According to scholars, terrorism is “the systematic use of violence to create a general climate of fear and thereby bring about a particular political objective.” Typically, this is the “military tactic of targeting innocent civilians to persuade leaders to change their policies.”

Unlike scholars, UN Member States have been unable to define terrorism. This is not due to lack of effort. Before World War II, League of Nations members tried to define terrorism. Since 2001, a special UN committee has also attempted the task, with no progress thus far. Nevertheless, many UN Member States have negotiated and ratified international treaties that attempt to eliminate terrorism by considering it a crime.

Today, 13 international treaties call on state parties to pass laws against terrorism, arrest people accused of the offense (however it is defined by each state), and assist one another by arresting people accused of terrorism in other states and extraditing (transferring) them to the state in which they are charged so they can be tried and punished. To date, all of the treaties related to terrorism deal exclusively with terrorist acts by non-state actors such as individuals, social groups, and militias. This is because most states prefer a definition that ignores state acts of terror, either against one another or against individuals and groups within their borders.

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1 This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, MMUN faculty advisor, and Nicole Allen, with contributions from Jake Pipinich (2005), Nathan Bilyeu (2010), and Nicholas Potratz (2015). Copyright 2015 by Karen Ruth Adams.


4 Upendra D. Acahra, “War on Terror or Terror Wars: The Problem in Defining Terrorism,” Journal of International Law and Policy 37, no. 4 (Fall 2009), pp. 653-680.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) compiles worldwide data on terrorist attacks by non-state actors. According to the GTD, in 2010, there were more than 16,800 terrorist attacks worldwide. East and North Africa experienced the most attacks (6,913), followed by South Asia (4,987). There were 2,305 terrorist attacks in sub-Saharan Africa, 1,076 in Southeast Asia, 954 in Eastern Europe, 294 in South and Central America, 213 in Western Europe, 42 in East Asia, 26 in North America, and 8 in Australia and Oceania.

In 2010, just 31 percent (5,134) of the attacks identified by the GTD met the scholarly definition of terrorism (attacks on “private civilians and property”). About 50 percent were attacks on government facilities and personnel (1,750), police (2,704), and military (3,942). The remaining targets were primarily business (1,169), other terrorist groups (453) religious institutions (434), educational institutions (396), and transportation (362). Many (7,496) 2014 terrorist attacks (defined broadly, not just in terms of attacks on civilians) had no casualties. As shown in Table 1, together the ten deadliest attacks killed or injured 5,210 people.

In 2014, Maplecroft, a corporation that forecasts political risk, predicted that 12 countries faced “extreme risk” of frequent and severe terrorist attacks. In descending order, the countries were Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Yemen, Syria, Philippines, Lebanon, Libya, Colombia, and Kenya.

This data shows that terrorism is a security problem that affects many states and people. Today, nearly 14 years after the 9/11 attacks, terrorism remains a challenge for UN Member States and their citizens. What can and should the Security Council do to diminish this threat?

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8 START, “Global Terrorism Database.” Browsed by date, then target type. Compiled aggregates from pie chart and fatality rankings from data list.

9 START, “Global Terrorism Database.” Browsed by date, then casualties, and compiled aggregates from pie chart.

Terrorism has been used throughout history by a wide variety of political actors, including individuals, groups, and states. For example, in April 1995, American Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The bombing killed 168 people and injured 800 others. McVeigh's motivation was to retaliate for and call attention to the US government's treatment of the militias in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas. Until 2001, this was the most destructive act of terrorism in the US.\(^{11}\)

On 11 September 2001, nineteen members of the radical Sunni Islamic group known as al Qaeda hijacked four planes and flew them into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania, killing nearly 3,000 Americans. Since then, groups affiliated with al Qaeda have been implicated in bombings and other attacks not only in their base countries, but in the UK, France, Tunisia, Bali, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Spain, India, Algeria, and other countries.\(^{12}\)

Another high-profile attack occurred in September 2004 in the Beslan, Russia. This attack was carried out by a group of 32 Islamic fighters seeking Chechnyan independence

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from Russia. The attack consisted of the capture of a school, followed by a three-day siege. The fighters killed 330 people and injured more than 700, mostly children.\textsuperscript{13} According to some scholars, some Chechen separatist groups are affiliated with al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{14}

The extensive history of terrorist attacks and organizations reveals the diversity of actors who employ it as a means to achieve their ends. Just as McVeigh was not the first individual terrorist (before him, for example, was the Unabomber), al Qaeda is not the only group using terrorist tactics to achieve its objectives. In November 2008, ten Pakistanis affiliated with the group Lashkar-e-Taiba killed 116 people in attacks on more than 10 civilian sites in Mumbai, India. Lashkar is believed to be sponsored by Pakistan’s intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to undermine India in the long-running dispute over Kashmir.\textsuperscript{15}

States, too, have carried out terrorist attacks. During World War II, the US and UK conducted “terror bombing” campaigns to encourage German citizens to rise up against Hitler. In February 1945, a one-day attack on Dresden killed 25,000 people and left 350,000 homeless.\textsuperscript{16} The US carried out similar attacks later that year in Japan. A one-day attack on Tokyo created a firestorm that killed 120,000 people.\textsuperscript{17}

Al Qaeda

Al-Qaeda’s origins lie in the American- and Saudi-funded Muslim fighters known as the Mujahedeen, a confederation of resistance groups that fought to end the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In 2001, al Qaeda leaders planned the 9/11 attacks on the US from its base in southern Afghanistan, then escaped to Pakistan. Since then, al Qaeda has affiliated with anti-government organizations in other countries, such as the TTP in Pakistan, the AQI in Iraq (before it became ISIS), and al-Shabab in Uganda.\textsuperscript{18}

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Since the assassination of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden by US security forces in 2011, as well as years of US drone attacks on al Qaeda leaders and operatives in Pakistan, the strength of what terrorism expert Daniel L. Byman calls the “core” of al Qaeda (or “al Qaeda central”) has been reduced. Because of al Qaeda central’s reduced power, it is possible that the post-9/11 consensus among UN Member States about the goals and methods of counter-terrorism may break down, with developed Western states such as the US, France, and UK primarily concerned about major attacks on Western cities by ISIS, and less-developed states more concerned about civil wars with groups such as AQAP, AQIM and al Shabab.

To date, there is mixed evidence of this divide. The permanent five (P-5) members of the Security Council have been hesitant to become involved in the civil wars in Syria and Mali. Yet the US has supported the African Union and Kenya in their effort to drive al Shabab from Somalia. If the Security Council agrees to authorize attacks on al Qaeda affiliates in these and other countries, the affiliates’ local leadership and close relationship with local populations may make them more difficult to weaken than al Qaeda central.

The Situation in Yemen

After the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the Republic of Yemen was ruled by President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In 2011, in response to the Arab Spring, an assassination attempt, and a Gulf Cooperation Council mediation plan, Saleh transferred power to Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was elected president in February 2012. Due to political instability from Houthis and Saleh loyalists in the north and from separatist movements led by AQAP in the south, Hadi resigned and fled the country in early 2015, leaving Yemen a

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20 See Schmitt, “ISIS or Al Qaeda?” for some discussion about the Western domestic versus overseas divide.


collapsed state and prompting a civil war between rebel and terrorist groups.\textsuperscript{24} AQAP has taken advantage of instability to consolidate control over considerable parts of Yeman.\textsuperscript{25}

The creation of AQAP dates back to the 2006 escape of 23 prisoners from a high-security prison in Yemen's capital, Sana'a. AQAP claims loyalty to Sunni Islam and opposes both the US and the Saudi royal family. The group has grown substantially in recent years. The US estimates that it now has several thousand members, up from several hundred in 2009.\textsuperscript{26}

Since 2009, AQAP and a related organization, Ansar al Shari, have controlled parts of southern and eastern Yemen. The group primarily aims to establish and Islamic caliphate in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. According to some analysts, their control has been weakened by US drone strikes\textsuperscript{27} and military cooperation between the US and Yemeni government, including the transfer of military vehicles, communication technology, rifles, small arms, rocket launchers,\textsuperscript{28} as well as the training of Yemeni Special Forces by US military personnel.\textsuperscript{29} Others dispute this, however, particularly as interviews and studies within Yemen suggest that drone strikes and the visible US presence anger local Yemeni citizens, turning them away from the Yemeni government and towards local militants and terrorist organizations. Experts warn that “The drones are killing al Qaeda leaders, but they are also turning them into heroes,”\textsuperscript{30} especially since the AQAP strategy has been to minimize Yemeni civilian causalities, suggest jihad as an


\textsuperscript{27} BBC, “Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.”


answer to local needs, and use propaganda to recruit individuals via "emphasizing national struggle."  

Several terrorist attacks in recent years have been attributed to AQAP. After intercepting communications between AQAP and central Qaeda leaders in 2013, the US closed down several embassies in Africa and the Middle-East that were intended targets of the group. Before his death in June 2015, former AQAP leader Nasser Abdul Karim al-Wuhayshi claimed appeared in a 2014 video claiming that AQAP would "fight Western 'Crusaders' and their allies everywhere." In December 2014, the group killed an American hostage, Luke Somers, along with a South African teacher, Pierre Korkie, after a failed US rescue attempt. AQAP also claimed responsibility for an attack on the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, which had published satirical cartoons about Muhammad.

In addition to US drone strikes, following Mansour Hadi’s departure, Saudi Arabia has led a joint Arab coalition to reclaim Yemen for the official government. As the New York Times reports, however, the Saudi forces have focused almost exclusively on fighting Houthis to reclaim territory in northern Yemen (close to the Saudi border). This has actually allowed AQAP to expand its influence by allying with tribal leaders who hold enmity towards the rebel groups in northern Yemen, and by distracting rebel groups from preventing AQAP advancement.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS – also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL) presents another (former) al Qaeda affiliate that has gained influence in recent years. In previous years, ISIS operated under the name al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). During the Iraqi civil war that followed the 2003 US invasion in Iraq, AQI carried out numerous terrorist attacks until the "Sunni Awakening," when the US allied with Sunni tribes to combat the group. As the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, AQI began fighting against the Assad regime, and acquired sizeable areas of Syrian territory. Its increasing capabilities allowed it to refocus its attacks back to Iraq in 2013, when it changed its name to ISIS. The group maintained relations with al Qaeda until that year, when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, severed ties with Qaeda central after disputing the role of another affiliate (al-Nusra) in Syria.


32 BBC, "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula."

33 Saeed al-Batati and Kareem Fahim, "War in Yemen Is Allowing Qaeda Group to Expand."

ISIS, similar to the AQAP, has sought to establish a caliphate that includes parts of Syria and Iraq. When al-Baghdadi severed ties with al-Qaeda, he designated himself as the caliph of the Islamic State. It has so far successfully achieved its goals, in no small part as a result of its ability to use propaganda to appeal not only to locals, but even to foreign citizens (about 4,000 people from the West have joined ISIS[35]), as well as its ability to incorporate local Sunni insurgent groups. Because of this, ISIS uses a combination of insurgent and terrorist tactics against its enemies. In fact, the US-led coalition in Iraq has employed both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies to combat ISIS in the region.[36]

As seen in Table 1, ISIS constitutes a significant terrorist actor today. ISIS perpetrated five out of the ten most fatal attacks in 2014. Most recently, in August 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on a Baghdad marketplace, killing 60 people and wounding more than 100 people.[37] ISIS has also used recorded executions that it posts online to further its political goals.[38] ISIS’s activities even extend beyond Syria and Iraq to places such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia. ISIS, because it has cut ties with al-Qaeda, has stated that it plans to “eclipse AQAP” in the Yemen, and even claimed responsibility for a number of bombings in Yemen’s capital, Sana’a in March 2015.[39] ISIS has also claimed responsibility for the May bombing of a mosque in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.[40]

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[39] BBC, "Yemen Crisis, Who is fighting Whom?"

Previous Committee Work on This Topic

Due to widespread opposition, the Comprehensive Convention against Terrorism, a draft treaty that would comprehensively and legally define terrorism, has stalled in the General Assembly. This reflects both the shared interest of many states in keeping state terrorism out of the definition, and the diverging interests of other states in labeling certain groups as terrorists while others see them as freedom fighters. Thus the historical trend in which states call their opponents terrorists continues, despite sea changes in the specific individuals regarded as terrorists. For example, the South African government once considered Nelson Mandela to be a terrorist. By the time of his death in 2013, however, most saw him as a leading force for peace.

In 2004, the Security Council adopted Resolution SC 1566, an effort to describe, if not define of terrorism. The resolution encourages international efforts to oppose:

… criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.

This resolution was a departure from previous Security Council approach, which encouraged individual states to develop domestic law unilaterally.

Although UN Member States have not agreed to a definition of terrorism, the Security Council has passed resolutions condemning specific acts of terrorism. In addition, in 1979, the Council resolved to treat terrorist activities as crimes, not acts of war. Since 2001, resolutions emanating from the SC have continued to address terrorism as a criminal activity.

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42 Tuman, Communicating Terrorism, p. 15.


After 9/11, the Security Council created the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) to “bolster the ability of UN Member States to prevent terrorist acts both within their borders and across regions.” The mandate of the committee has four aspects: technical assistance to connect countries to technical, financial, regulatory, and legislative assistance and donors; regular country reports from all UN Member States on their counter-terrorism activities; information on best practices, codes and standards for addressing terrorism; and meetings to develop ties between states and international, regional, and sub-regional organizations to avoid duplication of efforts.

With regard to Yemen, the Security Council has utilized two main strategies. One is to list al Qaeda and its affiliates (including AQAP) as terrorist organizations subject to sanctions and asset freezes, condemnation by the Council, and the measures (see above) used by the CTC to combat terrorism. The second strategy derives from the Council’s recognition that AQAP has capitalized on Yemen’s instability to expand control within the country. Thus, the Security Council has encouraged negotiations between the Yemeni government and groups such as the Houthis to restore order to Yemen. It has coupled this with calls for rebel groups such as the Houthis to cease acts of violence and restore territory to the Yemeni government in order to reestablish Yemeni stability.

The Security Council has passed several resolutions related to ISIS since mid-2014 in response to ISIS’s takeover of Syria and Iraqi territory. In these resolutions, the Security Council has not only condemned the actions of ISIS, but acted to "impair, isolate and incapacitate" the terrorist group via targeting ISIS’s sources of funding. In particular it has placed bans on the purchase of looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria and threatened actors who purchase oil from the group with possible sanctions. Efforts to combat ISIS directly derive from a US-led coalition that has provided military advice and assistance to Iraq and performed airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.

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In 2014, the Security Council passed Resolution 2178, aimed at preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) (individuals who travel abroad to join or support terrorist organizations and activities). The Council followed this with a July 2015 CTC meeting on the issue. At the meeting, experts discussed three important aspects to stopping the movement of FTF: (1) detecting and intervening in the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters, (2) strengthening border security and using advance passenger travel (API) to stymie the travel of FTF, and (3) criminalizing, prosecuting, rehabilitating, and establishing international cooperation regarding FTF.  

The danger of terrorists obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction was recognized before the al Qaeda attacks of September 2001. In 1996, the GA established a committee to draft a convention to address this threat. In 2005, the resulting convention was approved by the GA and opened for signature and ratification by Member States. This treaty is called the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (ICSANT) and is often simply referred to as the Nuclear Terrorism Convention. It came into force in 2007. As of today, 99 of the UN’s 193 member states have ratified the treaty, and 115 have signed the Treaty.  

In 1998, American scholars Ashton Carter, John Deutch, and Philip Zelikow argued for a four-pronged strategy to prevent terrorist acquisition and use of WMD. It involves: (1) intelligence and warning, (2) prevention and deterrence, (3) crisis and consequence management, and (4) coordinated acquisition of equipment and technology. Their suggested approach, specifically the first three suggestions, is similar to that later adopted in ICSANT. In addition to criminalizing the unlawful possession or use of radioactive substances, state parties agree to share accurate information and provide warning to other states regarding criminal possession of nuclear materials, protect radioactive materials to prevent “offences” under the agreement, and contain and “render harmless” criminally acquired radioactive material.  

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53 UN ICSANT, Articles 1, 5, 7, 8.
In Spring 2010, the United States invited 40 countries to attend a Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C. The summit focused primarily on preventing nuclear terrorism. At the summit, a number of countries agreed to ratify ICSANT, and all participants agreed to work for its universal adoption. These commitments are not legally binding but are to be carried out on a voluntary basis.

States at the summit further called for international cooperation to follow up on UN Security Council Resolution 1540, which calls on UN Member States to criminalize the possession of all WMD materials and delivery systems (nuclear, chemical, and biological) by individuals and groups. The resolution details steps that Member States must take to ensure their ability to track and contain all attempts at acquiring WMD by non-state actors. Finally, the resolution calls for periodic reports from states on their progress towards these objectives. Starting in April 2015, the Security Council Committee established in Resolution 1540 began a comprehensive review on the implementation of the resolutions. The Security Council has encouraged Member States, international organizations, and “appropriate sectors of civil society, including industry, to engage actively in the process.”

The Nuclear Security Summit also focused on the need for states to secure their nuclear weapons and nuclear energy materials so terrorists cannot obtain them. This effort is consistent with the IAEA’s Nuclear Security Plan 2014-2017 (and previous IAEA plans), which has initiated the creation of Nuclear Security Support Centres (NSSCs) at national, regional, and international levels to ensure the security of nuclear weapons, facilitate the transfer of nuclear security knowledge, and to exchange best practices. These are intended to help states comply with the requirements of the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials.

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Montana Model United Nations

The IAEA offers support to any country willing to secure its nuclear materials. At the Nuclear Security Summit, states pledged to adopt the recommendations and to partner with the IAEA in providing assistance to countries.

**Conclusion**

Terrorism poses complex challenges, ranging from sporadic local attacks to the fall of governments and the possibility of nuclear weapons acquisition and use. How should the Security Council respond to these threats? In researching your country’s position on this issue, consider the following questions:

- Has your country ever been threatened or attacked by terrorists? If so, what is the basis of the conflict? Did the threats or attacks involve WMD?
- To what extent has terrorism affected your state’s allies and/or the states in its region?
- What position does your country take on terrorism in general and on the challenges of AQAP, ISIS, and WMD terrorism in particular?
- What kind of counter-terrorism policies does your country favor? Which treaties has it ratified?
- Does your state need help with terrorism? Could it offer help to others? Is it currently involved in either the US coalition against ISIS or the Saudi coalition in Yemen?
- What aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism should the Council prioritize, and how should it encourage UN member states to address them?

**Recommended Reading**


The author of this 2005 article summarizes several positions in the debate about defining terrorism and provides examples of divergent views from various countries.

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This site provides transcripts of recent interviews about national and international aspects of the terrorist threat in Yemen. Also see the BBC profile on AQAP at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11483095.


This website provides access to detailed historical and current information on terrorist attacks in particular countries and regions. For tips on navigation, see footnotes 7-10.


This site provides easy access to all Security Council documents on Yemen. Also see the Security Council Report site for Terrorism as a thematic issue, with documents relating to ISIS. Available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/terrorism/.


This and other Times Topics pages (e.g. see the page for Yemen) provide a background information and recent news related to ISIS and other topics. Under the chronology, the New York Times also provides a search bar from which you can find articles related to the topic and the keywords for which you search.


From this site you can find out which terrorism treaties your country has ratified. It also includes summaries of the key provisions of each treaty. Be sure view summaries on treaties such as the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, and know what your country's position is on this and other terrorism treaties.