State Department *Country Reports on Terrorism*: 2001–2021

Overview

By April 30 of each year, 22 U.S.C §2656f requires the Secretary of State to provide Congress an annual country report on terrorism. The report must contain "detailed assessments with respect to each foreign country in which acts of international terrorism occurred, which were, in the opinion of the Secretary, of major significance."

The State Department issued the most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*, discussing 2021 trends, on February 27, 2023. While the *Country Reports* do not generally speak to the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strategies, policies, or operations, they are required by law to include

- an examination of foreign counterterrorism efforts;

- any judicial responses of foreign countries regarding terrorism affecting American citizens or facilities;

- a list of countries that support terrorist groups;

- an assessment of countries in which terrorists operate, including actions taken by those governments;

- a report on terrorism-related deaths, injuries, and kidnappings;

- a strategy for addressing terrorist sanctuaries; and

- an analysis of international terrorism trends.

The *Country Reports* include an *Annex of Statistical Information* prepared by a State Department contractor (see the "Data Collection" section, below). The *Annex* includes "violent acts" that meet the following criteria:

- the act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;

- the act demonstrated evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and

- the act was conducted outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law insofar as it targeted noncombatants.

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

Data Collection

Although the Annual *Country Reports'* original statutory requirements have not changed, the organizations responsible for preparing the *Country Reports* have changed. From 2001 to 2004, data collection to support the *Country Reports'* findings was the responsibility of the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism. The National Counterterrorism Center assumed analytic responsibility after it was established in 2004. It was

supported by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, which collected and provided data from its unclassified Global Terrorism Database. Starting with 2018 *Country Reports*, the State Department contracted with the Development Services Group Inc. This firm, in collaboration with the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at George Mason University, now provides support in the forms of "data collection, analysis, creation of a global database of terrorist incidents, production of the annex of statistical information, and editing of the Country Reports on Terrorism." Thus, over the past 20 years, data collection, associated methodologies, and analytic processes associated with preparing the reports have differed. This may make assessing historical trends, comparisons, and findings of terrorist threats and attacks challenging (see the **text box**).

Factors That May Affect Reporting of Historical Trends

- How to define a terrorist attack, collect data, use methodologies, and apply the analytic framework.

- How to weight different types of attacks; are fewer attacks with more fatalities weighted more than more attacks with fewer fatalities?

- How the increasing widespread use of the internet and social media over the past two decades has led to greater awareness of terrorist attacks that may not have been previously reported.

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20 Years of Terrorist Attacks

The trends discussed below begin with the year 2001. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Congress enacted new reporting requirements. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-458) mandated assessments of countries with territory being used as terrorist "sanctuary," and the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005 (P.L. 108-487) required a report on terrorist groups that possess or are attempting to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

2001–2003

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

2004–2006

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

2007–2011

In 2007, the State Department reported a then-record high of 66,995 terrorism-related casualties worldwide. Trends in 2007 included continued AQ activity, including its "guerilla terrorism" strategy and affiliations with regional groups. That year, nearly 43% and 13% of attacks occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively. After 2007, attacks followed a general downward trend and casualties dropped each year until 2012. The 2008 *Country Reports* stated that Al Qaeda "remained the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and its partners," and the *Country Reports* for 2009 and 2010 noted the continued challenge of Al Qaeda activity and safe havens in Pakistan. In 2011, the State Department reported the operational weakening of Al Qaeda in Pakistan and the death of several senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden.

2012–2016

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

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

2017–2021

In 2017, the State Department assessed that "the terrorist landscape grew more complex…. ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates have proven to be resilient, determined, and adaptable, and they have adjusted to heightened counterterrorism pressure in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere." In 2018, the *Country Reports* noted that "the United States and its partners made major strides to defeat and degrade international terrorist organizations in 2018," while also stating, "despite these successes, the terrorist landscape remained complex … as ISIS lost almost all its physical territory, the group proved its ability to adapt, especially through its efforts to inspire or direct followers online." The *Country Reports* 2019 assessment used similar language, noting that "the United States and our partners made major strides to defeat and degrade international terrorist organizations," while acknowledging that "[d]espite these successes, dangerous terrorist threats persisted around the world." A statement accompanying the release of the 2020 *Country Reports* subsequently addressed these findings when on December 16, 2021, the State Department's Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism stated that the *Annex* "shows that both the number of terrorist attacks and the overall number of fatalities each increased by more than 10 percent in 2020 as compared to 2019." The most recently published *Country Reports*, discussing the trends of 2021, found that "the terrorist threats we face are more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than ever before" and that "the United States is entering a new era of counterterrorism, one increasingly rooted in diplomacy, partner capacity building, and prevention."

Potential Questions Facing Congress

In light of the 2021 *Country Reports'* assessment that "counterterrorism efforts require use of the full range of counterterrorism tools and a whole-of government and whole-of-society counterterrorism approach," Congress may consider the following questions in considering how to use the *Country Reports*.

- Given the State Department's assessments in recent *Country Reports*, are U.S. policies effective in reducing the global counterterrorism threat?

- What metrics has the executive branch developed to assess effectiveness? Have those metrics changed over time? If so, how and why?

- How are the findings contained in the *Country Reports* tied to U.S. counterterrorism policies and priorities?

- Are the *Country Reports* meeting the needs of Congress to assess the current and historical terrorism threat environment?

- Given the diversity of terrorist threat actors emanating from various parts of the world, how is the United States reallocating resources to support the development of the *Country Reports* and related counterterrorism policies.

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