the reliability and completeness of START data, and have stated a need for an unclassified, U.S. government-sourced terrorism database. Some viewed the shift in country report data collection from NCTC to START in 2012 as a failure by NCTC to provide terrorism information to the public. Others believe that this improved efficiency by allowing NCTC to focus on different activities.

Natalie Bloy, CRS research associate, provided significant contributions to this piece.

Figure I. Trends in Terrorism, 2001–2016

Attacks and Casualties



Source: Graph prepared by CRS, based on information derived from State Department and START reporting.

Notes: Data for 2004 is derived solely from START’s Global Terrorism Database (GTD), University of Maryland.

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