COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTC SENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | JUNE 2025 · VOLUME 18, ISSUE 6

FEATURE COMMENTARY

Operation Rough Rider: An Assessment

Gregory Johnsen

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Richard Feakes

Former Australian Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism

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FROM THE EDITORS

From March 15 to May 5 of this year, the United States conducted a major aerial and naval campaign against the Houthis—Operation Rough Rider. In this month's feature commentary, Gregory Johnsen takes stock of the offensive and considers what might come next following a ceasefire between the United States and the group. "The Red Sea crisis is far from over," he writes. "The Houthis will take away two lessons from Operation Rough Rider. First, the group continues to understand exactly how disruptive it can be to the global economy by targeting commercial shipping. Second, it knows—or at least seems to believe—that it can outlast the United States in any bombing campaign."

Our feature interview is with Richard Feakes, former Australian ambassador for counterterrorism. As he tells us, "Because of a combination of very concerted and successful CT campaigns and operations in the region, but also the undermining of ISIL in the Middle East, the landscape in Southeast Asia is probably as good as it's been for some time. But there's certainly no room for complacency. The region's extremist fringe is still present, and terrorism is not going anywhere. And we know if we take pressure off, then the threat can build back quite quickly."

Suat Cubukcu, Eoin Healy, and Adam Blackwell—using data from the Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center—examine terrorism trends in the Middle East one year before and one year after the October 7th terror attack against Israel. Their "analyses reveal a dramatic rise in drone, rocket, and missile attacks—particularly by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq—against U.S., Israeli, and maritime targets. Despite the volume, these attacks caused limited casualties due to advanced U.S. and Israeli defenses, signaling a broader shift toward low-cost, high-frequency stand-off warfare, causing disruption over decisive outcomes."

Erik Hacker offers an in-depth look at the threat from minors involved in Islamist terror plots in Europe between January 2022 and March 2025. Across such variables as weapon selection, target selection, and group sympathy, Hacker compares minor plotters' profiles to their adult counterparts. He finds that "underage terror suspects' extensive digital footprint and their seemingly weak or absent ties to formal terror groups and cyber coaches have likely contributed to the high failure rate of minors' plots in Europe in recent years." "However," he cautions, "recent increases in propaganda around operational security by the Islamic State and its ecosystem of unofficial supporter outlets, advising followers on how to evade authorities online, may change the course of this trend."

Finally, this issue marks a new chapter for *CTC Sentinel* as we take up editorial leadership of the publication from Paul Cruickshank, who grew and developed it skillfully over the last 10 years. Though the top of the masthead may have changed, we remain as committed as ever to delivering objective, relevant, and rigorous content in these pages.

Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, *Editors*

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Cover: A destroyer with the Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group fires missiles during U.S. strikes against the Houthis, posted March 15, 2025, on U.S. Central Command's X account. (U.S. Department of Defense/CENTCOM)

Feature Commentary: An Assessment of Operation Rough Rider

By Gregory Johnsen

On March 15, 2025, the United States launched an offensive against the Houthis in Yemen with the stated goal of restoring "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea and ending Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. Fifty-two days later, on May 5, the United States ended its operations in Yemen following an agreement with the Houthis that the group would no longer target U.S. military vessels or U.S. flagged ships. This article provides an assessment of that campaign, known as Operation Rough Rider, looking at what the United States hit, who was killed, and what it cost as well as how the Houthis have rebounded and regrouped, the current situation on the ground in Yemen, and what is likely to come next.

In November 2023, the Houthis began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea in response to Israel's offensive in Gaza. Within months, the militia group had succeeded in greatly reducing commercial traffic in and around the Red Sea. The United States, under both the Biden and Trump administrations, looked for ways to combat the attacks, moving from an initial "defend only" approach to an air campaign, which ran from mid-March to early May 2025. That campaign, known as Operation Rough Rider, ended following an agreement with the Houthis that the group would no longer target U.S. military vessels or U.S. flagged ships.[a]

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The Road to Conflict

Two days after he was sworn in for his second term as president, Donald Trump signed an executive order redesignating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).[1] In many ways, President Trump's second term picked up exactly where his first left off. Four years earlier, on January 19, 2021, on its last full day in office, the outgoing Trump administration had designated the Houthis an FTO.[2] Within a month, the Biden administration reversed course, removing the FTO label in an effort to revive the political process in Yemen and to limit the potential humanitarian impact on civilians in the country.[3]

Initially, the Biden administration's approach appeared to bear fruit. In April 2022, Saudi Arabia pressured Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Yemen's internationally recognized president, to step down in favor of an eight-man presidential council.[4] The change at the top coincided with a U.N.-brokered ceasefire,[5] which significantly reduced fighting in Yemen. The Houthis held much of the north, the loose configuration of anti-Houthi forces held the south and east, while Saudi Arabia provided air cover to prevent Houthi advances into Marib.

Then, on October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, killing over 1,000 people and abducting 251. Israel subsequently responded with a military invasion of Gaza. The Houthis, who struggle to govern effectively or popularly, seized on Hamas' attack and Israel's response to reignite conflict. This is where the group thrives. Fundamentally, the Houthis are a militia group that needs to fight to survive. When they are forced to act as a state—providing services, governing, and facing even a minimal amount of accountability—the group is at its most vulnerable.

For the Houthis, then, the war in Gaza presented opportunities both domestically and regionally. On the domestic front, it allowed them to expand the war. This was important for two reasons. First, the Houthis know that to survive long-term, the group will need an economic base of support from which to rule the country. The overwhelming majority of Yemen's exports are oil and gas, which are primarily located in three governorates—what one analyst calls Yemen's "triangle of power," Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramawt.[6] The Houthis currently control none of these governorates. If the group is to survive, it must control at least one of them, which is why the Houthis have been so relentless in their drive over the past five years to take Marib.[7] Without it, the group will never be secure. With Marib, however, the group would have both guaranteed income

a The details, such as they are, of the deal were outlined by Badr al-Busaidi, the Omani Foreign Minister, in a post on X. See Badr al-Busaidi, "Following recent discussions and contacts conducted by the Sultanate of Oman with the United States . . .," X, May 6, 2025.

and would be well positioned to push into Shabwa, which would effectively split the south, dividing the southern capital of Aden from its wealthiest governorate, Hadramawt. If the Houthis were able to take Marib and push into Shabwa, it would only be a matter of time before the group was able to take control of all of Yemen. This is why the war in Gaza came at such an opportune time for the Houthis. By October 2023, the ceasefire in Yemen had lasted for nearly a year and a half, and it was clear to the Houthis that the group would not be able to take Marib or Shabwa during peace time. To take additional territory, the group needed a return to war.

The Houthis also needed a continuation of the fighting to mute the domestic dissent that had arisen in areas under their control since the ceasefire began.[8] The Palestinian cause is, regardless of one's political affiliation, one of the most popular issues in Yemen. By wrapping themselves in the Palestinian flag and claiming that their actions were in defense of Palestinians, the Houthis were trying to do three things at once. First, position themselves domestically as the defender of the Palestinian cause. Second, by linking themselves to Palestine, the Houthis were making it harder to criticize them, since to criticize the Houthis would be, in at least some sense, to criticize Palestine. Finally, by taking action at least ostensibly on behalf of Palestinians, the Houthis wanted to create a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect should Israel or the United States respond militarily, which the Houthis believed would produce more recruits and further cement the group's hold on power.

Regionally, Houthi actions benefited Iran. By firing missiles and drones at Israel and attacking Israeli-linked shipping in the Red Sea, the Houthis could further Iranian regional ambitions while also providing Iran, who has trainers and commanders on the ground in Yemen, with at least a fig leaf of plausible deniability.[9] This was important for Iran, which at the time was looking to avoid a direct confrontation with Israel. So, Iran could encourage the Houthis and provide the group with ballistic missile components to strike at Israel, while avoiding direct Israeli retaliation.

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis fired a rocket at Israel, which a U.S. naval vessel, the USS Carney, shot down.[10] The Houthis tried again on October 28 and 31, but met with little success.[11] Next, on November 19, the group hijacked a cargo ship, the Galaxy Leader, taking 25 crew members hostage.[12] Soon thereafter, the Houthis settled on the strategy that proved highly effective: targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea with missiles and drones.[13] Initially, the group said it was only targeting "Israeli-linked" ships, but this quickly grew into seemingly indiscriminate strikes on any ships in the Red Sea corridor. Very quickly, commercial traffic through the Red Sea dipped to less than half its normal volume.[14] Shipping companies chose to take a longer route around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, which resulted in a spike in shipping costs. An average 40-foot shipping container went from $1,400-$1,600 to between $4,000 and $6,000, with most of those costs being passed on to consumers.[15]

No Good Options

Since the Houthis began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea in late 2023, the United States has had five broad options to respond, in addition to what it has been doing for years: implementing sanctions on key Houthi leaders and interdicting weapons shipments from Iran.[16] These options have not changed and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, even as the United States transitioned from a Biden administration to a Trump one.

Option 1 is what could be called "defend only." Under this course of action, the United States would deploy additional naval assets to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and shoot down any Houthi missile or drone attacks. The problem with this option, of course, is that it does little to either deter the Houthis from carrying out strikes or compel them to stop attacking commercial shipping. In fact, the economics of this option work against the United States, as it often uses $1-2 million dollar missiles to shoot down Houthi attacks that cost between $10,000 and $20,000.[17]

Option 2 could best be described as "limited strikes." In this option, the United States would carry out direct military strikes targeting only assets the Houthis used to fire on commercial shipping. In other words, the United States might hit mobile missile launchers, drone sites, radar sites, and weapon storage facilities, but would refrain from broader and more extensive strikes while also targeting Houthi command-and-control. The benefit of this option is that it shows the Houthis that the United States is serious and provides them with a clear off-ramp. As the Houthis reduce their attacks, the United States reduces its strikes on Houthi targets. Unfortunately, this option overlooks the domestic reasons the Houthis wanted this fight, particularly the economic motivations and the need to mute domestic dissent.

Option 3 is "extensive strikes." Under this scenario, the United States targets all known Houthi sites as well as its leadership, essentially attempting to bomb the Houthis into submission. This is the deter and degrade approach. The United States uses overwhelming air power to deter the Houthis from future attacks, while at the same time attempting to degrade the group's military capacities to the point that they are no longer capable of carrying out strikes on commercial shipping. This is the approach the United States would eventually take in Operation Rough Rider from March 15 to May 5, 2025.

Option 4 is best described as "deter, degrade, and defeat." In this scenario, the United States concludes that the attacks on commercial shipping will not stop until the Houthis are decisively defeated and removed from power in northern Yemen. Crucially, however, this approach requires ground troops complemented by a broad-based strategy. It can be local Yemeni ground forces, as part of the anti-Houthi coalition, Saudi or Emirati troops, or even U.S. forces. This is because the Houthis cannot be defeated by air power alone. Saudi Arabia and the UAE tried the air power-only approach beginning in 2015. At the time, the Saudis thought the war in Yemen would last "six weeks."[18] More than a decade later, Saudi Arabia is still there. Obviously, after lengthy and largely failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States does not want to put boots on the ground in Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, after more than a decade of a failed war in Yemen, are similarly skeptical of getting drawn back into a long and bloody guerrilla war with no guarantee of success. That leaves the anti-Houthi coalition forces, who are represented by Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The best version of this scenario is something like the United States' counter-Islamic State campaign in which the United States provided the air power and the Syrian Democratic Forces acted as the primary ground component.

Option 5 is "strike Iran." In this course of action, the United States determines that the Houthis are only the symptom of a broader problem, which is rooted in Iran's attempts to violently export its revolution. After all, the Houthis are heavily dependent on Iranian smuggling of ballistic missile components, Iranian targeting data,

Aircraft assigned to Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 1 launches from the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) during flight operations in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, posted March 26, 2025, on U.S. Central Command's X account. (U.S. Department of Defense/CENTCOM)

and Iranian officers to carry out the group's attacks on commercial shipping.[19] So, instead of attacking the Houthis, the United States goes directly to the source of the problem and carries out sustained strikes against Iran.[b] Of course, this option carries significant risks, and instead of avoiding a broader regional war that would consume more U.S. resources, it could initiate just such a conflict.

This was the menu of options that the Biden administration had in November 2023, and it was largely the same menu that the Trump administration had in March 2025. Over the past year and a half, the United States has either attempted or threatened nearly all of these options, with little success.

Initially, in November and December of 2023, the Biden administration attempted option 1, the defend-only approach.[20] But in addition to the cost disparity, the presence of increased U.S. naval patrols did little to reassure international shipping companies to return to the Red Sea, particularly when many were facing increased insurance rates. In January 2024, the Biden administration moved to option 2—limited strikes—moving from Operation Prosperity Guardian to Operation Poseidon Archer.[21] The Biden administration continued to carry out strikes on Houthi targets directly involved in attacks on commercial shipping throughout 2024. The last documented attempted Houthi attack on a commercial ship came in December 2024, prior to the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.[22] The limited strike option did little to deter or prevent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

When the Trump administration took office in January 2025, it quickly signaled that it was going to "eliminate the Houthis' capabilities and operations, deprive them of resources, and thereby end their attacks on U.S. personnel and civilians, U.S. partners, and maritime shipping in the Red Sea."[23] Or as Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth later put it in the now infamous Signal chat, the Trump administration wanted to do two things: "restore freedom of navigation and re-establish deterrence."[24] In an effort to accomplish those goals, the United States launched Operation Rough Rider on March 15, 2025.

Operation Rough Rider

Over the course of 52 days, from March 15 to May 5, the United States carried out over 1,100 strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, with the expressed goal of restoring deterrence and freedom of navigation.[25] The United States hit everything from command and control facilities, weapon storage depots, air defense systems, and

b The United States did carry out limited strikes on June 22, 2025, hitting three Iranian nuclear facilities. See Farnaz Fassihi, David E. Sanger, and Aaron Boxerman, "What to Know About the U.S. Strike on Iran and the Israel-Iran Cease-Fire," *New York Times*, June 12, 2025.

weapons factories to warehouses, military bases, the captured cargo ship Galaxy Leader, port facilities, key Houthi figures, and houses thought to contain high-value targets.[26] It made mistakes, striking a migrant detention center in Sanaa[27] and killing dozens of civilians in strikes on an oil terminal on the Red Sea coast.[28] But it also reportedly killed several mid- and high-ranking Houthi officials, including Abd al-Rabb Jarfan,[29] the deputy chief of staff to Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the supreme leader of the movement, as well as Zakaria Hajar, a drone unit commander, and members of the Military Manufacturing Force.[30]

Yet, these were not debilitating losses for the group. After 52 days of bombings, the U.S. intelligence community (according to *The New York Times*) issued a stinging assessment: U.S. strikes had caused "some degradation," but the Houthis were in a position to easily reconstitute, regroup, and rebound.[31] That assessment matches that of regional experts, many of whom argue as Ned Whalley did, that after the U.S. campaign, "Houthi power remains entrenched, its drone and missile capabilities weakened, but intact."[32] The general view of specialists is that the United States failed to defeat, decisively deter, or even significantly degrade the group.

The United States put itself in almost a no-win situation with Operation Rough Rider. The goal of the operation was to end the threat of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, but that is a goal that can only be accomplished by defeating the Houthis and removing them from power in northern Yemen. What the United States ended up with was a compromise: The Houthis would not attack U.S. ships. So long as the Houthis remain in Sanaa, the group will present a threat to broader commercial shipping. The Houthis have lost neither their capabilities nor the desire to attack commercial shipping;[33] rather, the group has only agreed to pause such attacks, while it continues to fire missiles at Israel.[34]

To fully remove the threat to freedom of navigation, the Houthis would have to be removed from power, and that is not something that can be done through air power alone. For that, the United States would need ground troops. However, in nearly two months of strikes, no ground offensive materialized. The United States did not coordinate well with the disparate Yemeni groups on the ground,[35] who are too divided to present a unified threat to the Houthis. Indeed, this is where the comparison to the United States' counter-Islamic State campaign breaks down. Unlike the Syrian Democratic Forces, who were fairly united, the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen is deeply divided. Some members of the Presidential Leadership Council advocate for a single, unified Yemeni state, while others, most notably the Southern Transitional Council, want the south to secede and establish its own independent state.[36] There are also long histories on the PLC. Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, fought for more than three years alongside the Houthis in Sanaa from 2014 until 2017, when the former president broke with the Houthis and was subsequently killed. In the past, troops affiliated with the STC have clashed violently with soldiers loyal to Islah, a political party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.[37] Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not help either, as both have picked certain Yemeni elements to back at the expense of others.[c] The United States simply does not have a viable partner on the ground that it can work by, with, and through to achieve other objectives.

It is a similar situation on the regional front. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE wants to send ground troops into Yemen, particularly as both countries are trying to extract themselves from the country after a decade of fighting the Houthis. The last thing either country wants is to get drawn back into a war that has gone on far longer than either one expected.

That would leave only the United States, which never seriously considered using ground forces in Yemen. To be clear, the United States could defeat the Houthis, but it would likely take months and involve significant casualties, costs neither the Biden nor the Trump administration was willing to bear. From the beginning, in the author's view, Operation Rough Rider was a mismatch of a desired end state and the means used to achieve it.

The best that could have realistically been hoped for is essentially what emerged: a ceasefire deal in which the Houthis agree not to target U.S.-flagged ships, commercial and naval, and the United States agrees to stop bombing the Houthis. But such a deal, and the operation that produced it, has also had significant costs.

The Costs

First, there are the costs in lost planes, downed drones, and used munitions. Throughout Operation Rough Rider, the United States lost two FA-18s, one of which rolled overboard when the aircraft carrier it was on used evasive maneuvers to avoid a Houthi attack and another in a failed landing.[38] Each plane cost just over $67 million.[39] The Houthis also shot down at least seven U.S. Reaper drones during the operation, which totals more than $200 million in loses.[40] Then, there are the munitions. The United States used so many munitions—some estimates put the cost at over $1 billion and the total operation costs near $2 billion[41]—that, according to *The New York Times*, some defense planners worry that the United States might not have enough stand-off munitions to deter China from making a move on Taiwan.[42]

Perhaps even more important, however, are the costs of perception and reputation. The Houthis, like any insurgent group, win by not losing. It is how the group has survived and grown from each of its wars. The Houthis never won any of the group's six wars against the Yemeni government from 2004-2010. Indeed, at times it looked like the group was on the verge of being eliminated, particularly after its founder, Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, was killed in 2004. But the Houthis survived each round and came back stronger. It was the same story with Saudi and Emirati bombing from 2015 to 2022. The Houthis hunkered down, absorbed the bombs, and lived to fight another day. Each time, the onus was on the aggressor—the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, the UAE—to uproot and eradicate the Houthis, and each time, they failed. In the author's view, that is exactly what has happened to the United States.

The Houthis are already spinning Operation Rough Rider as a win, saying that the group was able to withstand everything the

c For instance, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE picked four members each of the Presidential Leadership Council. The STC, a group backed by the UAE, is at odds with Islah, a group backed by Saudi Arabia. The UAE is also very opposed to Islah.

United States could throw at them and hit back.[43] For the Houthis, the 52 days of bombings were not a one-off; it was simply the latest round in a war the group has been fighting since 2004. The only difference is that the next time the Houthis fight the United States—and the group appears to be preparing for the next round—it will have the confidence that, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, it can simply outlast the United States.

What Comes Next?

The Houthis, as their actions since May 5, 2025, have demonstrated, will continue to fire missiles and drones at Israel. On May 19, two weeks after the ceasefire deal with the United States, the Houthis announced a "maritime blockade" of Israel's Haifa port.[44] The group struck Ben Gurion International Airport in early May, injuring six people,[45] and has attacked Israel multiple times since. On May 28, Israel bombed the Sanaa International Airport in retaliatory strikes,[46] and on June 14, Israel conducted a strike in Sanaa that reportedly targeted Muhammad al-Ghamari, the Houthis' military chief of staff.[47] This back-and-forth is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, particularly if the Houthis become more involved in the Israeli-Iranian conflict, which began on June 13. As of this writing, the Houthis have remained relatively quiet—launching a few missiles at Israel on June 13 and 14—but otherwise waiting in an apparent attempt to coordinate the group's actions with broader Iranian strategy.

Either way, the Red Sea crisis is far from over. The Houthis will take away two lessons from Operation Rough Rider. First, the group continues to understand exactly how disruptive it can be to the global economy by targeting commercial shipping. Second, it knows—or at least seems to believe—that it can outlast the United States in any bombing campaign. Whenever the group feels threatened or wants to make a point in the future, it knows that it can fire a few missiles or drones at commercial ships and create a crisis for the United States. What's more, Russia and China know this as well, which means that in the future the Houthis could become one more tool these adversaries leverage against the United States. CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Richard Feakes, Former Australian Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism

By Don Rassler and Sean Morrow

Richard Feakes served as Australia's Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism from May 2023 to November 2024. Prior to that, he was the Commonwealth Deputy Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Australia's Ambassador to Afghanistan, and Deputy Head of Mission in Iraq. He has served in a number of strategic and national security positions across the Australian government, including as Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan and Pakistan and as a Senior Adviser within the Prime Minister's Department.

CTC: You recently served as Australia's Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism. Over the course of your career, you have served in a variety of roles—including as Australia's Ambassador for Afghanistan and Deputy Head of Mission for Iraq—that had terrorism and counterterrorism as a core part of what you were dealing with in your portfolio. Can you talk about how some of those prior positions prepared you to be the ambassador for CT and some areas you placed emphasis on in your role as CT Ambassador?

Feakes: I had worked on security issues, as you said, for some years before I took up the CT Ambassador role, in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also before that, I worked on CT in Canberra in the early 2000s when things were really kicking off. And in the mid-2000s, I had also worked on Solomon Islands issues related to the presence in that country of RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.[a] So, I had always been interested and drawn to the security sector. Iraq and Afghanistan cemented my feeling that the security sector was something I was interested in and wanted to contribute to. And it really gave me, to put it very glibly, a grandstand view of the effects of terrorism, both on the military and on civilians. I first went to Iraq in 2008 and finished in Afghanistan in 2017. So, over several years in those countries, I saw what impact terrorism can have. In Iraq, there was a CaSH, a combat support hospital, located next to the embassy, and I used to see injured U.S. soldiers brought in on those helicopters. It made a lasting impression on me, so that much later as CT Ambassador, terrorism wasn't remote or academic if you like. It was actually quite real for me. I might add here, that during my posting to Afghanistan, we managed a number of kidnap cases, so I saw also the kidnap for ransom *modus operandi* of some terrorist groups.

Second, I saw some of the strategic shifts and trends developing in terrorism during that time, some of which, like the rise of ISKP [Islamic State Khorasan Province], are still playing out today. When I first started working on Afghanistan in 2014, ISKP was really starting to cement its presence on that border area with Pakistan. It's grown in lethality, sophistication, and reach since then of course.

Finally, and most important, my time in Iraq and Afghanistan really underscored the criticality of partnerships, both in a coalition sense—bringing nations together, particularly in Afghanistan, and harnessing the best of what you might call the 'pointy end,' which is intelligence and policing and military to achieve an effect—but also civilian agencies delivering development assistance programs, governance, and capacity building to militate the potential for radicalism to take hold in the first place. So, it left in me—particularly Afghanistan— with a very strong appreciation for partnership and cross-agency cooperation and the incredible work that agencies can do working together. I've seen instances since where genuine partnership is lacking and trust is not built and information is not shared. It can have a really corrosive effect.

The second part of your question was regarding some of the areas I focused on as CT Ambassador. It was a really busy time; a lot was happening geographically but also thematically in terms of development of terrorism. Far and away, my number-one priority was Southeast Asia. We have very significant CT partnerships with Southeast Asian countries—particularly Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia—partnerships that have been cemented over many years going back to the early 2000s but still require investment and attention to ensure regional CT gains are not lost. I'd note in particular two flagship programs: one is the Partnership for Justice between Australia and Indonesia, which is multi-year and covers the justice sector, prisons, CVE [countering violent extremism], and working with civil society; and in the Philippines, the Peacebuilding in Mindanao program addressing the root causes of radicalism and insecurity.

I also made a point, in my dealings and conversations with the Five Eyes[b] and European partners, of making sure that Southeast Asia was always on the agenda. Why? Because I think Southeast Asia can get a little bit lost in the CT conversation with those partners—partly because of geographic distance but also, because of CT successes in Southeast Asia over a number of years, there was a sense that there were more immediate issues on which to engage. So, I thought it was important to maintain Southeast Asia on people's radars. Not to fly the Australian flag, but because for reasons of tourism levels to the region and commercial investment, it is relevant to our partners as it is to Australia. So, that was an important adjunct to my work on Southeast Asia.

a Editor's Note: Following the outbreak of violence in Solomon Islands, "in late June [2003], the Australian Government established the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI was a partnership between Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand and 13 countries of the South-West Pacific region" with the goal of helping "Solomon Islands restore peace and lay foundations for stability, security and prosperity." RAMSI ended in 2017. See "Australian peacekeepers in Solomon Islands from 2000 to 2017," Anzac Portal, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Australian Government, n.d.

b Editor's Note: The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Richard Feakes

The Middle East, of course, was another key focus for me. Australia is not a central player as others are. But it was very important to keep in close touch with Five Eyes, European, and Southeast Asian partners to understand what they were seeing, to share assessments and understand what the implications were for them as they saw it. And I note, there were specific CT-related actions that the Australian government took in response, including imposing counterterrorism/financial sanctions on Hamas, both on individuals and the group itself. Australia also listed the Houthis for the first time as a proscribed terrorist organization, and we had already listed Hezbollah in its entirety and Hamas in its entirety.

And then finally, Africa, which I had not necessarily expected to be a focus of my work. The terrorism threat in parts of Africa has been one of the major strategic shifts we've seen over the last few years. The figures speak for themselves: Over 50 percent of all terrorism-related deaths occurred in the Sahel in 2024, against just one percent occurred in 2007.[1] So, they've risen very significantly. There are other factors that come into play, not least reduced casualty figures and terrorism impacts in Afghanistan, which skews some of the statistics and comparisons. This is why parts of Africa today are called the epicenter of global terrorism. The threat has been developing over a number of years, and it's a very complex suite of issues in play—governance, strategic competition, ecological factors, border insecurity.

Frankly, we also know less about what's happening there. It's become opaque because of the loss of critical ISR that is needed elsewhere, but also because of anti-Western sentiment, which has led to drawdowns of international deployments. So, we see less of what's happening on the ground, plus local governments are building partnerships with competitors and are less prepared to share and partner with us. All that matters to Australia because we have very high levels of mining and resource investment in Africa. We have about 170 separate commercial investments, some $40 billion dollars' worth of investment in Africa via mining resources and $10 billion of that is in the Sahel. So, building links with mining companies and information sharing was an important part of my work and not something I expected necessarily to do. Australia is not a big CT player in Africa, but we're not bystanders either. We've investing in the International Counter-Terrorism Academy in Côte d'Ivoire, and we've invested previously in the U.N. policing academy in Rabat, among other things.

CTC: As you know, the terrorism threat has ebbed and flowed over time. It has evolved. What type of terror threats is Australia most concerned about today?

Feakes: It has certainly evolved. Since I began working directly on CT around 2020, there have been very significant shifts—the rise of ISKP; the growing threat in Africa as I mentioned; the rise of single-issue/personal grievance-inspired terrorism; post-October 7th threats, including from the Houthis, Shi`a militia group in the Middle East; and the increasing relevance of social media, technology, encryption, drones, and the like. There has been a huge amount of activity in the last three or four years. The U.S. administration's recent decision to designate cartels as FTOs [Foreign Terrorist Organizations] underlines this evolution, even if we don't yet know what the effects of that designation will be.

Internationally, Australia remains focused on transnational

jihadist terrorist groups in the Middle East, in Africa, in Afghanistan. We're focused on events post-October 7th. I think there's still a question about what impact that will have in terms of the conflict as a generational radicalizing event and what that tail is going to look like in the future. But what is clear is that it has had a terrorism impact beyond the Middle East, most particularly for our European partners in the form of increased attacks and increased attack plots in Europe and attacks against Jewish and Israeli interests. So that has been and remains a real concern for us.

We are always alert to the potential for foreign conflict theaters—current and emerging—to appeal to regional extremists as destinations or to establish links. Afghanistan is one of those places, and in the 1990s, those links and travel did exist. But also, the Sahel, where the reach of ISIL and AQ affiliates is expanding.

We are concerned about Afghanistan and ISKP, which has been an interest of mine and is a key concern I know for U.S., U.K., and European colleagues. We've seen very starkly how that threat has accelerated, faster perhaps than we feared it would, as the Crocus Hall and Kerman attacks show. And the group has grown in sophistication in terms of its use of encryption, crypto currencies, its secure communications, and its multilingual propaganda. It's a very serious threat indeed, and one that of course can no longer be considered an AfPak threat. It's an international threat.

Domestically, Australia's Director General of Security raised the terrorism threat level in Australia from 'possible' to 'probable' in August last year. He did that because we were seeing much more unpredictability, a much more volatile landscape in which more Australians were being radicalized and being radicalized more quickly. What that means practically is that we now have a greater than 50 percent chance of an attack in Australia. We are seeing four factors that are playing into that overall threat level: the threat of lone actors; radicalization happening more quickly; we are seeing more minors radicalizing; and we're seeing diverse drivers of extremism—personal grievance, anti-authoritarianism, hybrid grievances, contradictory grievances, in which individuals are holding the types of ideologies which would have never come together previously. And what that usually looks like in an Australian context—as it may elsewhere—is a lone actor attacking with a rudimentary weapon in a crowded place, having radicalized quickly and possibly online and, importantly, not being radicalized by people that that person knew or was related to. All of that is quite different to what we were seeing previously with the jihadist threat.

The other thing to add to the domestic threat landscape is that, as we're dealing with this cocktail of domestic, ideologically motivated threats, we are also dealing with those previously convicted jihadists who are now being released into the community. They may not be being released in great numbers, certainly not by comparison to some of our European partners like the French, but we have a number that are being released now that were convicted in the early to mid-2000s. They've served their time. Some of them are under supervision orders in the community, which of course puts considerable resource strain and pressure on our police and intelligence agencies.

As we know from numerous offshore cases, you cannot eliminate risk, and you may be a hair's breadth away from something bad happening. That is an issue in itself, but it also goes to the point that has been made previously, including by U.S. colleagues, about the compounding or additive nature of terrorism. You don't just cross a threat off the list and say, 'Job well done, we can leave that behind.' You never do that. Your pile of jobs just grows, and the release of convicted jihadists is a good example of that.

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CTC: Shifting gears, when you look out over the horizon for the next several years, what types of terrorism threats are you most concerned about in the Indo-Pacific area?

Feakes: Looking over the horizon is never easy. October 7th took us all by surprise, as did the fall of Kabul. As our Director General of Security said in his annual threat assessment, over the next five years a complex, challenging and changing environment will become even more dynamic.[2] The factors behind radicalization and the formation of ideologies are so much more varied, dynamic, and quicker now than before.

But for us, as I've said before, our key focus is on Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia. Because of a combination of very concerted and successful CT campaigns and operations in the region, but also the undermining of ISIL in the Middle East, the landscape in Southeast Asia is probably as good as it's been for some time. But there's certainly no room for complacency. The region's extremist fringe is still present, and terrorism is not going anywhere. And we know if we take pressure off, then the threat can build back quite quickly. So, it's really important not to be complacent.

Indonesia's security agencies have been extremely successful with their disruptions. Their CT agencies—particularly Densus 88—are very effective. The issue is not one of capability; it's one of capacity. And that's a factor for us all in having to deal with multiple threats simultaneously. They've had some real successes. JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] recently announced it was disbanding and Indonesia's deradicalization programs, both pre- and post-release from prison, are very mature. The Philippines, again, is as positive as it's been for many years following the Marawi siege attacks in 2017. There's been a lot of very strong CT operational activity, not least the eradication of a number of ISIL-P emirs over the last two to three years. But while the threat may be down, it's not out.

So, we have very good cooperation and a relatively benign threat landscape in Southeast Asia, but there are a number of challenges over the horizon to return to your question. One is the release of

terrorism offenders arrested and convicted at the peak of the mid-2010s global terrorism wave and before. In Indonesia, of the five Bali bombers who remain in prison, four have made clemency applications. So, the release of prisoners will put pressure on security forces. Deradicalization programs are never 100-percent effective, and there is always some residual risk when terrorism prisoners are released. So, we're concerned about released terrorist offenders. We're also concerned about foreign terrorist fighters, families, women and children, returning from the Middle East to Southeast Asia over the next few years. There's a large number of them in the detention camps in northeast Syria, and their future return raises the prospect that new ideologies, networks and capabilities may be brought into the region. That is something we are working with our Southeast Asian partners on. And then also the emergence of new and foreign conflict theaters—Afghanistan but elsewhere—and whether actors in Southeast Asia may be drawn to those areas. And the last point I'd say is that social media has very high take-up in Southeast Asia. Groups may exploit social, economic, and cultural divisions. Social media platforms don't have the linguistic capability to monitor Southeast Asian languages like they do Arabic and English. So, there's a potential there for social media to be further exploited to radicalize individuals.

CTC: In January 2025, the Australian government released its new counterterrorism and violent extremism strategy.[3] How would you characterize the evolution of Australia's approach to counterterrorism over the past two decades? To what extent does the new strategy focus on factors such as economics, the information environment, diplomacy, and threat finance in addition to 'traditional' kinetic CT aspects?

Feakes: The domestic terrorist environment today is not one we can only arrest or intelligence-gather our way through. It requires action by a much broader range of actors than before: government, clubs, community groups, social media companies, mental health practitioners, teachers, the whole lot. And we are getting much better at harnessing those groups. In terms of evolution, that's a very big question. There's been a very significant two decades of CT development in the Australian system, as there has been elsewhere. Since 9/11, and particularly since 2002 for us with the first Bali bombing, we've seen legislation passed, partnerships built, the standing-up of a whole CT structure and enterprise, which previously did not really exist. Post-9/11, Australian agencies were watching closely transnational groups, Sunni violent extremism groups operating offshore but directing and radicalizing Australians in Australia. And they were watching and stopping Australians traveling offshore to join up with some of those groups in Afghanistan but also in the Middle East. About 210 Australians traveled to the Middle East to join the caliphate. The dynamic was focused very clearly on jihadist groups, and for very good reason.

It's totally different today. Of the potential terrorist matters that ASIO[c] investigated in 2024, fewer than half of those were religiously motivated, and the majority of those involved mixed ideologies, national and racist ideologies. Almost all the matters involved minors. So, there's been a fundamental shift. The radicalization process—and our response to that—have also changed very significantly. During the caliphate days, individuals were radicalized over an extended period whereas today it now much quicker. Individuals today are not being radicalized by family members and associates, but, as I said, often acting as lone actors. And extremism before—going back to the 2000s, early mid-2000s and later—was something that was really confined to metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne. It no longer is. Now extremism is more diffuse and geographically spread, including in remote and regional Australia, which presents its own suite of challenges for security and law enforcement agencies. And then, of course, we're dealing with social media, mental health, spread of disinformation and misinformation.

So, the whole strategy has fundamentally changed. It's less about intelligence and policing, though they remain critical, and more about prevention, supporting at-risk individuals and their families, working with community groups, working with mental health practitioners, advising bystanders to understand what radicalization looks like. That's what the strategy at its core is about. Partnership—domestic and international—is a big part of the strategy.

CTC: Let's talk a bit more about partnerships. Given the global and networked nature of terrorism, counterterrorism has always been a team endeavor, as you know well. Are multilateral fora and CT groups correctly focused? Are we getting the most out of our partnerships? When it comes to CT partnerships, from the Australian perspective, what do you think works and what can be done better?

Feakes: The premise to your question is spot on. We've had some success—it's probably fair to say—since 9/11 in suppressing major high-profile attacks. Not all of course. Why have we been able to do that? Two reasons. One is we've been able to throw vast resources at the problem set, which we can no longer do, and the second reason is partnerships. Since 9/11, we've had a fair degree of unanimity of effort and consensus in international fora. But today, some of that consensus is fraying. In parts of Africa, where the terrorist threat is worsening quite quickly, we are seeing the impacts of strategic competition in ways that are very unhelpful and undermine our CT interests. So, partnership is absolutely fundamental, but it's not always easy to get partnerships right. Countries bring their own national interests, their own capacity and resource constraints, their own definition of what a threat is, what a terrorist is. A partner can be friend and foe at the same time, and sometimes you're working with partners on issues that are frankly very sensitive, where you're dealing with a CT effort that delves into security sector reform or CVE work. These are sensitive things. So, partnerships aren't always easy to get right.

One thing that struck me as CT Ambassador is that you can spend a large amount of time on the road going to CT fora groupings/meetings—multilateral, regional. We don't just do that for the sake of it. We go to these groupings because we need to get something out of it in the national interest, whether that's information sharing or building links between entities that can work to good effect in counter-radicalization; it saves lives. So, if you can't answer the question, 'Why am I here and what am I getting out of it?' then you probably shouldn't be at that particular meeting. CT resources are not what they used to be and, given the multiple security

c Editor's Note: The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is the domestic intelligence and national security agency of the Australian government.

challenges governments today face, nor can they be. It's not a matter of shouting louder for resources. But it is important to be clear with governments about risk and to ensure you are making the most effective use of resources to manage risk, including engagements with partners multilaterally and regionally.

As a CT community, I think we should certainly bring more rigor and efficiency and effectiveness into our groupings. Some of them work very well. The de-ISIL coalition is one that is evolving and being streamlined to meet more directly current threats and challenges. The Quad CT[d] is another—a small partnership with a high degree of strategic convergence, a group that's inclined to action and outcome rather than discussion and description. And I think our Southeast Asian partnerships work very well. We've invested over many years in the relationships. The relationships are founded both on national partnerships that are very strong and comprehensive across the board, but also, they're founded on very strong personal relationships. You need those personal relationships if you want to create practical effect.

A couple of further points on multilateral partnership. With CT these days, you've got to get the experts around the table. We're getting better at that, but I think we can get even better. There are roles for people like me in convening and perhaps setting some of the strategic direction and objectives, but you need the experts around the table. I think we can be a little more reflective too about our partnerships. And I don't mean strategically; I mean to avoid the tendency to do X with Y because we've done that previously. We can put a bit more effort into actually working out what we want out of a partnership. Why are we doing it? How does partnership with this country fit into our broader national CT strategy? How does it support that? I sometimes think we don't give that enough thought. It takes time and effort, but that's an area for improvement.

Finally, on burden sharing through partnership, I think we can be more effective and deliberate in this. It should go beyond what can sometimes be a crude geographical approach to something that is much more granular and sophisticated and informed by analysis of national investments. For the resource challenges I mentioned earlier, we need to work better on deconflicting and disaggregating our CT programs to avoid duplication with our partners, or on the other hand working to force multiply these programs. None of that is easy, I know.

CTC: Speaking of partnerships, could you address Australia's relationships with Indonesia—how Australia has built that partnership and what it's been able to achieve?

Feakes: It is, far and away, our most comprehensive and interconnected CT partnership. It's a partnership that benefits Australia as much as it does Indonesia. It's been forged through very difficult times, going back to the 2002 Bali bombings, the Marriott Hotel attack in 2003, the 2005 Bali bombing, and other attacks. We have been through thick and thin. After 2002, we worked hand in glove on the Bali bombing investigation with the Indonesian police, which led to the conviction of the Bali bombers. In some ways, once you've worked so closely with a country like that, you can never go back. It's something that has been transformative for us both. I was struck when I went to Jakarta for the first time as CT Ambassador to meet the Indonesian CT coordinator and he described his time working with Australia in the aftermath of the 2002 Bali bombing. He became very emotional about it. Here was a pretty hardened, experienced guy who was, 20 years later or more, still moved by his experience. And he was still working with Australia. So those really hard times have forged a relationship that is today very successful, and those personal relationships, as I said, are so important.

It's a CT partnership that is part of a much broader and successful bilateral relationship, which is crucial to Australia. Indonesia was the first country our Prime Minister visited after his recent reelection. In any relationship, let alone one as interconnected and critical as ours with Indonesia, there are bound to be ups and downs. The CT relationship in some way has been quite successfully quarantined from differences that may arise from time to time. We've kept things steady because we both appreciate how important the CT relationship is. We've seen the terrible cost when things go bang. As I said, it's a CT relationship that is deep and comprehensive: intelligence, CT financing, defense, border cooperation, our Home Affairs—homeland security equivalent—is working in Indonesia as well. And I mentioned previously our very large Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Justice program, which has CT/CVE elements to it. Finally, it's a partnership that we take forward bilaterally, in regional fora and multilaterally, where we co-chair with Indonesia one of the CT working groups in the GCTF.[e]

In terms of the successes, we've seen the uplift in the capacity of Indonesian agencies over recent years; that's something that the Indonesians have been most responsible for. We've been happy to play a part and support them where we can. But that in itself is a success story. If I had to point to one thing, I would point to the JCLEC, the Jakarta Center for Law Enforcement Cooperation, which was set up in 2004 as a training nerve center for police from Indonesia and Australia after the 2002 Bali bombings. It's situated not far from Jakarta in Samarang, and it's grown into what is today an incredibly successful regional/international training center, which covers CT and transnational crime more broadly. It brings together our Five Eyes partners, but also regional neighbors. It's delivered a little under 2,000 courses, about 100 countries involved, about 50,000 participants, and it is an incredibly successful, world-leading, multidisciplinary center of excellence and one which we've sought to replicate in Australia without Pacific policing neighbors. The JCLEC is a direct legacy of Bali, and a very successful story today and one that we and our Indonesian partners are very proud of.

CTC: When you think about the impact of two major world events—the war in Gaza and the war in Ukraine—and you look at both of those conflicts through the lens of terrorism and counterterrorism, what are your concerns for the future?

d Editor's Note: Established in 2023, the Quad Counterterrorism Working Group (CTWG) consists of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States and meets "annually to discuss CT threats, Quad CT good practices, and ways the Quad can work together to mitigate acts of terrorism through information sharing, consequence management and strategic messaging." "Fact Sheet: 2024 Quad Leaders' Summit," The White House, September 21, 2024.

e Editor's Note: The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)—made up of 32 members—"is an informal, apolitical, multilateral counterterrorism (CT) platform that contributes to the international architecture for addressing terrorism … The GCTF's mission is to diminish terrorist recruitment and increase countries' civilian capabilities for dealing with terrorist threats within their borders and regions." "Background and Mission," Global Counterterrorism Forum, n.d.

Feakes: With October 7th, I'm worried about the radicalizing impact it will have both internationally and domestically, and I don't think we know yet what that tail is going to look like. Certainly, the conflict is resonating in Australia in terms of heightened community tensions and protest activity, which has on occasion strayed into incidents of violence. We've seen a very significant uptick in racial vilification, antisemitism, but also attacks on Jewish sites and prominent figures. So, I'm worried about that. Our state police services talk about the really significant uptick in hate crimes that they're seeing, and in that regard it's worth noting that the country with the highest number of Holocaust survivors outside of Israel is Australia, in Melbourne specifically. So, we're acutely conscious of the impact of antisemitism. And the government's taken a number of initiatives in response to secure Jewish and Islamic schools and sites. I read the other day that 60 percent of Hamas fighters, most of whom now happily have been killed, were orphans,[4] and we are, of course, now creating a whole new generation of orphans. What will that look like? We don't really know, and we may not know for five years or 10 years, but I suspect what's happening in the Middle East is going to be with us for many, many years to come.

In Ukraine, we don't really know what those takeaways look like because the war is sadly grinding on. But I think I'm right in saying, going back certainly to the beginning of the war, there was a fair amount of chatter amongst jihadist and extreme right-wing groups. On the jihadist side, some hardline groups were advocating for jihadist fighters to take advantage of Western preoccupation in Ukraine to launch attacks internationally. And some others—like AQ through its Wolves of Manhattan publication—urged fighters to travel to Ukraine for training and weapons acquisition and to attack so-called crusader targets there, in Russia and elsewhere, while others, like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), advocated for the Muslim world to support Ukraine. And on the extreme right-wing side, there has been chatter in support of both Ukraine and Russia. I'm not sure, frankly, to what extent that chatter has proven to be a factor in terms of people being drawn to the conflict area. I'm sure there have been some; the extent to which those individuals are susceptible to radicalization, it's questionable.

I think there's, as I said, a question and a concern around those individuals who have gone to fight. What happens when they come back, either with greater capability or, worse, with greater capability and trauma? Foreign fighters are often used as cannon fodder, so they may be few in number.

Then, of course, there's the impact of drones. To what extent are terrorist groups sitting on the sidelines, thinking, devising plans to replicate what we're seeing? Ukraine has been fundamentally different from other conflicts in terms of the use of drones, either commercially acquired or provided by Iran, like the Shahed one-way attack drone. And then there's what we saw with the 'spider web attack,'[f] which has been a fundamental change in being able to realize attacks through shipping containers and to project attacks inside a country such as Russia from places where shipping containers are quite normally seen, like shipping yards and ports and trucks traversing countries. Terrorists will learn from that operation. These are some of the things that I am worried about when I think about terrorism outputs from Ukraine. CTC

f Editor's Note: Operation Spider Web was a complex Ukrainian operation conducted on June 1, 2025, that involved more than 100 drones that were smuggled into Russia and were used to later strike airbases deep inside Russia, which reportedly resulted in the destruction and/or loss of approximately 40 aircraft. Laura Gozzi and BBC Verify, "How Ukraine carried out daring 'Spider Web' attack on Russian bombers," BBC, June 2, 2025.

Citations

1 Editor's Note: See "Global Terrorism Index 2025," Institute for Economics & Peace, March 2025, p. 4.
2 Editor's Note: Mike Burgess, "ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2025," Office of National Intelligence, February 19, 2025.
3 "A Safer Australia Australia's Counter – Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy 2025," Commonwealth of Australia, January 2025.
4 Editor's Note: "A Tale of Two Spies: The former heads of MI5 and MI6 on the Iraq War, double agents, and the IRA," The Rest is Politics: Leading podcast, March 31, 2024.

Regional Terrorism Trends Before and After October 7

By Suat Cubukcu, Eoin B. Healy, and Adam Blackwell

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel triggered a rapid escalation in regional conflict and reshaped the operational landscape of Iran-backed violent non-state actors. Using data from the Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center's GRID database, this article compares patterns of terrorist violence in the Middle East one year before and after the attack. The analyses reveal a dramatic rise in drone, rocket, and missile attacks—particularly by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq—against U.S., Israeli, and maritime targets. Despite the volume, these attacks caused limited casualties due to advanced U.S. and Israeli defenses, signaling a broader shift toward low-cost, high-frequency stand-off warfare, causing disruption over decisive outcomes. While Hezbollah and Hamas suffered major losses at the hands of Israeli forces, the Houthis emerged as Iran's most active and disruptive proxy. The analysis underscores a post-October 7 reconfiguration of the proxy landscape and highlights the strategic limits of Iran's indirect warfare and its eroded ability to deter direct Israeli attacks on Iran.

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel was the deadliest assault in the country's history, resulting in the deaths of about 1,200 people and the capture of 251 hostages.[1] This shocking 'black swan' attack triggered a large-scale Israeli military campaign against Hamas in Gaza, which has led to over 54,000 Palestinian deaths (as of May 28, 2025)[2] and an untold number of casualties. The campaign subsequently expanded into Lebanon, the West Bank, and Iran, further destabilizing the region. Recently, the Israel-Iran conflict has escalated into war, with Israeli airstrikes killing senior Iranian officials, triggering retaliatory missile and drone attacks, and causing casualties on both sides, raising fears of a prolonged and wider conflict.

While Israel has intensified its military operations against Hamas, Iran-backed groups escalated their attacks to show solidarity with Hamas. These groups have deployed unmanned aerial systems, rockets, and missiles in attempts to penetrate Israel's aerial defense systems and strike Israeli targets. Additionally, they targeted U.S. military facilities using stand-off aerial weapons to avoid direct confrontations. The Houthis, Iran's proxy in Yemen, have launched a series of drone attacks targeting Israel and both commercial and U.S. military vessels in the Red Sea and further expanded the regional scope of the conflict.

This article starts by providing an overview of the Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center's Record of Incident Database (GRID), which forms the empirical basis of this article. Leveraging GRID data, the article then compares one-year periods before and after October 7 and examines the potential impact of the October 7 attack on the nature and frequency of terrorist attacks in the Middle East region. The mobilization and tactical evolution of Iran-backed groups (Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq) over the past year, with emphasis placed on their use of air-domain weapons such as drones, missiles, and rockets, is also explored. In addition, the article also evaluates the targeted operations of Iran-backed groups, the patterns and effectiveness of their attacks in achieving tactical objectives, the casualties inflicted, and the associated economic impact.

Part I: Introducing the GRID Database

The Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) Record of Incident Database, commonly known as GRID, is a comprehensive open-source database that chronicles terrorist incidents around the world.[3] This system was developed to gather and summarize data on terrorist events since 2018, primarily to support the Annex of Statistical Information on Terrorism, under contract with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism. GTTAC is run jointly by the private research firm Development Services Group and the Terrorism, Transnational Crime & Corruption Center at George Mason University.

GRID utilizes open-source intelligence, gathered through multimedia data aggregators, to identify potential terrorist

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incidents.[a] The database employs ontologies for various aspects of terrorism, including incidents, perpetrators, tactics, weaponry, and victim/facility targeting.[4] After automated processing and triage, a team of multilingual subject-matter experts, technologists, and researchers reviews and validates the information before entering it into GRID.

To ensure accuracy and objectivity, GRID only includes incidents reported by independent and reliable sources, excluding information from terrorist media or incidents with significant uncertainty. This uncertainty, which is widespread in many areas around the world, is often present in open-source reporting on terrorism incidents. Being dependent on open-source reporting means that GRID is vulnerable to disruptions in journalistic reporting and standards around the world. GTTAC aims to mitigate these challenges by developing a roster of regionally focused analysts with continuously updated methodologies that are specific to not only the terrorism that is present in those regions, but also the reporting standards, quality, and sources for specific countries. Finally, the definition of terrorism that is utilized for GRID means that it is restricted in its reach, and the trends reported are not the full reflection of political violence experienced around the world. The GRID dataset is dynamic, with updates typically occurring weekly. This report uses GRID data retrieved on January 15, 2025.

Part II: Evaluating Regional Terror Activity Pre- and Post-October 7

Incident Trends

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack was a pivotal moment, leading to an immediate surge in violent activity across the Middle East. During the year prior to October 7, there was a relatively steady increase in the number of incidents and fatalities, peaking occasionally but generally maintaining a lower level of intensity compared with terror activity one year after the attack. The attack led to an immediate and dramatic rise in fatalities, followed by a sustained period of heightened activity. While fatalities declined from their peak on October 7, incidents remained consistently high, indicating a shift toward more frequent non-state terror violence. Figure 1 illustrates trends of terrorist attacks in the Middle East, which indicates a significant shift in terrorism targeting patterns, with increased attacks on Israel and U.S. assets in the region in the year following October 7.

Following the October 7 attack and Israel's intensified military response in Gaza, Iran's support and influence—as a key backer of Hezbollah and Hamas—have become more visible.[5] Maintaining substantial leverage over its network of proxies, Iran reinforced a unified "Axis of Resistance" formed by Iran-backed groups acting in solidarity with Hamas, targeting both Israel and U.S. assets in the region. Hezbollah emerged as the group that perpetrated the most attacks, with a sharp increase to 1,398 incidents from only three incidents with no recorded fatalities during the year prior to October 7. (See Figure 1.) This sharp increase reflects another chapter in the episodic nature of Hezbollah's violent campaigns against Israel.[6] Hamas had been relatively inactive in the year before its October 7 assault, with only 39 recorded incidents—possibly reflecting strategic restraint in the lead-up to a major operation. Following the attack, as the group engaged in direct conflict with Israel in Gaza, its recorded violent attacks surged to 480 incidents, yet the Israeli counteroffensive degraded Hamas' military infrastructure and leadership in Gaza and limited its operational capacity.

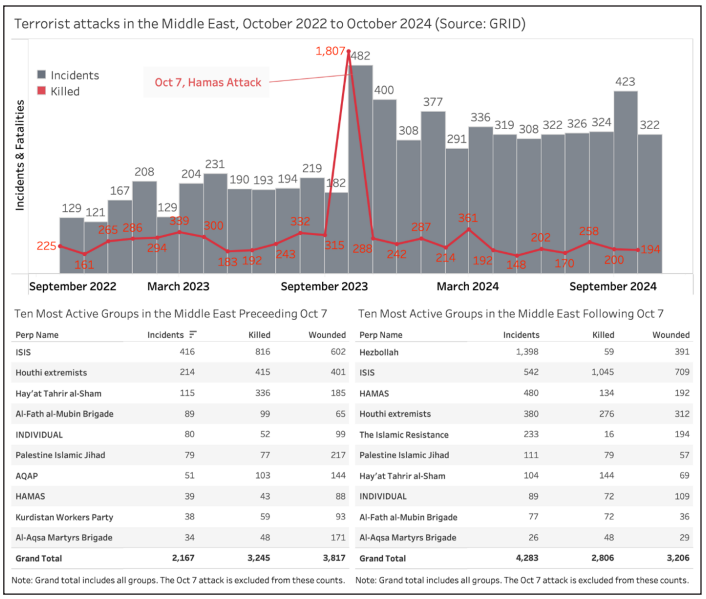


Figure 1: Trend of Terrorist Incidents and Perpetrators

Another Iran-backed group, the Houthi movement, declared war on Israel on October 31, 2023, as a reaction to Israel's military campaign in Gaza and in support of Hamas.[7] The Houthis began launching drone attacks against Israel, demonstrating their growing stand-off strike capabilities.[8] In November 2023, the Houthis also declared their intention to attack Israeli-linked shipping.[9] This led to a series of attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, significantly disrupting global maritime trade, and expanded to include assaults on commercial and naval ships.[10] According to the Pentagon, about 190 such attacks were recorded from November 2023 to June 2024.[11] As reported by the Defense Intelligence Agency, by March 2024, the Houthi attacks had affected ships linked to more than 65 countries, illustrating the global nature of the threat.[12] For the year after October 7, the Houthis' violent activity escalated to 380 incidents, reflecting a broader regional response to the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Of these, 84 attacks were intended to target U.S. military bases or navy vessels in the region; however, none were successfully executed against U.S. targets.

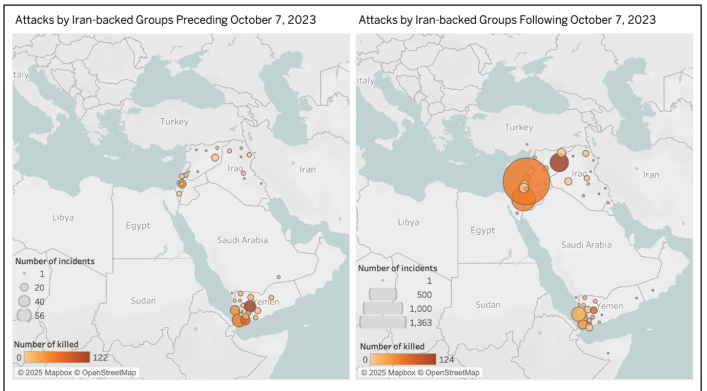
The Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) emerged after October 7 as an umbrella organization for Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups supporting Hamas in its armed struggle against Israel.[13] IRI unites several groups designated by the U.S. State Department as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Specially Designated Global Terrorists, including Harakat Hezbollah al-

a The definition of a terrorist incident used by GRID is approved by the U.S. Department of State and aligns with Title 22, Section 2656f, of the U.S. Code, incorporating elements from various U.S. government agencies and the United Nations. According to GRID, "a terrorist incident is a violent act carried out by non-state actors and individuals (lone actors) that meets all of the following criteria: 1. The violent act aims to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal. 2. The violent act includes evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to an audience (or audiences) larger than the immediate victims. 3. The violent act occurred outside the precepts of international humanitarian law in that it targeted non-combatants." For more background, see "Methodology," Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center, n.d.

Nujaba, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Ansar Allah al-Awfiya.[14] GRID data indicates that IRI carried out 233 attacks in the year following October 7, which resulted in 16 deaths. Of these, 194 attacks were intended to target U.S. military forces in the region. Only 14 of these attacks were effectively carried out and hit intended targets, leading to 74 U.S. service members reported wounded.

Beyond Iran's proxy groups, other terrorist organizations, particularly the Islamic State, have also contributed significantly to the region's volatile security environment. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was the most active network in the region before October 7, responsible for 416 incidents in the preceding year. Its violent activities were concentrated primarily in Syria, and to a lesser extent in Iraq. The Islamic State's violent campaign in Iraq and Syria increased to 542 incidents in the year following October 7. While the Islamic State did not specifically target Israel or Jewish populations, it has framed its violent campaigns in Syria, Iraq, and other regions as contributions to the Palestinian cause and part of a broader fight against regimes protecting Israel.[15]

Overall, the operational focus of the Islamic State's network in the Levant remained largely unchanged, continuing to prioritize its anti-Shi`a narratives and *takfiri* ideology rather than shifting toward a Palestine-centric jihad. For example, in January 2024, Islamic State Khorasan carried out one of the deadliest attacks in Iran's history, bombing a ceremony in Kerman that killed more than 80 people.[16]



Attacks by Iran backed Groups Preceeding Oct 7, 2023

Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Houthi extremists	212	414	397
HAMAS	39	43	88
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	4	2	10
Liwa Ahrar al-Iraq	2	0	0
Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani	2	1	4
Hezbollah	2	0	0
Liwa Fatemiyoun	1	0	1
Liwa al-Ghaliboun	1	1	6
Kata'ib Hizballah (KH)	1	0	0
Ashab al-Kahf (People of the Cave)	1	1	0
Grand Total	**319**	**495**	**545**

Attacks by Iran-backed Groups Following Oct 7, 2023

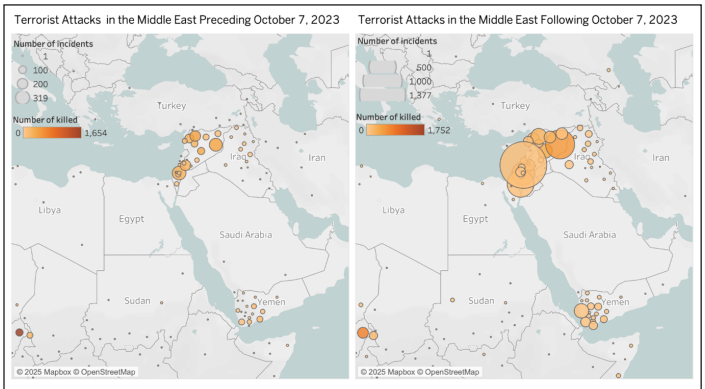
Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Hezbollah	1,394	59	390
HAMAS	479	134	192
Houthi extremists	380	276	312
The Islamic Resistance	231	16	194
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq	4	4	11
Lebanese Resistance Brigades	1	0	0
Kata'ib Hizballah (KH)	1	0	0
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	1	4	6
Humanitarian Relief Foundation	1	0	6
Grand Total	**2,671**	**633**	**1,257**

Figure 2: Iran-Backed Groups and Their Attacks One Year Before and One Year After October 7

Geographic Dynamics

The October 7 Hamas attack served as a catalytic event that not only changed the intensity but also dramatically reshaped the geographic distribution of terrorist violence across the Middle East. (See Figure 3.) During the year prior to October 7, non-state terror violence in the Middle East region was concentrated primarily in Syria (1,180 incidents), Yemen (336 incidents), and the West Bank (308 incidents). The intensity of violence is reflected in Syria, which experienced the highest fatalities (2,109) and injuries (1,848). After October 7, 2023, the focal point of attacks shifted significantly, with Israel experiencing the largest surge in incidents (1,999). Yet, despite the highest number of non-state terror attacks being against Israel, the number of fatalities remained low, at 173.

Syria remained a major hotspot the year after October 7, with 1,288 incidents and 1,675 fatalities recorded for that year. These incidents were largely driven by internal dynamics and civil conflict within Syria rather than direct involvement in the Israel-Hamas war. As the Houthis focused more on Israel, U.S. naval vessels, and commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden following the October 7 attack, Yemen saw an increase in overall incidents (rising from 336 to 432) with a significant surge in attacks against maritime, commercial, and naval vessels, which rose from two to 162. Yemen remained one of the top countries in the region experiencing non-state terror violence. As seen in Figure 3, the October 7 attack significantly shifted preexisting trends and demonstrates how a high-impact, black-swan terror event can trigger immediate escalations in other countries and further destabilize a region.



Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
SYRIA	1,180	2,109	1,848
YEMEN	336	611	627
WEST BANK	308	230	683
IRAQ	194	186	214
ISRAEL	93	33	140
TURKEY	22	29	111
GAZA STRIP	22	14	61
LEBANON	7	19	131
SAUDI ARABIA	5	14	2
Grand Total	**2,167**	**3,245**	**3,817**

Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
ISRAEL	1,999	173	670
SYRIA	1,288	1,675	1,478
YEMEN	432	398	409
WEST BANK	334	336	321
IRAQ	177	201	201
LEBANON	32	2	10
GAZA STRIP	10	2	3
TURKEY	5	3	17
JORDAN	3	3	47
OMAN	2	9	50
SAUDI ARABIA	1	4	0
Grand Total	**4,283**	**2,806**	**3,206**

Figure 3: A Comparison of Terrorist Attacks in the Middle East Before and After October 7

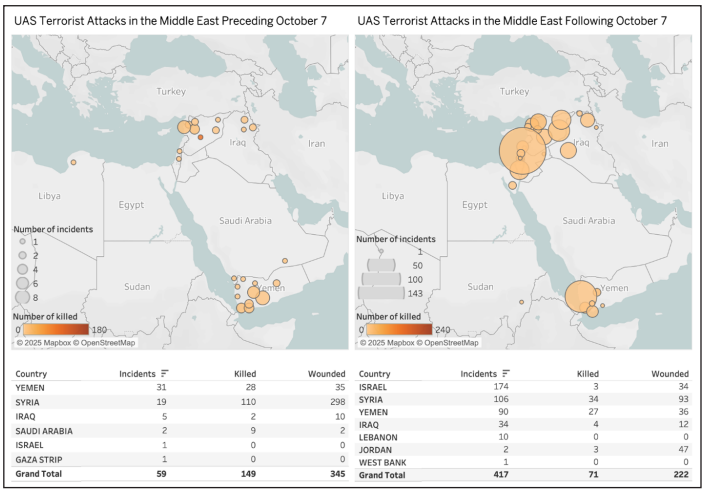
UAS, Missile, and Rocket Attacks

Analysis of GRID data reveals a clear shift in the scale, scope, and nature of attacks in the region. Unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and rocket attacks have become central tools in the arsenals of Iran-backed actors. What had been infrequent and geographically limited strikes escalated into high-volume, cross-border campaigns targeting primarily U.S. and Israeli positions and assets in the aftermath of October 7.

UAS

According to GRID data, UAS attacks by non-state actors were relatively infrequent and localized in the Middle East, with a total of 59 UAS recorded incidents in the region in the year preceding October 7. Key perpetrators were primarily Houthis in Yemen, responsible for 29 incidents that caused 37 deaths and 34 injuries. Other groups, such as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), conducted limited operations with minimal casualties. The primary geographic focal points of UAS attacks during the year prior to October 7 were concentrated in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, with Yemen

accounting for the highest number of incidents (31) and significant casualties (28 deaths) from UAS attacks. (See Figure 4.)

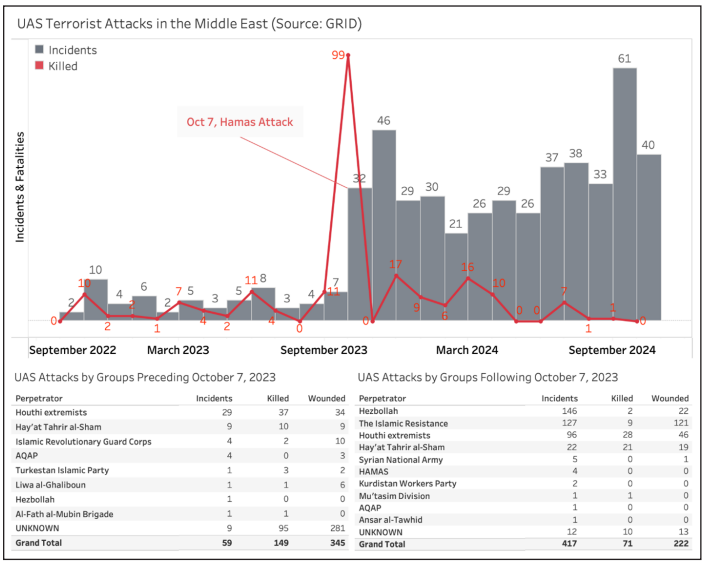


Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
YEMEN	31	28	35
SYRIA	19	110	298
IRAQ	5	2	10
SAUDI ARABIA	2	9	2
ISRAEL	1	0	0
GAZA STRIP	1	0	0
Grand Total	**59**	**149**	**345**

Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
ISRAEL	174	3	34
SYRIA	106	34	93
YEMEN	90	27	36
IRAQ	34	4	12
LEBANON	10	0	0
JORDAN	2	3	47
WEST BANK	1	0	0
Grand Total	**417**	**71**	**222**

Figure 4: Unmanned Aerial System Attacks and Targeted Countries Before and After October 7

A sharp escalation in the use of UAS attacks was observed throughout the region after October 7, with a total of 417 incidents recorded over the year. (See Figure 5.) Hezbollah emerged as the most active perpetrator of UAS attacks (146 incidents), followed by the IRI (127 incidents), and the Houthis (96 incidents).



UAS Attacks by Groups Preceding October 7, 2023

Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Houthi extremists	29	37	34
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	9	10	9
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	4	2	10
AQAP	4	0	3
Turkestan Islamic Party	1	3	2
Liwa al-Ghaliboun	1	1	6
Hezbollah	1	0	0
Al-Fath al-Mubin Brigade	1	1	0
UNKNOWN	9	95	281
Grand Total	**59**	**149**	**345**

UAS Attacks by Groups Following October 7, 2023

Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Hezbollah	146	2	22
The Islamic Resistance	127	9	121
Houthi extremists	96	28	46
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	22	21	19
Syrian National Army	5	0	1
HAMAS	4	0	0
Kurdistan Workers Party	2	0	0
Mu'tasim Division	1	1	0
AQAP	1	0	0
Ansar al-Tawhid	1	0	0
UNKNOWN	12	10	13
Grand Total	**417**	**71**	**222**

Figure 5: Unmanned Aerial System Attack Trends and Perpetrators

Additional analysis of GRID data revealed that this surge was accompanied by a significant geographic expansion and target diversification of UAS activity after October 7 by non-state terror actors. While UAS attacks mainly targeted regional governments and local adversaries (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces) before October 7, the focus shifted to international targets, especially U.S. military bases in Iraq and Syria and Israeli targets. For example, Israel, which had experienced only a single UAS attack in the year prior, endured 174 incidents post-October 7. GRID recorded 106 UAS attacks in Syria in the year after October 7, 70 of which intended to target U.S. military assets based in Syria. According to GRID data, of these, seven hit the target and led to a total of 49 injuries of U.S. service members. Ninety UAS incidents took place in Yemen (89 of them executed by Houthis and one by AQAP), 52 of which were aimed at U.S. military and naval vessels, though none of them successfully hit their intended targets. In Iraq, 34 UAS attacks occurred, 30 of which were executed by the IRI. All these targeted U.S. military assets, with three of these attacks successfully hitting the target and resulted in injuries to seven U.S. service members (no fatalities).

Overall, according to GRID data, during the year after October 7, Iran-backed groups conducted 373 UAS attacks, 153 of which were intended to strike U.S. military targets, up from just one incident recorded by GRID during the year prior to October 7. The IRI alone accounted for 100 intended attacks against U.S. military; 11 of these incidents were able to hit the target. The deadliest incident during this period occurred on January 28, 2024, when the IRI launched a drone strike on Tower 22, a U.S. military base located in northeastern Jordan near the Syrian border. The attack killed three U.S. soldiers and injured 47 service members—the highest number of casualties from a UAS attack on U.S. forces during this timeframe. Houthis executed 96 UAS attacks, 53 of which were intended to target U.S. assets, compared to none targeting U.S. assets in the prior year according to GRID data.

GRID also recorded 26 intended UAS attacks on non-U.S. foreign military assets in the year after October 7, including U.K., French, and Israeli naval vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, with the Houthis responsible for nearly all, which is a stark rise from zero the year prior to October 7.

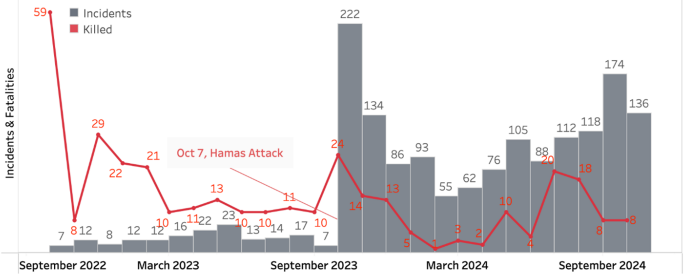
Overall, the Houthis have significantly expanded their operational reach through UAS and stand-off attacks. Prior to October 7, however, the Houthis conducted UAS strikes on critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which spearheaded the Saudi-led coalition against Houthis in the Yemen war. In the aftermath of October 7, the Houthis intensified their assaults on international commercial and naval vessels, and, more recently, direct attacks against Israel. They carried out seven UAS attacks directly targeting Israeli territory in the year following the October 7 attack. In one such incident on July 19, 2024, a Samad-3 drone—which is reportedly capable of carrying an explosive payload over a range of 1,500 kilometers[17]—struck Tel Aviv, killing one Israeli civilian, injuring at least 10 others, and causing material damage to property and vehicles.[18] With Iranian support,[19] the Houthis' rapid adoption of UAS technology has enabled them to internationalize the conflict and carry out long-range strikes with more precision.[20]

Missiles and Rockets

The proliferation of Iran-backed groups' tactics extends beyond UAS attacks to include a significant increase in missile use. As seen in Figure 6, GRID reveals a dramatic spike in rocket artillery[b] attacks after October 7. The recorded rocket artillery attacks increased from 168 one year prior to October 7 to 1,394 one year after October 7, revealing an over-eightfold increase. For example, Hezbollah was responsible for 749 incidents, accounting for more

b According to the GRID codebook (2023), rocket artillery weapon type and refers to "artillery and other ground-to-ground munitions propelled by their own explosive/fuel charge and designed to deliver artillery payloads across medium-range distances," excluding rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). See "GTTAC Record of Incident Database 2023 Codebook Version 2023.2," Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center, 2023, p. 15.

than 50 percent of rocket artillery attacks in the Middle East during the year after October 7, compared with negligible activity the year prior. While this reflects a dramatic escalation over the two-year span, Hezbollah's violent campaigns, including missiles and rockets, have historically been episodic, with prior periods of intense activity, most notably during the 2006 war. The most prominent groups exhibiting increased rocket artillery attacks the year after October 7—Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the IRI—are all Iran backed. Hamas, for instance, increased its rocket attacks from 14 incidents the year before October 7 to 401 incidents the year after. Similarly, PIJ expanded its operations from 24 incidents the year before October 7 to 74 incidents the year following. The IRI conducted 69 rocket artillery attacks during the same post-October 7 period.



Rocket Attacks by Groups Preceding October 7, 2023

Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Al-Fath al-Mubin Brigade	33	31	19
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	30	129	64
Palestine Islamic Jihad	24	6	23
HAMAS	14	0	15
Houthi extremists	10	15	15
People's Protection Units (YPG)	8	4	41
Syrian National Army	4	1	5
Al-Ayyash Brigade	3	0	0
Liwa Ahrar al-Iraq	2	0	0
Kurdistan Workers Party	2	0	0
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	2	0	5
The Lion's Den	1	0	0
Popular Resistance - Syria	1	0	0
National Liberation Front (NLF) - Syria	1	3	0
Democratic Front for the Liberation of P..	1	0	0
Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Battalion	1	5	6
UNKNOWN	35	26	84
Grand Total	**168**	**220**	**277**

Rocket Attacks by Groups Following October 7, 2023

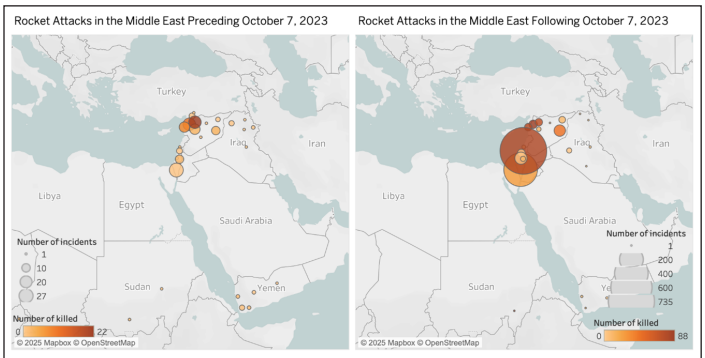
Perpetrator	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
Hezbollah	749	25	144
HAMAS	401	10	100
Palestine Islamic Jihad	74	0	0
The Islamic Resistance	69	2	34
Al-Fath al-Mubin Brigade	30	21	20
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	24	27	7
Democratic Front for the Liberation of Pa..	12	0	0
Syrian National Army	6	0	32
Palestinian Mujahideen Movement	6	0	0
Houthi extremists	4	4	0
Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade	4	0	0
Popular Resistance Committees	2	0	0
Popular Front for the Liberation of Pales..	2	0	0
Al-Fajr Brigade	2	0	0
People's Protection Units (YPG)	1	1	7
National Liberation Front (NLF) - Syria	1	1	3
National Front for the Liberation of Syria	1	3	20
Lebanese Resistance Brigades	1	0	0
Kurdistan Workers Party	1	0	0
AQAP	1	0	0
Ansar al-Tawhid	1	2	6
Al-Nasir Army - Syria	1	1	0
UNKNOWN	14	11	7
Grand Total	**1,394**	**108**	**380**

Figure 6: Trends of Rocket Attacks and Perpetrators

The geographic scope of these types of attacks also widened significantly. (See Figure 7.) The year prior to October 7, rocket attacks were largely localized in Syria, Israel, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip. The year after, regional activity intensified, particularly in and around Israel and Syria. Notably, Israel became the primary target the year after October 7, with incidents surging from 33 the year prior to October 7 to 1,227 the year after, signaling a major escalation in both frequency and strategic focus, which many observers have noted. On the other hand, according to GRID data, the Houthis' use of rockets and missiles during this period decreased from 10 incidents in the year before October 7 to four in the year after. This is a continuation of the Houthis' declining trend in using rocket missiles, primarily due to the depletion of their pre-war unguided rocket stockpile and a strategic shift toward guided missiles and drone technology.[21]

Lethality

The authors' analysis reveals a notable trend: Although the number of terrorist attacks across the Middle East surged significantly after October 7, the number of fatalities remained relatively



Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
SYRIA	91	190	131
ISRAEL	33	2	38
YEMEN	11	15	15
GAZA STRIP	11	4	0
IRAQ	9	0	15
WEST BANK	6	0	0
TURKEY	6	3	18
LEBANON	1	6	60
Grand Total	**168**	**220**	**277**

Country	Incidents	Killed	Wounded
ISRAEL	1,227	27	225
SYRIA	127	74	132
IRAQ	14	0	16
GAZA STRIP	9	2	3
WEST BANK	7	1	4
YEMEN	5	4	0
LEBANON	5	0	0
Grand Total	**1,394**	**108**	**380**

Figure 7: Rocket Attacks and Targeted Countries Before and After October 7

stable, excluding the October 7 Hamas attack, which represents a black swan outlier. For example, incidents rose from 182 attacks in September 2023 to 484 attacks in October 2023, marking a nearly twofold increase over a two-month period. Despite this surge, fatalities did not rise correspondingly; the number of deaths fluctuated around the same levels as before the attack on October 7.

When comparing Iran-backed groups with other organizations such as the Islamic State, one of the most significant differences lies in the fatality rate per attack. The fatality rate for Islamic State attacks in the Middle East for the period under consideration stands at 1.93 deaths per attack, meaning nearly two fatalities per incident on average. Broadening the scope, non-Iran-backed groups worldwide conducted 12,153 terror attacks over the two-year period, resulting in 39,282 fatalities—an average of 3.23 deaths per attack.

In stark contrast, Hezbollah attacks during the same period resulted in just 0.042 deaths per incident—approximately 45 times lower than the Islamic State's rate and 75 times lower than that of non-Iran-backed groups. Other Iran-backed groups also showed notably low fatality rates, including the IRI (0.07) and the Houthis (1.16). Excluding the October 7 attack, Hamas' fatality rate averaged 0.32 over the two-year period; it dropped from 1.10 before the attack to 0.28 afterward.

Several factors could explain this finding. One primary explanation is that the increased use of missiles, rockets, and UAS tactics by Iran-backed groups have targeted U.S. military installations in the region and Israel. These aerial-borne attacks were mostly neutralized by advanced air defense systems. For instance, during Iran's large-scale attack on Israel in April 2024, in which more than 300 drones and missiles were launched at Israel, the Israel Defense Forces claimed that 99 percent of the projectiles were successfully intercepted.[22]

Data from GRID also speaks to this. For example, a significant decline in fatalities from UAS and rocket attacks launched by Iran-backed groups following October 7 was observed in the dataset. The average fatality rate for drone attacks from these entities dropped from 2.53 deaths per attack during the year prior to October 7 to 0.17 the year after that attack, which is a 93 percent decrease. In a similar vein, the fatality rate of rocket attacks dropped from 1.31 deaths per attack during the year before October 7 to just 0.08 the

year afterward, marking a 94 percent reduction.

While these attacks resulted in limited casualties, they were still effective in imposing economic costs—especially given the imbalance between the relatively low cost of drones and rockets and the high expense of counter-UAS technologies and air defense systems.[23]

Conclusion

The October 7 attack marked a turning point in regional security and triggered widespread escalations by Iran-backed groups. Data and analysis featured in this article reveal a shift in the geographic distribution and tactical evolution of non-state terror violence in the region in the year that followed the attack. While terrorist incidents surged, particularly in Israel and the Red Sea, fatality rates remained disproportionately low. This paradox appears to be due largely to the reliance on mostly rudimentary unmanned aerial systems[24] and rocket attacks. Despite their ability to bypass conventional defenses, these attacks were also largely neutralized by Israel's and the United States' counter UAS and advanced air defense systems.[25]

The fatality rate for Iran-backed groups remains significantly lower than those of organizations such as the Islamic State, which continue to prioritize close-quarters assaults, bombings, and suicide attacks over aerial strikes. The evidence suggests that while proxies such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the IRI have expanded their operational reach and intensified attacks, they have struggled to achieve their strategic objectives. Their reliance on stand-off warfare has disrupted regional stability and global trade and instilled fear among large civilian populations, but it has proven ineffective in causing mass casualties. Instead, their actions have escalated economic and military costs for targeted states, particularly Israel and the United States. These findings underscore the evolving nature of non-state violence, particularly among Iran-backed groups, where proliferation of UAS shapes non-state strategies but remains constrained by superior—though disproportionately more expensive[26]—countermeasures from state actors.

Looking beyond October 2024, into the second year after the October 7 attack, Iran's Axis of Resistance—its network of state and non-state allies across the Middle East—has suffered significant setbacks,[27] and Iran's ability to shape regional dynamics through non-state actors has been significantly constrained. Israel's counteroffensive and intelligence operations have eliminated Hezbollah's high command and many of its members, while inflicting severe damage on its forces and weapons stockpiles. A further blow to Hezbollah came with the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, severing a crucial land corridor that had long facilitated Iranian support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hamas also has been severely weakened. Israel's invasion and bombing of Gaza have devastated Hamas' military infrastructure, manpower, underground tunnel networks, and weapons arsenal as well as decapitated its leadership by eliminating its key figures. Meanwhile, amid these setbacks, the Houthis have emerged as Iran's most formidable proxy,[28] aggressively disrupting maritime trade in the Red Sea. Yet, the direct exchange of strikes between Israel and Iran in June 2025 has introduced a new and potentially far more volatile phase, shifting the conflict from proxy warfare to direct state-on-state confrontation with uncertain future implications.

Overall, the October 7 attack and Israel's sweeping military response redrew the map of regional conflict, triggering a wave of proxy escalations, transforming the operational playbook of violent non-state actors in the region, and escalating into a direct Israel-Iran war in June 2025. The GRID data reveals a sharp surge in attacks—particularly by Iran-backed groups using drones, rockets, and missiles—but these assaults, though disruptive, produced limited casualties due to capable U.S. and Israeli defenses. This shift marks a pivot toward stand-off terror warfare: cheaper, remote, and high-volume, yet strategically ineffective in achieving decisive outcomes. CTC

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Generation Jihad: The Profile and *Modus Operandi* of Minors Involved in Recent Islamist Terror Plots in Europe

By Erik Hacker

Europe has largely avoided major jihadi attacks in recent years, though experts and officials from the United Nations as well as the Five Eyes intelligence alliance have repeatedly warned of the heightened terror threat increasingly linked to a new generation of teenagers, who radicalize primarily online. Yet, little is known about the specific profiles and *modi operandi* of these underage suspects. As this trend shows no signs of waning, a clearer understanding of these minors' specific characteristics is vital in order to adapt counterterrorism responses and sustain the current high rate of foiled plots. This article offers an in-depth account of the background and attack planning behaviors of 44 minors who planned to carry out jihadi terror attacks in Europe since 2022 but were arrested before they could act. By comparing their characteristics to adult terror suspects, it highlights the distinctive traits of this new generation of Islamist extremists and explores the strategic implications for counterterrorism efforts moving forward.

In March 2024, a 15-year-old Swiss teenager stabbed an Orthodox Jew in the immediate vicinity of a synagogue in Zurich after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State and being an active member of a decentralized online network supporting the group.[1] Two months later, a 14-year-old girl was arrested by authorities in Graz, Austria, for plotting an Islamic State-inspired attack with a knife and ax, intending to target "non-believers" at a supermarket or a square, or a priest.[2]

The young age of the suspects is striking, yet these examples of minors involved in jihadi terrorism in Europe are not outliers. Rather, they are indicative of a relatively new phenomenon. Some experts claim that the surge in jihadi terrorism in Europe[3] since the outbreak of the war in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas and other Palestinian jihadi factions has been spearheaded by minors.[4]

To shed light on the increasing threat posed by radicalized minors, this article examines findings from a dataset of thwarted jihadi attack plots in Europe between January 2022 and March 2025. It unfolds in four parts. The first section reviews recent literature on the nature of the youth threat. The second section presents the author's data, comparing plots involving minors to plots with only adult suspects. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of minor plotters' unique features. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and offering recommendations for moving forward.

Youth Radicalization

The radicalization of young people in Europe used to be a fringe issue with a few isolated cases. This has changed in recent years, with the number of cases proliferating. A United Nations monitoring report from January 2024 highlighted that radicalized individuals are increasingly young, pointing to the recent case of a loose network run by two minors in Spain that radicalized over 50 other minors on video game communication platforms before being arrested.[5]

French officials have expressed similar concerns,[6] noting that the number of terrorism-related indictments involving minors had grown from two to three in previous years to 15 in 2023.[7] UK Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Jonathan Hall claimed that "children are breaking records" in terms of terrorism-related convictions and arrests in the United Kingdom.[8] In 2023, about a fifth of those arrested for terrorism-related charges in the United Kingdom were reportedly minors.[9]

The prevalence of young people involved in terrorism is on the rise globally, too, beyond just Europe. Aaron Y. Zelin and Ilana Winter reported that teenagers or minors were involved in at least 6.38% of Islamic State-related legal cases globally between March 2023 and March 2024, with the actual number likely higher given that many countries do not report the age of suspects.[10] The gravity of the issue prompted the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance to release a rare public warning in December 2024, "calling for a whole-of-society response to help identify and deal with the radicalisation of minors – especially online – across the Five Eyes nations."[11]

An even more serious concern is that youth radicalization is increasingly turning into attack plotting. A recent analysis by Dino Krause warned about this development, highlighting that the frequency of Islamic State-related plots involving minors has increased notably since 2022,[12] confirming Peter Neumann's recent analysis with the same conclusion.[13] An overview of the Islamist terror threat landscape in Germany in this publication also found that the average age of both attackers and plotters has decreased, with half of the thwarted plots being planned by suspects aged 18 or younger.[14]

Analysts link this development to changes in jihadi online propaganda as well as societal trends. Krause explains the

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proliferation of young plotters as the aftermath of the pandemic that introduced psychological distress and uncertainty into the lives of European youth. These challenges coincide with the recent publications tied to the Islamic State—particularly Voice of Khurasan replacing Dabiq and Rumiyah—being increasingly tailored to Western audiences with frequent calls for lone-actor attacks.[15]

Notably, according to Moustafa Ayad, much of the Islamic State propaganda geared toward minors is likely made and distributed by other minors instead of actual Islamic State members. Small networks of young supporters dispersed across countries reportedly run many of the 93 unofficial Islamic State outlets on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Element, and RocketChat that Ayad examined. This ecosystem of unofficial outlets was directly linked to the only successful jihadi attack perpetrated by a minor in Europe in recent years (the Zurich attack mentioned earlier) and has undoubtedly inspired many of the minors arrested in Europe lately for their involvement in attacks, plotting, or spreading propaganda.[16] Jonathan Sarwono also found that Islamic State propaganda actively targets young users on TikTok (with many referring to this as CaliphateTok), with propaganda utilizing popular culture and digital trends to recruit and mobilize young sympathizers.[17] Ayad noted in his analysis that these minors are "well-versed in the language of the Islamic State and its history, while also steeped in internet cultures," thereby largely diverging from traditional Islamic State circles with older patrons.[18]

Despite the numerous warnings and anecdotal evidence, no systematic analysis exists on the profiles and *modi operandi* of recent underage plotters, or their differences to adult counterparts.[a] To fill this gap, this article examines original data on jihadi plots in Europe between January 2022 and March 2025 to contribute to understanding the extent to which the latest wave of jihadism in Europe is indeed driven by minors and what the profile of recent underage suspects is, particularly compared to older plotters. It argues that the issue requires more nuance than the recent warnings about minors' involvement in terrorism in the West provide.

Generation Jihad: Characteristics of Recent Plots and Plotters in Europe

The following analysis utilizes the author's original dataset of jihadi attacks and thwarted plots in Europe (E.U.-27, United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland) between January 2022 and March 2025. The database was compiled using open-source data,[b] largely relying on secondary sources such as news articles, publicly available datasets (e.g., the Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map[19]), as well as primary sources when available (e.g., official reports by authorities, press conferences, [leaked] investigation files, verified social media information of suspects). The open-source nature of the database results in some notable data gaps, particularly regarding suspects' citizenship and legal residence status. Such variables with a high share of unknowns are explicitly flagged in the text.

While Europe has been hit by a flare-up of jihadi attacks in recent years, only one out of 21 attacks since 2022 was carried out by a minor.[c] Out of the 73 foiled plots and 21 successful attacks in Europe since 2022 recorded by the author, 31 incidents (~33%) involved an underage individual. This shows that while suspects indeed tend to get younger, successful jihadi attacks remain driven by adults, for now.

Table 1: Interception rate and online tip-off source for foiled plots involving minors versus adults only between January 2022 and March 2025 in E.U.-27, United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland

	Foiled plots involving minors	***Foiled plots with adults only***	***Difference (%)***
Foiled plots	30 (~41% of 73 foiled plots)	43 (~59% of 73 foiled plots)	–
Interception rate*	96.8% (30 out of 31 plots)	68.3% (43 out of 63 plots)	+ 28.5%
Tip-off online	21 (70% of 30 foiled plots by minors)	18 (41.9% of 43 foiled plots by adults)	+ 28.1%

** Based on 73 foiled plots and 21 successful attacks*

However, when disregarding successful attacks and only considering foiled plots, these numbers shift drastically. Of the 73 foiled plots, almost every other involved at least one minor. Overall, 44 individuals under the age of 18 are suspected of having planned to carry out a jihadi terror attack, with the youngest suspect being just 12 years old.[20]

These plots differ significantly in some aspects depending on whether minors are involved or not. All but one plot involving minors was thwarted by authorities (96.7%), in contrast to 68.3% of the plots involving only adults.

Notably, the lead for identifying and arresting these suspects before they carried out an attack was overwhelmingly (70%) generated via open-source intelligence (i.e., the suspects' online footprint), which almost always included spreading terrorist propaganda online, but in many cases also online discussions of their intentions and plans for the attack. In the case of plots only involving adults, this number is significantly lower (41.9%),[d] hinting at a much higher adult awareness of the importance of operational

a A study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation on underage terrorism offenders in England and Wales also highlighted the lack of data and transparent analysis regarding minors' involvement in terrorism, while acknowledging the recent public attention to younger extremists. "Childhood Innocence?: Mapping Trends in Teenage Terrorism Offenders," *ICSR Report*, November 15, 2023.

b Parts of the data collection process were supported by the Internal Security Fund of the European Commission under the framework of the project "PARTES: Participatory Approaches to Protecting Places of Worship" with Grant n° 101100542. The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.

c The author defined 'minor' as any individual below the age of 18 at the time of the relevant incident.

d The type of lead is unknown in eight foiled plots by minors (~26.6%) and in 21 foiled plots by adults (48.8%). In the author's experience, leads generated via social media are widely reported in press and official reports, whereas other types of leads often involving sensitive sources tend not to be publicly disclosed.

security (OPSEC).[e] This partially explains the major gap between adults and minors regarding the success rates of their attack plans.

Realistic Weapon Selection and Targeting

In terms of the weapons intended for use in the planned attack, the differences between adults and minors are minimal. Minors seem to slightly prefer knives over firearms and IEDs, whereas adult plotters tend to strive for more sophisticated weapons, such as IEDs and firearms, over knives.

Table 2: Weapon selection in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Weapons	Foiled plots involving minors	Foiled plots with adults only	Difference (%)
Knives	28.2%	19.6%	+8.6%
IEDs	20.5%	32.1%	-11.6%
Firearms	20.5%	25%	-4.5%
Vehicles	7.7%	7.1%	+0.6%
Improvised incendiary devices	2.6%	–	+2.6%
Chemical weapons	–	1.8%	-1.8%
Unknown	20.5%	14.3%	+6.2%

In general, there is no clearly preferred weapon among plotters, regardless of age. Notably, there is a significant difference between plots and successful attacks regarding weapon selection: 16 out of 21 successful attacks in this time period were stabbings, marking a sharp deviation from the data on foiled plots presented above. While the stark contrast to successful attacks that are dominated by knives[21] can likely be attributed to the wishful thinking in the plotting phase, these metrics suggest that minors are not more ambitious or unrealistic than adults. On the contrary, they tend to lean somewhat more toward unsophisticated and thus more accessible weapons.

Table 3: Targets in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Targets	Foiled plots involving minors	Foiled plots with adults only	Difference (%)
Indiscriminately targeted civilians[f]	24.3%	21.7%	+2.6%
Christians	18.9%	13.3%	+5.6%
Jews	16.2%	16.7%	-0.5%
Police	13.5%	11.7%	+1.8%
Government	8.1%	8.3%	-0.2%
Soldiers	2.7%	5%	-2.2%
LGBTQ	5.4%	8.3%	-2.9%
Unknown	10.8%	15%	-4.2%

Likewise, when it comes to foiled plots, minors do not significantly differ in their targeting preferences from their adult counterparts, and there are no apparent targeting patterns either in general.[g] Indiscriminately targeted civilians are the most frequently considered targets overall, followed by religious adversaries prominently featured in jihadi propaganda, such as Jewish and Christian places of worship, events, and community members.

Overall, age does not seem to play a role in weapon and target selection, given that the differences between foiled plots involving minors and plots by adults only in these two aspects are minimal.

Targeted Country of Foiled Plots

As mentioned above, the only plot by a minor that successfully materialized took place in Switzerland. Among foiled plots, most targeted countries do not differ largely based on the involvement of minors, though two countries appear to be more affected.[h] With six out of eight (75%) foiled jihadi plots in Austria since 2022 involving at least one underage suspect, the central European country is a major outlier due to the fact that its threat landscape appears to be dominated by minors.[22] Austria is followed by Spain, with two out of three foiled plots involving minors, though this sample is small. France leads in absolute numbers of foiled plots both overall and involving minors. However, when looking at the relative share of plots involving minors, its numbers are less dramatic: 10 out of 22 (45.5%) foiled jihadi plots involved at least one minor, placing it third in relative terms.

The Involvement of Terror Organizations

With geopolitical developments affecting global terror

e Operational security is a term originating in military spaces for measures taken to protect plans, movements, communications, identities, and other aspects of an upcoming or ongoing operation from detection or disruption by adversaries. In the context of terrorism, this mainly refers to keeping attack plans secret and unknown by authorities (e.g., by using secure lines of communication, using coded language, and avoiding digital traces that would hint at the attack).

f The category 'indiscriminately targeted civilians' refers to individuals targeted without specific ideological or symbolic justification beyond residing in European countries. This contrasts with other target categories that are selected discriminately based on jihadi ideology classifying them as 'enemies of Islam,' (e.g., representatives of Western governments (police officers, soldiers), and symbols and members of particular religious communities).

g These targeting patterns largely resemble the patterns found in successful attacks, though the latter have a higher tendency (47.8%) to indiscriminately target civilians.

h The countries targeted most by successful attacks in the covered time frame are Germany (eight attacks), France (five attacks), and Belgium (two attacks).

organizations[23] as well as the recent internal power shifts within the Islamic State regarding external operations,[24] the question of whether any particular branch appears to be favored by minors in Europe is key. Many experts and authorities have been warning about the threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), mainly due to its strong online presence and utilization of the virtual planner blueprint.[25] So far, no successful attack in the covered European countries over the time period considered has been linked to ISK.[i] Out of the 21 attacks between January 2022 and March 2025, 14 attacks were linked to the Islamic State, with the rest (seven) having no ties to formal terror organizations.[j]

Table 4: Group sympathy in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Group sympathy	***Foiled plots involving minors***	***Foiled plots with adults only***	***Difference (%)***
Tied to Islamic State Core	23 (76.7% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	25 (58.1% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	+18.5%
Tied to ISK	3 (10% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	11 (25.6% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-15.6%
No ties to terror entity	4 (13.3% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	7 (16.3% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-3%

Based on the dataset used for this article, data on foiled plots offers limited support for these concerns, with ISK only being associated with a small number of known thwarted attacks. Overall, European jihadis still seem to be drawn toward Islamic State Core in general, with ISK, Africa-based Islamic State affiliates (Islamic State Somalia, Islamic State Greater Sahara), and other jihadi groups altogether being linked to less than a third of the foiled plots. Particularly among minors, the Afghanistan-based affiliate lags significantly behind Islamic State Core in its ability to inspire or direct foiled attack plots in the covered European countries both overall and compared to adult plotters, marking one of the few major age-based differences.

Table 5: Involvement of a cyber coach and plot execution modality (solo vs. multiple perpetrators) in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

	Foiled plots involving minors	***Foiled plots with adults only***	***Difference (%)***
Contact to cyber coach	4 (13.3% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	16 (37.2% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-23.9%
Lone actor[k]	17 (56.7% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	25 (58.1% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-1.5%

Group sympathy also matters due to the different *modi operandi* of the various Islamic State affiliates for external operations. For example, contact to cyber coaches[l] has recently reemerged as a concerning phenomenon, with the return of the virtual planner blueprint of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria now increasingly being utilized by ISK.[26] While cyber coaches consciously target young individuals online,[27] whether this demographic is (more) susceptible to such approaches has major counterterrorism implications. Despite young people being particularly vulnerable to online radicalization,[28] the author's data clearly shows that this increased vulnerability does not apply to online recruitment for attacks by members of terror organizations: Minor suspects plotting an attack are much less likely to have contact to online recruiters (13.3% of foiled plots involving minors) than adult plotters (37.2% of foiled plots by adults).

Another crucial aspect of jihadis' *modi operandi* in Europe has been whether the perpetrator(s) act alone or together with others. After all, since 2014, attacks perpetrated by cells in Europe have been significantly more lethal and sophisticated.[29] While all terror attacks in the covered European countries since early 2019[m] have been perpetrated by lone individuals, there is a concerning contrast among plotters with an apparent return toward small terror cells as seen in earlier years in Europe.[30] However, once again, there is virtually no difference between adult and minor plotters in this regard: Regardless of age, about every other plot was planned to be executed by one person.

Suspect Profiles

The background of plotters is a crucial piece of the puzzle,

i The terror attack in Moscow, Russia, tied to ISK on March 22, 2024, falls beyond the geographic scope of the dataset used for this article.

j These attacks are often described as lone-actor jihadi attacks, although they do not have ties to terror entities. These perpetrators often have a recognizable jihadi motive but also act within a broader politico-religious Islamist framework (e.g., revenge for perceived blasphemy or moral disgust with both a political and a personal objective for the violence). For more on this, see Liam Duffy, "Islamist terrorism has taken on a new, insidious form," CapX, April 16, 2025.

k This category indicates whether suspects intended to carry out the attack on their own (i.e., lone actors) or together with other perpetrators.

l The Islamic State has assigned some of its members to the role of cyber coaches, also known as "online entrepreneurs." These individuals actively seek to recruit and mobilize supporters online, oftentimes providing ideological encouragement, precise attack instructions and guidance, and also facilitating logistics on the ground by connecting supporters previously unknown to each other in the same region (e.g., for the purpose of weapon acquisition or other attack-related action items). This strategy is often called "virtual planner." See Rueben Dass, "Islamic State-Khorasan Province's Virtual Planning," Lawfare, May 19, 2024.

m While this article only covers the timeframe between January 2022 and March 2025, given its focus on recent developments, the in-house dataset on jihadi terror attacks in the covered European countries also encompasses attacks from January 2014 onward.

potentially revealing aspects that prevention and counterterrorism efforts should focus on. There are several notable age-driven differences, mainly related to citizenship, migration status, and criminal records. At the same time, age appears to have no impact on the number of converts, mentally ill individuals, and authorities' knowledge of radicalization processes among the suspects of foiled plots. These latter features are rare among adult suspects, too.

Table 6: Profiles of individuals in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Profiles	*Minor suspects of failed plots*	*Adult suspects of foiled plots*	*Difference (%)*
Criminal record	0%	16.3%	-16.3%
Known to authorities	20%	25.6%	-5.6%
Convert	9.3%	3.5%	+5.8%
Mental health issues	0%	2.6%	-2.6%
Asylum seeker	3.3%	27.9%	-24.9%
E.U. citizen	45.5%	21.4%	+24.1%

No minor involved in a foiled plot in Europe over the time period of study had a criminal history before being arrested on suspicion of planning an attack,[n] compared to about every sixth plot by adults involving at least one individual with a past conviction.[o] The terror-crime nexus has been a key factor in European jihadism throughout the past decade, with almost every other attack perpetrator having had a criminal record already before carrying out an attack.[31]

Somewhat contradicting the high interception rate of plots involving minors, authorities do not seem to be aware of most underage suspects' radicalization prior to their arrests for planning an attack. The contrast to adult plotters is minimal, however.

Converts have not played a considerable role in the latest wave of European jihadism since 2014.[32] With the recent emergence of youth radicalization, however, authorities have highlighted troubling developments of young radicals proselytizing among peers in schools and online, raising the question of whether this turns into some of the converts getting involved in plotting. The data used for this study does not support these concerns, with less than every 10th underage suspect being a convert.

Only two suspects[p] were reported to struggle with a psychological condition, both being over 18.[q] Mental health has been a major factor for the past decade of European jihadism, prompting experts and authorities alike to dedicate significant resources to studying and addressing the issue in the context of radicalization.[r] This trend, however, appears to be waning in recent years,[33] as also shown by the data on plotters compiled by the author.

"Particularly among minors, the Afghanistan-based affiliate [ISK] lags significantly behind Islamic State Core in its ability to inspire or direct foiled attack plots in the covered European countries both overall and compared to adult plotters, marking one of the few major age-based differences."

Residence status and country of origin are further clues about the nature of the recent surge in jihadism in Europe, though open-source data on this aspect may be affected by under-reporting. In the context of youth radicalization, whether the recent surge of minors involved in plotting in Europe is driven by failed integration efforts for young people who recently arrived to Europe also has major policy implications. Based on the sample, however, underage suspects are highly unlikely to be asylum seekers. This also sets them apart from adult suspects of foiled plots, every fourth of whom was seeking asylum in Europe.

The suspects' country of origin also points toward youth radicalization being more of a homegrown than an imported issue, particularly compared to adults. While there are notable gaps in the data on suspects' citizenship, minor plotters are more likely to be E.U. citizens than third-country nationals. In particular, 18.2% were Germans, 11.3% were Austrians, 11.3% Moroccans, followed by Russians (9.1%, mainly ethnic Chechens) and French (9.1%). Notably, nationals of German-speaking countries (Austrians, Germans, Swiss) account for 31.8% of underage suspects. While exact figures are not available, several of these minor terrorism suspects were reportedly second- or third-generation immigrants in E.U. countries. This points toward challenges related to integration, and places some burden on European countries to prevent or at least detect and proactively interrupt such cases of radicalization. In comparison, adult plotters were twice as likely to be third-country nationals than E.U. citizens, with the largest groups among them being Russians (10.3%, mainly ethnic Chechens) and Tajiks (7.7%).

Unique Features of Minor Plotters

The difference in interception rates clearly suggests that age is

n The dataset used for this article largely relies on open-source reporting including on the criminal history of suspects. Legal frameworks on disclosing the criminal record of minors differ across European countries. However, in the context of terrorism-related cases, authorities often mention if a suspect—regardless of age—was previously known to law enforcement for prior offenses.

o Perpetrators of successful attacks in Europe in the covered time frame have a significantly higher rate of having a prior criminal record, with nine out of 21 perpetrators (42.9%) reportedly having been convicted of a criminal offense.

p The share of mental health conditions among perpetrators of successful attacks is notably higher, with seven out of 21 perpetrators reportedly having mental health issues.

q While disclosing underage suspects' mental health-related records might also be affected by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and domestic legislation, in the author's experience, authorities in the covered European countries tend to mention any such suspicions or the lack thereof.

r For instance, the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network had a separate working group for the mental health-terror nexus. Based on the author's previous research, almost every third attacker in Europe since 2014 was reported to have struggled with mental health. See Erik Hacker, "Jihadi Attacks in Europe. Trends and Features 2014-2022," SCENOR, April 2023.

a crucial predictive factor for a plot succeeding or failing, given that young jihadis in Europe have been significantly less capable of executing terror attacks. Their weapon selection leaning more toward easily accessible dual-use tools instead of sophisticated weapons also hints at the lack of capabilities.

The features of minor plotters mostly resemble that of adult plotters, though in a few characteristics, there are notable differences with considerable implications for counterterrorism and violence prevention. Underage suspects appear to be more likely to be homegrown (with the three German-speaking countries' citizens accounting for 31.8% of the underage suspects in the dataset), and are highly unlikely to be asylum seekers. The integration of underage refugees is thus not a key driver behind the recent surge, supporting earlier findings that they are not more vulnerable to being radicalized and mobilized.[34]

However, the fact that many from the recent wave of minor plotters come from second- or third -generation immigrant families suggests that multigenerational integration remains a challenge. Schools thus become a central venue for both prevention work and intelligence gathering, raising several delicate legal and ethical issues, including limitations on collecting minors' personal data under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the risk of securitizing students' learning environments, and the potential for overreaching teachers' mandates. Austria in particular, but France, too, appears to have a major issue with underage terror suspects, warranting further analysis to determine the root causes behind this development.

Underage suspects' countries of origin may also explain why—despite concerns about the group—ISK appears to be less popular among minor terrorism suspects in Europe. ISK's propaganda is particularly tailored to the Central Asian diaspora,[35] yet seems to struggle to gain traction among young Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks in Europe, contrary to Central Asia.[36] In fact, most of the adult Central Asian plotters just recently entered Europe, unlike underage plotters who are more likely to be born and raised in Europe. This finding strongly suggests that ISK has failed to capitalize on the opportunity of increased radicalization among minors in Europe so far, indicating that its messaging or digital products are either not appealing to European youth or do not reach youth—and especially the Central Asian diaspora—in Europe.

Related to this finding, minors are also unlikely to have contact with cyber coaches of the Islamic State and its affiliates. The data compiled by the author does not show that minors are overly prone to being recruited online by coaches under the virtual planner model. This confirms Ayad's findings that much of the propaganda relevant to youth is made and circulated by fellow teenagers, instead of Islamic State members.[37] It is also closely related to the previous point about ISK's apparent lack of appeal to minor terrorism suspects in Europe. Language barriers are more likely to exist among younger people, and potential intergenerational differences (attitudes on authority, cultural cues) might also be a factor for the low number of cyber-coached plots by minors. These factors can make it harder for virtual planners to find and/or convince individuals to mobilize.

However, the low rate of cyber-coached underage plotters as reflected in the author's dataset may also indicate a conscious decision by terrorist organizations to prioritize approaching adults over minors, either based on negative experiences in the past or due to assumed reliability and capability issues. As a further counterterrorism implication, this may reduce authorities' opportunities to utilize signals intelligence (SIGINT) to exploit known cyber coaches' footprints in order to intercept plots by minors.

Counterterrorism Implications

The largest contrast to adult Islamist terrorism suspects appears to be minors' poor operational security, explaining why most of them failed unlike those above the age of 18. Likely attributable to their inexperience, young suspects seem to be more likely to look for advice online on target selection and weapon acquisition, resulting in them getting caught. This is an interesting dynamic as the data compiled by the author highlights how plots involving minors in Europe are generally less ambitious when it comes to weapon selection.

Still, even if a suspect's online activities are monitored, it is increasingly challenging to decide when to intervene. With the rising integration of online youth subcultures into jihadi spaces,[38] and the accompanying sarcasm and jokes, assessing the intent and mobilization of suspects becomes more challenging. Interventions that take place too early can lead to prosecutors not having enough evidence to charge or successfully prosecute the suspect, while also tipping off the suspect that their online posts are being watched, potentially triggering an attack. Most European legislation sets high bars for minors to be convicted in general, thus authorities tend to wait longer to gather evidence that is more likely to secure a sentence.[39] However, there is always an inherent risk given the dominant *modus operandi*: Any unpredictable trigger could lead to an immediate, spontaneous attack with an easily accessible weapon, such as a knife or a vehicle.[40]

The European Union's criminal justice policy prioritizes alternative measures to detention in general.[41] For terror suspects in particular, incarceration may exacerbate radicalization, though data on prisons' impact on minors is strongly limited, besides anecdotal evidence.[s] Reviews on the general prison population suggest that prisons can be hotbeds of radicalization[42] due to networking with other radicals. They can also fuel grievances against the state and make individuals more vulnerable to radicalization by isolating them from previous social circles while also making employment challenging due to stigmatization.[43] On the other hand, disengagement from radical environments can also be an opportunity, and juvenile facilities tend to focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society, thereby potentially limiting these concerns. Another option is to involve deradicalization services, but some suspects may be too far down the radicalization process, and participation in such initiatives is voluntary unless mandated by a court order.[44]

Conclusion

The data presented in this article suggests that current counterterrorism approaches have been highly effective against radicalized minors in Europe, who appear to lack the ability to translate intent to conduct a terror attack into successful attacks. Underage terror suspects' extensive digital footprint and their

s The case of the Austrian Lorenz K. demonstrates the radicalization risks of minors' incarceration. He was first incarcerated as a minor for membership in a terrorist organization. While in prison, he expanded his network of radicalized individuals and Islamic State supporters, and continued to commit terror-related offenses in detention (e.g., recruiting and instructing individuals online to conduct attacks).

seemingly weak or absent ties to formal terror groups and cyber coaches have likely contributed to the high failure rate of minors' plots in Europe in recent years.

To capitalize on the early-detection opportunities afforded by the digital behavior of radicalized youth, intelligence agencies should strengthen OSINT capabilities in both personnel and technical domains by expanding the monitoring of online platforms, particularly those popular among young Islamic State supporters, such as TikTok, Pinterest, and Instagram.[45]

However, recent increases in propaganda around operational security by the Islamic State and its ecosystem of unofficial supporter outlets,[t] advising followers on how to evade authorities online,[46] may change the course of this trend. Although the Islamic State and its affiliates have recently focused on inspired attacks in Europe with little operational involvement, these indicators suggest that the group has recognized the importance of OPSEC for its young European supporters. Potential platform migration, particularly to more secretive and encrypted outlets, mirrors past innovation patterns in reaction to counterterrorism pressure[47] and could reduce the effectiveness of current counterterrorism measures focusing on easily accessible online platforms.

Barring online activities, the typical profile of underage terror suspects limits early-detection opportunities. Based on the dataset compiled by the author, radicalized minors in Europe tend to lack a criminal record or recognized mental health conditions, and have limited connections to formal terror organizations. To stay ahead of this threat and proactively bridge potential intelligence gaps, OSINT efforts should also be complemented by offline counterterrorism measures in preparation for potential changes in young suspects' digital behavior. Schools and sports associations are well-positioned to contribute to the identification of early signs of radicalization among minors and help facilitate targeted radicalization prevention pathways. CTC

t The unofficial ISK-supporter outlet Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production has launched its own series on this topic in its monthly magazine Voice of Khurasan under the title "Light of Darkness."

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