

Key Takeaways from the Latest Country Reports on Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

In its annual rundown of counterterrorism challenges and achievements, the State Department focused on jihadist exploitation of undergoverned spaces, Iran's continued sponsorship of regional terrorist groups, and the threats posed by violent extremism.

Last month, the State Department released [the latest edition \(https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/\)](https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/) of its *Country Reports on Terrorism*, covering the year 2022. The document opens by noting the shift from a “U.S.-led, military-centric approach” to a framework prioritizing diplomacy, partner capacity building, and prevention. In explaining this transition toward a “whole of government and society” approach, the report cites the rising urgency of challenges beyond terrorism, such as great power competition, cybersecurity threats, and climate change. It also notes that terrorist groups “remained resilient and determined to attack” despite the important successes achieved against them in 2022—from targeting key terrorist leaders to improving cooperation with international partners. Of particular concern were the persistent threats represented by terrorist safe havens, Iranian sponsorship of terrorism, and racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE).

Safe Havens

The report details how global jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have weathered leadership losses. For example, U.S. forces killed IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi in northwest Syria in February 2022, and eight months later, the Free Syrian Army killed his successor, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Quraishi. Yet the group's core—based in Syria and Iraq—remains capable of launching terrorist attacks and maintaining its smuggling and fighter networks in “ungoverned, under-governed, and ill-governed physical areas,” which allow for relatively secure recruitment, fundraising, and operational activities.

IS core demonstrated its operational capability on January 20, 2022, when it carried out [a multifaceted attack \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-al-sinaa-prison-enduring-islamic-state-threat-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-al-sinaa-prison-enduring-islamic-state-threat-syria) on al-Sinaa Prison, a facility in Hasaka city administered by the Syrian Democratic Forces. The incident marked the group's most significant targeting of a major Syrian detention center since its territorial defeat in March 2019. According to the Pentagon, [dozens of IS detainees were freed \(https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/01/2003106275/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q4_SEPT22_GOLD_508.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/01/2003106275/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q4_SEPT22_GOLD_508.PDF) during the attack, but the exact number remains unclear.

Elsewhere, IS [expanded its territorial control and operations \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/introducing-islamic-state-select-worldwide-activity-map\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/introducing-islamic-state-select-worldwide-activity-map) in its West African, Central African, and Sahel “provinces” throughout 2022, in each case taking advantage of terrorist safe havens. IS West Africa, based in the Lake Chad region, increased both its territorial claims and its attempts at “shadow governance.” IS Central Africa, based on the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, likewise expanded its territory while also increasing its attacks on civilian targets, though a joint Congolese-Ugandan military operation managed to disperse the group's fighters and degrade its

capacity. IS Sahel, based primarily in Mali and Burkina Faso, rapidly expanded into coastal West African countries whose governments lack the capacity to police their borders. Notably, all of the Islamic State's successful African affiliates operate in nations whose counterterrorism efforts are hampered by regional and domestic instability.

In Central Asia, the group's Afghan-based Khorasan "province" (ISKP) **remained a regional threat** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>). In addition to bombing Shia Muslim civilians in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the group also attacked foreign embassies in Kabul and launched cross-border rocket strikes against Tajik and Uzbek military bases. U.S. responses to this activity centered on increasing neighbors' capacity to police their borders, but the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Afghanistan has prevented direct, large-scale U.S. countermeasures against ISKP.

Al-Qaeda affiliates have continued terrorist operations in safe havens as well, despite the core group losing leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to a U.S. drone strike in Kabul on July 30, 2022. The largest affiliate, Somalia's al-Shabab, continued to **control undergoverned spaces** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/more-emirati-military-involvement-somalia-could-help-curb-al-shabab>), retaining access to significant financial resources and weapons despite a joint military campaign by the Somali government and African Union. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) maintained its pace of operations from the previous year, mainly targeting foreign aid workers and domestic security personnel. In the Sahel, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) increased its operations and territory—the only al-Qaeda affiliate to do so in 2022. The rise in both civilian casualties and JNIM attacks coincided with **the end of France's Operation Barkhane** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mali-and-mena-future-counterterrorism-sahel-and-maghreb>) and subsequent troop withdrawal.

The report did not include information on al-Qaeda core's activities in Afghanistan. This may indicate uncertainty about what the group has been doing since the Taliban takeover.

State Sponsorship of Terrorism

Iran continued to lead the globe in state-sponsored terrorism in 2022. It supported this activity not only through state institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), but also via regional proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, various **"resistance" militias** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>) in Iraq, and other groups throughout the Middle East.

This sponsorship included extensive financial and logistical support. Tehran provides hundreds of millions of dollars to Hezbollah each year and "up to \$100 million annually in combined support" to Palestinian groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Iranian entities have also frequently taken matters into their own hands. For example, IRGC personnel unsuccessfully targeted former Trump administration officials in 2022 in retaliation for the 2020 killing of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani; they also attempted to kill or kidnap individuals in Britain on at least ten occasions that year.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah marked forty years of existence by continuing to exploit the country as a base for its global terrorist activities, a funnel for financial and logistical support to other regional proxies, and a political tool to further both its own interests and Iran's. In July 2022, the group decided to "send a threatening message to Israel" by **launching three drones** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-gas-field-diplomatic-opportunity-or-casus-belli>) toward the Karish natural gas field. Elsewhere, the *Country Reports* noted ongoing Hezbollah criminal activity in North and South America, including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama, Peru, and the United States. Its primary activities in these countries were illicit fundraising, money laundering, and surveillance operations.

In Iraq and Syria, Iran continued to supply its proxy militias with weapons, funding, and training, including the U.S.-designated terrorist organizations Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. These groups conducted multiple rocket and drone attacks on U.S. and coalition interests—Iraq's al-Asad Air Base was targeted in January and May, while al-Tanf garrison in Syria was struck that August (notably, this pattern would intensify dramatically a year later, as Iran-backed groups **escalated their attacks** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>) in response to the war in Gaza). Iraqi proxies also launched rocket and drone attacks on Turkish targets in the area.

In the Palestinian arena, Israel and PIJ engaged in an August 2022 conflict that included 1,100 rockets launched from Gaza. The conflict was preceded by an escalating series of incidents, including Israeli counterterrorism raids against Palestinian militants in the West Bank and public PIJ threats to launch a cross-border attack after one of the group's leaders was arrested.

Focus on Violent Extremism

REMVE incidents "constituted a growing, transnational threat to the United States and U.S. allies" last year. On October 12, 2022, a nineteen-year-old man shot and killed two individuals and injured another during an attack outside a bar in Bratislava, Slovakia; shortly before the murders, he released an online manifesto **explaining** (https://www.academia.edu/105266452/Terrorgrams_first_saint_analyzing_accelerationist_terrorism_in_Bratislava) that he was conducting the attack for "my People—my Race." The manifesto also cited inspiration from previous REMVE attacks, including the March 2022 mass shooting against Black grocery shoppers in Buffalo, New York, and the 2019 mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand. Other REMVE-inspired attacks were committed in France and Britain in 2022.

In light of such threats, the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau identified REMVE—specifically, "white-identity terrorism" that targets

minority communities—as a primary focus of its countering violent extremism (CVE) programming. And to emphasize the year’s overarching theme of multilateral approaches to counterterrorism, the United States and Norway launched the [Toolkit on Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism](https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Links/Meetings/2022/CC20/Documents/REMVE%20Toolkit/GCTF%20REMVE%20Toolkit.pdf?ver=0ulGjk8DJNGEIqHNmdYQrA%3d%3d) (<https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Links/Meetings/2022/CC20/Documents/REMVE%20Toolkit/GCTF%20REMVE%20Toolkit.pdf?ver=0ulGjk8DJNGEIqHNmdYQrA%3d%3d>) at the Global Counterterrorism Forum that September. The toolkit was later used as an educational tool at various workshops in The Hague. Washington also continued implementing strategies to counter domestic extremism by conducting REMVE-related programming, designating foreign REMVE terrorists and extremist groups, and hosting the “United We Stand Summit” to “counter the effects of hate-fueled violence on democracy and on public safety.”

Conclusion

The United States and its partners achieved noteworthy counterterrorism successes in 2022, exemplified by the targeted killing of top IS and al-Qaeda leaders and the substantial progress made in building partner capacity and information-sharing channels. Yet challenges persisted in the global counterterrorism landscape—terrorist safe havens enabled groups to thrive in undergoverned areas, Iran continued to support terrorist activity through state institutions and regional proxies, and REMVE-inspired actors conducted several tragic attacks. As the *Country Reports* noted, these challenges “require a continued commitment” from Washington and its partners, including substantial “investment in counterterrorism efforts going forward.”

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