

Country Reports on Terrorism 2004:

The State Department Assesses the Broadening Global Jihadist Reach

by [Michael Jacobson \(/experts/michael-jacobson\)](/experts/michael-jacobson)

Apr 29, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Michael Jacobson \(/experts/michael-jacobson\)](/experts/michael-jacobson)

Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence.



Brief Analysis

 In April 27, the State Department publicly released its annual report on global terrorism trends, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* ([read a PDF of the full report \(http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/45313.pdf\)](#)). Previously called *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, the renamed report has generated considerable controversy for the second year in a row, again centered on terrorism statistics. While last year's controversy concerned the inaccuracy of the figures released, this year's has focused on the State Department's decision to exclude them from the report, having turned over statistical responsibility to the newly created National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). Although the statistics are certainly important, the controversy has diverted attention from other, more significant aspects of the report. *Country Reports 2004* provides a fairly balanced assessment of the evolving global jihadist threat, illustrating why and how jihadist groups pose a serious danger not only to the United States, but also to many other countries.

Background

The State Department has produced an annual report on global terrorism trends since 1982. Previously, this responsibility had fallen to the CIA, which first issued an annual report on international terrorism in 1976. The production of the report became a legal requirement in December 1987, when Congress mandated that the State Department produce it annually. Congress revised the legislation in 1996, requiring that the State Department include not only information about international terrorist groups, but also assessments of other countries' cooperation on counterterrorism matters.

The report traditionally included statistics on significant international terrorist incidents, although it was not required to do so by law. This year, the State Department decided to transfer responsibility for assessing and releasing these statistics to the NCTC. According to State Department officials, it made more sense for the NCTC to be in charge of this process, given its role as the government's "shared knowledge bank" on global terrorism. The NCTC's predecessor, the Terrorist Threat Integration Center, had already been maintaining statistical databases on terrorism, which made the transfer even more logical. In light of the report's narrower scope, the State Department changed the title of the series from *Patterns of Global Terrorism* in order to better reflect its content.

Growing Global Threat

The threat of global jihadist terrorism is sometimes viewed as being chiefly a U.S. concern. Although *Country Reports*

2004 certainly illustrates the persistence of this threat against the United States, it also provides considerable evidence of the increasing threat to other countries. U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts have inflicted considerable damage on al-Qaeda and diminished its ability to conduct large-scale attacks. As the report suggests, however, this positive development has not necessarily reduced the overall terrorist threat, but rather changed its nature.

The “resonance” of al-Qaeda’s message has, according to the report, spurred a “grassroots” movement of terrorist cells and networks with no links to al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden other than ideological affinity. These entities operate with great independence at both the tactical and strategic level, including the selection of targets. They are often more interested in, and capable of, attacking local targets. The report cites the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid and the May 2003 bombing in Casablanca—both carried out by local groups inspired by al-Qaeda—as examples of this trend. In other words, while U.S. targets undoubtedly remain a high priority for global jihadists, the United States is certainly no longer alone atop their target list.

Prior to the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda focused almost exclusively on U.S. targets. The group had also persuaded many other Sunni extremist groups that America should be the primary target, given that it was the “head of the snake” propping up corrupt Middle Eastern regimes. According to this strategy, once America was brought down, local regimes would collapse. Since 2001, however, al-Qaeda has greatly expanded its list of acceptable targets, with bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly threatening three dozen countries in addition to the United States. Such statements by al-Qaeda leaders could affect target selection by grassroots groups, who may be more willing to conduct attacks against local, non-U.S. targets if they have tacit approval to do so.

Country Reports 2004 also points to one particularly disturbing development that could dramatically increase the threat posed by local jihadist groups. Although al-Qaeda remains the group most capable of acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction, the report notes that such technology and knowledge is “proliferating in the jihadist community,” and that the number of jihadist groups interested in such materials and information is increasing.

Iraq: Experience for Jihadists

Although the report accurately asserts that many local terrorist groups are inexperienced and capable of only smaller, less sophisticated attacks, it also provides valuable insight into how they might grow in potency. Many jihadists are gaining experience by taking part in the Iraqi insurgency. As the report notes, foreign jihadists are attempting to transform Iraq into this generation’s Afghanistan, a “melting pot for jihadists from around the world, a training ground, and an indoctrination center.” Many of these jihadists will ultimately return to their own countries more experienced, better trained, and perhaps more inspired. They may then form their own terrorist cells or help improve the capabilities of groups already in place.

Although the report does not directly state it, this issue should be of particular concern to European countries, as many of the foreign jihadists in Iraq are from Europe and will likely return there in the future. In fact, French intelligence recently arrested five militants suspected of recruiting individuals to fight in Iraq. This is hardly surprising—European intelligence officials have long maintained that al-Qaeda affiliate Ansar al-Islam operates a large network designed to recruit young European Muslims for this purpose. In 2003, for example, Italian police arrested a dozen suspected Ansar members believed to have smuggled approximately 200 people into Iraq from Europe. Those arrests led investigators to Ansar members in other European countries, including Sweden, England, and Germany.

Not All Countries Are Adequately Prepared

Unfortunately, while the terrorist threat has broadened, the report shows that not all countries have taken adequate steps to improve their counterterrorism capabilities. Europe, for example, will continue to be one of the primary battlegrounds in the global struggle against terrorism. Although a number of European countries have made

significant counterterrorism changes since the September 11 attacks, others have not. Many countries remain particularly hampered in their ability to prosecute terrorist suspects, in part due to inadequate counterterrorism legislation. For example, the Norwegian government failed to prosecute suspected Ansar al-Islam leader Mullah Krekar—a Norwegian resident—because much of its evidence was inadmissible in court under existing laws.

The report paints an overly positive picture of intra-European cooperation and coordination, however, both of which remain deficient. Problems related to information sharing and coordination are particularly worrisome in light of the ease of movement across the European Union.

Conclusion

Although Country Reports 2004 makes clear that terrorists pose a serious threat to many countries other than the United States, this does not mean that Washington can rest any easier. Global jihadist groups have expanded their target list since September 11, but U.S. targets remain one of their highest priorities. For example, more than a few of the suspected terrorists arrested in Europe in recent years were believed to be plotting attacks on U.S. interests. The fact that terrorist groups are more autonomous, and their networks more decentralized, means that international cooperation will be even more essential in defeating them. Similarly, given its role as the government's primary annual assessment of foreign cooperation on counterterrorism matters, Country Reports 2004 may become more important as well. Accordingly, its assessments must be as candid as possible while retaining a measure of balance. The report can then be used as a means of prodding other countries into increasing their cooperation with the United States and improving their own counterterrorism capabilities.

Michael Jacobson, a Soref fellow in The Washington Institute's Terrorism Studies Program, served as counsel on both the congressional and independent commissions investigating the September 11 attacks.



Policy #989

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)