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.

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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.