

Terrorism: U.S. Strategy and the Trends in Its Wars on Terrorism

Anthony H. Cordesman, Burke Chair

The United States has now been at war in Afghanistan for some seventeen years and been fighting another major war in Iraq for fifteen years. It has been active in Somalia far longer and has spread its operations to deal with terrorist or extremist threats in a wide range of conflicts in North and Sub-Saharan in Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia. In case after case, the U.S. has moved far beyond counterterrorism to counterinsurgency, and from the temporary deployment of small anti-terrorism forces to a near "permanent" military presence. The line between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency has become so blurred that there is no significant difference.

The national academic consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) has just issued new trend data on terrorism that are updated through the end of 2017. When they are combined with other major sources of data on terrorism, they provide the ability to trace the history of U.S. "wars" against terrorism in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. They show the results of America's "long wars" of attrition where it is increasingly unclear that the United States has a strategy to terminate them, or has the capability to end them in ways that create a stable and peaceful state that can survive if the United State should leave.

The resulting graphics and maps are provided in the full text of the report on which this summary is based, and which is available on the CSIS website at [???????](#). This summary both summarizes how the trends in such data reveal the patterns in terrorism and impact on U.S. strategy. The key conclusions, and an index to these graphics, are provided in this summary.

Examining the "Terrorist" Threat

The trends in terrorism and extremism are only one part of this problem, and part of the lack of any clear grand strategy that can offer the U.S. a credible probability of lasting victory in its wars – if "victory" is defined a stable, friendly postwar state. They are, however, as important and revealing as the trends on the battlefield, and they reveal major global and regional challenges that go far beyond today's wars.

Unfortunately, there is no official U.S. database on global terrorism to draw upon. Just as the U.S. has failed to create a consistent level of reporting on warfighting and civil-military affairs – as well as on the cost of its wars – it has abandoned the effort to create such a database by the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) and effectively subcontracted the effort to a national academic consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism called START which is managed by the Homeland Security Center of Excellence and led by the University of Maryland (<http://www.start.umd.edu/>).

Limits to the Data

The START effort does an excellent job of tracking unclassified open source material, providing a readily accessible database that is clearly tied to assessment of the uncertainties in the data and to individual acts of terrorism in ways the explain it limitations and validate its counts. This database is available to the public at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/>, and is used to provide the statistical trend data in the U.S. State Department's annual country reports on terrorism. (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/>).

It is not designed for the purpose of tracking the interactions between terrorism and insurgency, or how extremism affects warfighting, but it does provide information that provides considerable insight into each of the "wars" on terrorism, and can be used to put the impact of those wars in context relative to the global, regional, and national trends in terrorism. That is the central focus of the maps and Figures in this report, and each of its major sections.

There are, however, some important –and unavoidable– limits to the START database:

- *There is no clear or consistent way to define a difference between terrorist acts and acts of war.* Extreme violence has been a constant tactic of war. Insurgencies and civil wars have always used asymmetric and extreme means of combat as have counterinsurgency efforts. Almost all warfare has a decisive phase in heavily populated areas that raises questions about the resulting uses of force, and every act of military violence and/or intimidation has some elements of terrorist impact on combatants and civilians. The phrase that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," may be a cliché but that does not make it incorrect. It is a fact that non-state actors facing serious governmental opposition feel they are forced to use the population as both a shield and a weapon.

These problems are particularly serious in the cases where terrorism succeeds in escalating to the level of insurgency and/or this occurs in an environment where there are many other incidents of serious internal violence that have related causes like sectarian, ethnic, tribal, regional differences; deep political tensions; or the failure of the state to provide effective governance. Terrorism is hard to define at the best of times. As later parts of this analysis show, it can be impossible when hate crimes and individual acts become endemic or when there is no clear dividing line between terrorism and insurgency.

- *Open source material has major limitations that vary by country, conflict and terrorist/extremist movement.* Given countries are much more forthcoming about the level of terrorist or extremist violence than others, and differ radically in integrity of their reporting. Some countries label, arrest, and attack legitimate political opposition as terrorists. Some limit their media to censored reporting because they fear it will stimulate internal support for opposition movements, create hostile human rights criticism, and affect foreign support and investment. This is particularly true of a number of Asian states, such as Myanmar, but national differences within a given region are more the rule than the exception.
- *The current definition of "terrorism" excludes state terrorism although it is at least as serious a source of terrorism as acts by non-state actors.* Many authoritarian and repressive governments kill, torture, punish, and imprison in large numbers. As is discussed later in this report, the casualty figures coming out of the acts of the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war have probably produced more casualties and human trauma than all the acts of non-state terrorism in the world since 1970.
- *Similarly, counterterrorism is often a form of terrorism and counterinsurgency is often a form of repression.* Far too many counterterrorism and military forces in states that have serious insurgency and terrorism problem make excessive use of violence against their targets and the civil population. Killings, disappearances, random arrests, torture, prolonged imprisonment, and rigged trials are all forms of state terrorism, as is the excessive targeting of civilians and indifference to collateral damage and civilian

casualties. This form of state terrorism breeds response in kind but is reported - if at all – along separate chains of human rights reporting.

- *Calling the enemy movement or state a terrorist or supporter of terrorism has become all too common.* Here, the U.S. is no exception. It uses the label as carelessly as anyone else. The fact that states like Iran are actively hostile to the U.S. and its allies, as are movements like Hezbollah does make them enemies. It does not make them terrorist except when they actually do commit acts that can be defined as terrorism.
- *Attribution, incident reporting and characterization, and estimates of deaths and injuries are all necessarily uncertain.* Even the most rigorous studies and counts must try to cope with uncertain and contradictory estimates, the fact the perpetrator is not clearly identified, and highly uncertain reporting of deaths and injuries. Injury data is particularly uncertain and generally only covers the most serious immediate effects of an attack. The indirect effect of attacks in terms of destruction of property and sources of income, loss of housing, forces displacement, follow-on medical and security costs is not reported.

None of these limitations mean that the START data, or the various analytic groups that draw upon it and are used in this report, do not provide information that is broadly correct or fail to reveal key trends. In practice, each clearly defines the major uncertainties in its data and methods. They do, however, make it difficult to make country-to-country comparisons, make it difficult to know exactly when military actions are – or are not-treated a terrorism, and falsely exempt state actors from legitimate charges of terrorism.

Ignoring the Potential Causes of Terrorism: A Focus on Half the Problem Means Having Only Half the Solution and Strategy

Another key problem in such reporting on terrorism is that it does not address the causes of terrorism and insurgency or address the issue of why major terrorist activity or civil violence should end. Reporting focuses on acts of terrorism, direct human costs in death and injuries, and perpetrators, and not on its causes and efforts to address them.

There not only is at least a partial decoupling of most of the statistics on terrorism from associated insurgencies and civil wars, there is a near total decoupling from the civil side of counterterrorism and counter insurgency, the equivalent of stability and civil-military operations, and success in reshaping and reforming national politics, governance, and economics.

This has been particularly true of the United States since 2011, which focused the U.S. on terrorist movements and terrorism per se rather than the conditions which helped generate it. It has also been accelerated by the U.S. failures in "nation building" in Afghanistan and Iraq which have progressively reduced civil aid efforts and the civil side of civil-military relations.

The mix of causes varies sharply by region, country, and often divisions within a given country. As noted earlier, causes include state terrorism, violence, and repression. They also, however, include ideological, sectarian and religious divisions and tensions, and ethnic, racial, tribal, and nationality divisions – all often involving major aspects of discrimination by a given government. At the same time, as the World Bank, IMF, UNDP, and Arab Development reports have shown, they include poor to terrible governance, failed rule of law, corruption, poor development and income, and population pressure and unemployment – often all interacting in the same country or state.

Afghanistan Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, the Sudan are all examples of failed states with broad ranging causes of internal dissent and violence. While terrorism and extreme violence can never be justified in ethical or moral terms, no strategy that attempts to deal with terrorism can be successful that not recognize the nature and seriousness of its causes. Addressing these problems is not the responsibility of counterterrorism experts in the narrowest sense of the term, but fighting half a war is a good way to lose one. The U.S. has never come to grips with this aspect of the threat. Like far too many other states, this means it only has half a strategy, and has taken a largely "hole" in government approach to counterterrorism.

“Tell Me ~~How~~ Why This Ends?”

While the U.S. did initially attempt create unified civil-military strategies to win popular support for the governments it supported and an outcome that would have lasting stability, the U.S. has since virtually abandoned its efforts at "nation building." It now relies largely on reform efforts and humanitarian aid to provide the civil side of victory.

The U.S. has also increasingly sought to reduce its presence on the ground to a minimum of train and assist personnel backed by combat air power. This has limited terrorist and extremist gains in the cases where the U.S. is fighting a major insurgency, but the end result has become a series of wars of attrition. The U.S. has shown that such an approach to warfare can deny victory to extremist threats and win most key tactical engagements. As in Vietnam, however, it is far from clear that U.S. supported tactical victories can either maintain control of the countryside or win a meaningful peace – or even that such military efforts will allow the governments the U.S. is backing to survive.

This has led to a situation where an increasing number of U.S. policymakers are all too conscious that the U.S. has no real strategy that can end the war it is fighting by creating a stable peace. They increasingly are seeking ways to end or sharply reduce the U.S. military role in wars like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria – and beginning to define "victory" in terms of the ability to defeat a few key organized terrorist movements like ISIL (ISIS/Daesh), rather than end a war by creating stable state or stable regions.

The practical problem, however, is that simply reducing the U.S. presence –with or without a cosmetic peace settlement – does not remove the threat or produce any form of lasting stability or freedom from extremism and terrorism. The same is true of even the most serious defect of a given terrorist or extremist movement like ISIS, Al Qaida, or the Taliban. Even full military success does not address the causes of extremism and internal violence, prevent rise or renewal of violence or terrorism, or ensure any form of lasting peace. Losing by leaving will also inevitably make things worse – at least in the country involved.

An UN study found that there is something like a 50% recidivism rate within five years for even successful cases of UN peacekeeping. That rate could be far higher for peace settlements in countries where the terrorist movement appears to be contained or defeated, but all of the causes of internal violence remain.

The U.S. military has repeatedly warned that there is no military solution to such wars if the government continues to fail to serve its people and is corrupt and ineffective, there is no real security or rule of law, and the economy does not develop, offer a decent income, and create needed jobs. The same is true of leaving massive divisions and tensions along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and

regional lines that are almost inevitably compounded by past fighting, failed efforts at recovery and rebuilding, and a decline in development during the years of major terrorism or war.

In early 2003, when he was still commander of the 101st Airborne Division and still preparing for the invasion of Iraq, General David Petraeus asked a key question: "How does this war end?" As the Figures that follow show, no clear answer has yet emerged to that question in any of the wars with extremism that the U.S. is now fighting or intervening in. More than that, Petraeus's question needs to be modified to "Why does this war end?"

The data on the trend lines in global and regional terrorism and extremism that follow show that our current wars largely affect three key movements in three countries in a world where this represents a small portion of the total levels of terrorism and extremism. The data on Afghanistan are anything but reassuring after seventeen years of war. Fifteen years later, we are no closer to an answer than we were then in Iraq, and we seem to have empowered an unstable "victory" by Assad's state terrorism in in Syria.

The purpose of war is never to simply win military victories. The grand strategic purpose of any form of war should be to shape a peace that serves the lasting strategic objectives of the nation that fights it. We have not been able to focus on this goal in any of our "wars". Not only Iraq and Syria, but Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and the other much smaller fights against terrorism and extremism in west and east Africa.

This analysis addresses these issues by showing the rising global scope of terrorism, how it is evolving by region, the spread of terrorist violence in the Muslim world in spite of the current "wars" on terrorism, the fact that the threats extend far beyond a few current threats like ISIS, Al Qaida, and the Taliban, and the interactions between counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and key perpetrators in America's current wars.

Global Trends in Terrorist Incidents and Casualties

Figures One to Figure Six provide a range of views of the overall trends in global terrorism using START data and estimates from *The Global Terrorism Data Base*. They all help set the stage for putting the trends in a given movement, country, or region in perspective, but each also provides some additional insights:

- *Figure 1: Worldwide Trend in Terrorism – 1970-2017: START Incidents.* This figure shows the trend in terrorism since the original creation of the START database. It shows a long period of rising terrorism between 1976-1991, a drop that lasted till 2004, and then a mass rise that appears to have abated in 2013, but which is as much the result of a sharp rise in the level of fighting by extremist groups in insurgencies and actual war as any reduction in terrorism.
- *Figure 2: Worldwide Trend in Terrorism – 2000-2017: START Incidents,* Figure 2 highlights the recent trend in the number of worldwide terrorist incidents. As is discussed later, the steep rise after 2004 is driven largely by Islamist extremism, and well as ethnic and sectarian fighting within largely Islamic countries.
- *Figure 3: Global Trend in Terrorist Attacks: 1970-2016:* This figure is not as current as Figure 1, but it shows how much bigger the global trends in terrorism are than the trends in any war or conflict area. It also shows how much large the threat has been in conflict

states than in the West. For all the U.S. and European focus on terrorism, all the key threats have emerged in other regions.

- *Figure 4: Global Trend in Terrorist Fatalities: 1970-2016:* A close comparison of Figure Three with Figure Four shows the very real differences between the patterns in attacks and incidents by country, and that no one benchmark or trend reveals the patterns in terrorism. At the same time, it shows roughly the same cycles in overall violence.
- *Figure 5 and Figure 6 attempt to map the patterns in both the density and seriousness of global terrorism in 2012 and 2017.* A close examination shows a major rise in the level of terrorism between 2012 and 2017, but little change in the areas where it is concentrated. There still, however, is a significant increase in terrorism in Europe and the United States.

Trends by Region

Figure 7 to Figure 9 use the same sources to compare the trends in terrorism by region. They highlight the fact that the largest center of terrorist incidents occurs in the Middle East/North Africa, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These trends are particularly important because both regions are largely Muslims or high a high percentage of Muslims – trends explored in more depth in the next section.

- *Figure 7: START – Terrorist Incidents by Region* shows how quickly massive changes can take place in the number of incidents in a given region. The fall in the number of terrorist incidents after 2013, however, far more apparent than real. In practice, violence that was identified as "terrorist" was offset by a major rise serious counter insurgency warfare. The later sections of this analysis also show that trend would have been sharply upwards if the data base recognized state terrorism rather than only non-state actors. The fact that some politicians and military spokesmen have referred to such trends as "victories" in the fight against terrorism is totally misleading –as is any U.S. strategy based on such non-victories.
- *Figure 8: Terrorist Fatalities by Region* shows similar trends, but this time it is Sub-Saharan Africa and not South Asia that has second place. This reinforces a fact that emerges again and again in the data. there is no clear correlation between the number incidents and actual human damage. (It should be noted that most comparisons in the analysis are fatalities rather than injuries because the injury data are substantially more uncertain and very hard to compare.)
- *Figure 9: START – MENA & South Asian Trends in Incidents and Violence: 2000-2017:* This chart illustrates some of the uncertainties in estimating casualties – whether killed or injured. It should also be noted, however, that the data on incidents use the highest estimate, regardless of doubt.

Like the previous maps tracing the global patterns in terrorism, these Figures do, however, highlight a key problem in U.S. strategy. The U.S. approach to counterterrorism is heavily oriented towards supporting a limited number of other states in counterterrorism and counter insurgency, and particularly towards destroying or defeating ISIL/ISIS and Al Qaida in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

The rising level of terrorism, however, is far broader in scope, and defeating particularly movements in particular countries can only achieve useful short term goals. As becomes clear through this report, it is absurd to talk about even total success in such limited fights as somehow

defeating terrorism. The scope of existing terrorism is far too wide. The underlying causes of terrorism – diverse as they seem to be – are far too great. As UN, World Bank, IMF, and human rights reporting shows, these causes have also become far more serious since "9/11" – as events like the "Arab Spring" have shown.

Clashes Within a Civilization: Incidents in Muslim or Largely Muslim States

The data in *Figure 10* to *Figure 1* – along with much of the data which follows – highlight a key problem in the U.S. and much of the Western approach to terrorism which has its mirror image in the approach of much of the Muslim and Arab world.

- *Figure 10: ODNI Map of Violent Extremist Operating Areas in 2017*: There is no question that the map of Sunni violent extremism in *Figure 10* that DNI Daniel R. Coast issued in his 2018 Worldwide threat assessment is all too correct. Sectarian anger and extremism do drive terrorism in many of the main centers of terrorism highlighted in the previous section.
- *Figure 11: Trend in Terrorism in Muslim States or with Large Muslim Populations – 1970-2017: START Incidents*, and *Figure 12: Trend in Terrorism in Muslim States or with Large Muslim Populations – 2001-2017: START Incidents* highlight the importance of Islamist, extremism more broadly.

They show the number of terrorist incidents in Muslim states and states where Islamic sectarianism and Islamist extremism are the overwhelming cause of terrorism. The resulting percentage was 51% of all worldwide incidents during 1970-2017. Their impact rose sharply after 2000, and they accounted for 73% of all incidents between 2001 and 2017.

As the follow section shows, this rise of Islamist extremism did lead to "9/11" and a limited increase in serious terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Europe. Extremist movements have actively used the Internet and other means to recruit and indoctrinate in the West. The START and other data on terrorism do not, however, in any justify calling the rise of Islamic sectarianism and Islamist extremism a "clash of civilizations" and charges that Islam – or Islamist extremism – have somehow become focused on the West as its principal target are absurd.

Any examination of the full START data base, or any estimate of the casualties produced in either the individual terrorist attacks listed by START or other sources, or UN and NGO data on the casualties and human costs of related insurgencies and civil wars shows that virtually every movement involved focused on taking power locally and controlling a given state or narrow region.

More generally, some 85-90% of the casualties involved – and those made refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) – were Muslims who have been attack by fellow Muslims. Small non-Muslim minorities did suffer, and many were killed, displaced, and made refugees. Like the Christian Reformation before it, however, today's religious terrorism and wars overwhelmingly consists of one religion attacking itself.

U.S. official strategy, and that of most European states, recognizes the level of ignorance and paranoia involved in demonizing Islam for the acts of its extremists and the real nature of this struggle. It understands the need to deal with the threat in situ and the critical role Muslim government play as strategic partners in this struggle. There is enough xenophobia and bigotry among some factions in the West, however, to turn Huntington's valid concerns in the "Clash of

Civilization" into yet another form of extremism. The last thing the West needs is to meet ignorance and hatred with ignorance and hatred

At the same time, the Muslim governments and analysts who try to deny the rise in Islamist extremism, or insist on cloaking it in some form of "politically correct" rhetoric that denies its religious origins and nature. Regardless of every other measure that needs to be taken to reduce the causes of terrorism, ideological movements need to be fought on ideological terms. Islamist extremism needs to be labeled as such, and its deviance from actual Islamic scriptures, values, and history needs to be explained and made clear. The fact such movements espouse approaches to law, economic, and social custom that would make it impossible for Muslim states to survive and compete in a modern world needs to be openly and constantly addressed.

Trends in the Threat to the U.S. and Europe

Every life matters, and the primary focus on the U.S. government –along with that of every state – must be to protect its own citizens. At the same time, *Figure 14* to *Figure 27* show that the very real threat that terrorism poses to the West is very limited in scope and then varies sharply by country to the point where no one approach to counterterrorism can be correct.

- *Figure 13: Direct ISIL, Al Qaida, and Taliban Attacks on the United States and Europe: 2000-2017:* The START data in this Figure are arguable in detail, but they reinforce the analysis made in the previous section and make a key point. The key terrorist movements the U.S. and European states are fighting inspire lone wolves and self-indoctrinated terrorists using their material. They train Western citizens in their facilities outside the West, their foreign volunteers return to the West, and they can sometimes influence mosques and religious teaching. However, they have not managed to set up major cells or conduct serious operations outside their base countries in Muslim states.
- *Figure 14: Incidents and Casualties in the US: 1990-2017:* This figures shows just how low the number of attacks and casualties in the U.S. has been since "9/11." It is still a grim warning as to how quickly the threat from terrorism can surge, but it is clear that actual terrorism in the U.S. has produced very few incidents and casualties since 2001. Given the fact the U.S. has spent several trillion dollars in counterterrorism and related wars since 2001, it also raises question about how efficient the U.S. has been in using its resources. (For a comparison of the risk of terrorism in the U.S. with other causes of death based on ODNI data see [The Comparative Threat from Terrorism Compared to Drug Poisoning, Suicide, Traffic Accidents, and Murder: 1999-2016](https://www.csis.org/analysis/comparative-threat-terrorism-compared-drug-poisoning-suicide-traffic-accidents-and-murder), [https://www.csis.org/analysis/comparative-threat-terrorism-compared-drug-poisoning-suicide-traffic-accidents-and-murder.](https://www.csis.org/analysis/comparative-threat-terrorism-compared-drug-poisoning-suicide-traffic-accidents-and-murder))
- *Figure 15: Incidents and Casualties in Western Europe: 1990-2017* and *Figure 17: Incidents and Casualties in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Eastern Europe: 1990-2017.* These two figures show that the terrorist threat has been far higher in Europe, but still has been a very low percent of total global incidents in both regions.
- *Figure 16 to Figure 22 provide different ways of showing the overall risk to given European members of NATO:* They again show how on major attack can create a sudden major surge in the impact of terrorism, and the dangers inherent in relying on a pattern of comparative security. At the same time, they show how sharply the NATO Europe data have been skewed by Tukey's renewal of its fight with its Kurds. It is clear that NATO

faces a significant terrorist threat. It is also clear that the same approach to counterterrorism will not meet the needs of countries with such different levels of threat.

Trend by Major “War”

Figure 23: Terrorism in Key Insurgencies and Civil Wars: 2001-2017, and Figure 24: Worldwide Trend in Terrorism – 2000-2016: Deaths, provide a rough indication of the impact of what happens when a violent terrorist or Islamist extremist movement makes the transition to insurgency. The data are often uncertain, for all the reasons stated earlier, but clearly show the impact of the initial transition.

At the same time, they also reveal two key problems in the data. The number of incidents and deaths drops sharply after 2014 because the level of conflict in several key states reaches the point of a major counterinsurgency war. This may be an accurate way of distinguishing between terrorism and war, but this is far from clear, and it does not illustrate the real world trends in the level of violence.

The trends are also heavily driven by the fact that Turkey's fight against its Kurds are treated as counterterrorism, while the civil war in Syria is largely ignored because the actions of the Assad regime are sharply undercounted because they are treated as normal warfare rather than state terrorism.

The Limited Impact of Al Qaida, ISIS, and the Taliban

The U.S. sometimes seems obsessed by a focus on two major terrorist groups: ISIL/ISIS and Al Qaida. It has been fighting a third group – the Taliban – for some seventeen years, although it has historically been more of an insurgent group than a terrorist one. It is still far from clear that the U.S. can defeat any some of these groups although it may be able to deprive them of major sanctuary or control over a major population center.

What is already clear, however, is how limited the role of that ISIL and Al Qaida play in terrorism is compared to the global and regional patterns in terrorism, and that even the total defeat of both would leave most current terrorism intact and do little or nothing to affect the causes of terrorism that can generate new movements.

- *Figure 25: Worldwide Terrorism: ISIL, Al Qaida, and Total Incidents: 2000-2017*: This figures shows that Al Qaida only accounted for 1.9% of the total worldwide terrorist incidents between 2000 and 2017. ISIL only accounted for 5.3%.
- *Figure 26: Worldwide Terrorism: Taliban, ISIL, and Al Qaida as % of Total Attacks and Deaths in 2017* shows the latest impact of each movement. In a pack fighting year that led to its loss of most of its "caliphate," ISIL caused 12.1% of worldwide attacks and 26.9% of terrorist deaths." Al Qaida did not make START's top 15 ranking. The Taliban caused 8.3% of worldwide attacks and 18.6% of terrorist deaths

None of this makes containing and weakening movements less important. However, any politics figure or military/ government spokesmen who conflates defeating them with defeating terrorism on any broader less is talking sheer nonsense.

Trends in Syria, Iraq, and Their Neighbors

The data on the impact of terrorism war in Iraq and Syria provide some insights to the progress in the fighting in what is effectively one war against ISIS, but also illustrate the major problems in

tying terrorism data to the data (or lack of it) on the counterinsurgency campaign, and the problems in assessing Syria – where much of the fighting is dominated by the equivalent of state terrorism.

- *Figure 27: Syria & Iraq Terrorism: ISIL, Al Qaida, vs. Worldwide Incidents: 2000-2017:* This Figure strongly reinforces the cautions in the previous section about focusing too much on ISIL/ISIS. Even if one ignores the fact that most of the terrorist action of the Assad regime are not counted as such, ISIL only account for 21.1% of the terrorist incidents in 2000-2017, and Al Qaida only accounted for 2.4%. "Defeating" ISIL in these two countries is at best likely to defeat its ability to hold any territory, and the level of other violence and terrorism virtually ensures that new forms of terrorism will emerge even if ISIL is formally disbanded.
- *Figure 28: Terrorist Incidents in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, and Jordan: 1970-2016:* This figure shows how the trends in incidents in Iraq since 1970. It covers the period of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980-1988, the Gulf War in 1990-1991, and the period from the U.S. invasion in 2003 onwards. The trend data again illustrate the problems in defining terrorism vs. war. They evidently do not count Kurdish attacks or pro-Iran, Iraqi Shi'ite attacks as terrorism, and sharply undercounts the terrorist activity of the Assad regime. The attribution of terrorism to the more extreme elements of Syrian rebel forces is unclear. It is interesting that Turkey, which led in the NATO count of terrorist incidents barely registers relative to incidents in Iraq, but actually leads Syria in 2016.
- *Figure 29: Terrorist Deaths in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, and Jordan: 1970-2016:* This figure illustrates the same broad trends for deaths in Iraq. It reverses the ranking of Turkey and Syria, however, and produces a surprising high death rate in 2015 – followed by a drop in 2016 despite as significant increase in the intensity of the fighting.
- *Figure 30: Incidents and Casualties in Iraq: 1970-2016:* The data on Iraq show a major rise in terrorism through 2015, followed by a drop in 2016 in spite of a major increase in the tempo of the fighting. Illustrating the problems in trying to assess terrorism during a period of active fighting.
- *Figure 31: Incidents and Casualties in Syria: 1970-2016:* The data in this Figure highlight the problems raised in regard to *Figure 28*. The factors driving these patterns again are unclear.
- *Figure 32: Civilian Deaths from Terrorist Insurgencies: Iraq:* This figure shows the estimated civilian casualties in the fighting in Iraq from 2003 onwards, and the impact of two cycles of terrorist insurgency. The sources in Iraq Body Count, the most respected source of such estimates. The trends in this Figure show very different levels of casualties from *Figure 30*.
- *Figure 34: Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq: 2018:* This Figure illustrates some of the broader costs of terrorism and its progression to a major conflict. It only however, provides a snapshot of the fighting in the most recent round of fighting. it shows how broadly the war impacted in spite of the fact it was concentrated in Western Iraq, and it makes no attempt to estimate the cost of recovery or the damage the fighting has done to Iraq's development.
- *Figure 35: Civilian Deaths in Terrorist Insurgencies: Syria:* This Figure reveals a far sharper difference over the size and nature of casualties in Syria. It should be noted that

the UN figure cuts off in early 2016, and that it implies that the high end of the SOHR estimate for March 2018 may be correct. If so, it may well be true that the Assad regime and its outside supporters killed more civilians in the process of state terrorism using weapons like barrel bombs and poison gas between 2001 and 2017 than all of the non-state terrorists in the world during the same period.

- *Figure 36: Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: May 2018:* This Figure provides an estimate of what may be the worst humanitarian costs of war in recent times. It illustrates how devastating the shift from terrorism to civil war/insurgency can be in human terms, and again does include any estimate of the cost of recovery and in a conflict that the World Bank indicates may have cost Syria the equivalent of a generation of economic development.

These figures warn just how far the current conflicts have gone beyond given terrorist movements, and just how deeply they have divided and crippled civil society. In the case of Syria, Assad, state terrorism, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia seem to be winning but will preside over a crippled state filled with people that have every reason to fear and hate the regime. In Iraq, it faces yet another deeply divisive failed election, continued failed and corrupt governance, deep tensions with its Kurdish population, and the risk of sectarian division between Sunni and Shi'ite, fueled by outside pressure from Iran.

Trends in Afghanistan, South Asia, and Central Asia

- *Figure 36: Afghan Terrorism: Taliban, ISIL, Al Qaida, and Total Incidents: 2000-2017:* Once again, the data by major perpetrator illustrate the risk of "demonizing" a few key perpetrators in a deeply divided nation. The lack of data on ISIS is surprising, however, and this is a case where one perpetrator – the Taliban – does dominate the war in terms of both incidents and civilian casualties.
- *Figure 37: Terrorist Incidents in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia: 1970-2016:* This Figure puts the trends in attacks in Afghanistan in the broader context of the fighting and terrorism in the region. The data on Pakistan show the danger in assuming that Afghanistan presents the major threat of becoming an extremist or terrorist sanctuary – given the instability in Pakistan. The rising trend in India includes both Muslim and Hindu terrorism.
- *Figure 38: Terrorist Deaths in Afghanistan Central and South Asia: 1970-2016:* The data on fatalities in this Figure show that the fighting – whether defined as terrorism or war – has been far more lethal in Afghanistan than Pakistan or India. It again shows that no one metric can characterize the patterns in terrorism.
- *Figure 39: Incidents and Casualties in Afghanistan: 1970-2016:* This Figure again illustrates the very high ratio of casualties to incidents in the Afghan conflict.
- *Figure 40: Civilian Deaths in Terrorist Insurgencies: Afghanistan:* The UN data in this Figure again illustrate the problems in making wartime estimates. They are normally seen as the most reliable overall estimates, but the more recent estimates of the number of deaths inflicted by all anti-government elements in all acts of terrorism and war are less than half the totals in Figure 39.

- *Figure 41: Incidents and Casualties in Pakistan: 1970-2016:* This Figure illustrates the major swings in terrorism in Pakistan, and shows a very high ratio of injuries to deaths and incidents in the Afghan conflict.
- *Figure 42: Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan in 2018:* This Figure provides another estimate of the humanitarian costs of war. Like the similar data on Syria and Iraq, it illustrates how devastating the shift from terrorism to civil war/insurgency can be in human terms. and again, does include any estimate of the cost of recovery or the broader impact on Afghan development.

These Figures warn that Afghanistan remains locked into a war of attrition where there is no clear end in sight. They show that Pakistan is not only a state sponsor of terrorism, but still faces serious internal terrorist threats. World Bank data, and reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction show that the Taliban continues to expand its influence, and that Afghanistan remains crippled by corruption and poor governance, deep political divisions, and a narco-economy where the rate of poverty has increased steadily since 2008. The U.S. seems to be tilting towards trying to find some form of peace settlement with the Taliban, or division of the country, as a way to leave or end the war, but it is far from clear that any such solution could bring lasting stability or peace.

Trends in Other Wars

The final set of Figures in this analysis summarizes estimates of the trends in other major "wars" and again how different their scale, timing, and lethality can be.

- *Figure 43: Incidents and Casualties in Yemen: 1990-2017:* There do not seem to be any credible estimates of the trends in the Yemen War. Media sources often seem to use very uncertain figures and focus far more on casualties from air attacks than the overall impact of the fighting and terrorism. It is clear, however, that this conflict has even more potential for major human suffering than the Syria War.
- *Figure 44: Incidents and Casualties in Libya 1990-2017:* Any estimate for Libya has to be a rough guesstimate, particularly for any actions outside the major coastal cities.
- *Figure 45: Incidents and Casualties in Somalia 1990-2017:* Sources differ sharply, possibly because of the problems in reporting, but also because of the difficulty in defining what is terrorism versus civil war.
- *Figure 46: Incidents and Casualties in Philippines 1990-2017:* These trends represent one of the longest periods of consistent terrorism and fighting in the various country estimates.
- *Figure 47: Incidents and Casualties in Mali: 1990-2017:* The data on Mali are typical of the rising level of Islamist extremist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa
- *Figure 48: Incidents and Casualties in Turkey: 1990-2017:* The data show the continuing impact of Turkey's wars against its Kurds, and raise key questions about the extent to which this violence is really the result of a struggle against a terrorist non-state actor, or an opportunist struggle by Erdogan to use state terrorism to his own advantage by restarting a fight with Turkey's Kurds.

The one thing these wars do all have in common is the lack of clear efforts to address the causes of violence at the civil level. Once again, the key question is why do these wars end?

OTHER BURKE CHAIR REPORTS ON TERRORISM

- The Comparative Threat from Terrorism Compared to Drug Poisoning, Suicide, Traffic Accidents, and Murder: 1999-2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/comparative-threat-terrorism-compared-drug-poisoning-suicide-traffic-accidents-and-murder> .)
- Aid Stability and Recovery in Counterterrorism and Warfighting, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aid-stability-and-recovery-counterterrorism-and-warfighting> .
- Islam and the Patterns in Terrorism and Violent Extremism, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islam-and-patterns-terrorism-and-violent-extremism> .
- Trends in European Terrorism: 1970-2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/trends-european-terrorism-1970-2016> .
- Global Trends in Terrorism Through 2016 and the Relative Role of ISIS and the Taliban, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-trends-terrorism-through-2016-and-relative-role-isis-and-taliban> .
- The Patterns in Global Terrorism: 1970-2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/patterns-global-terrorism-1970-2016> .

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. He has served as a consultant on Afghanistan to the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State.