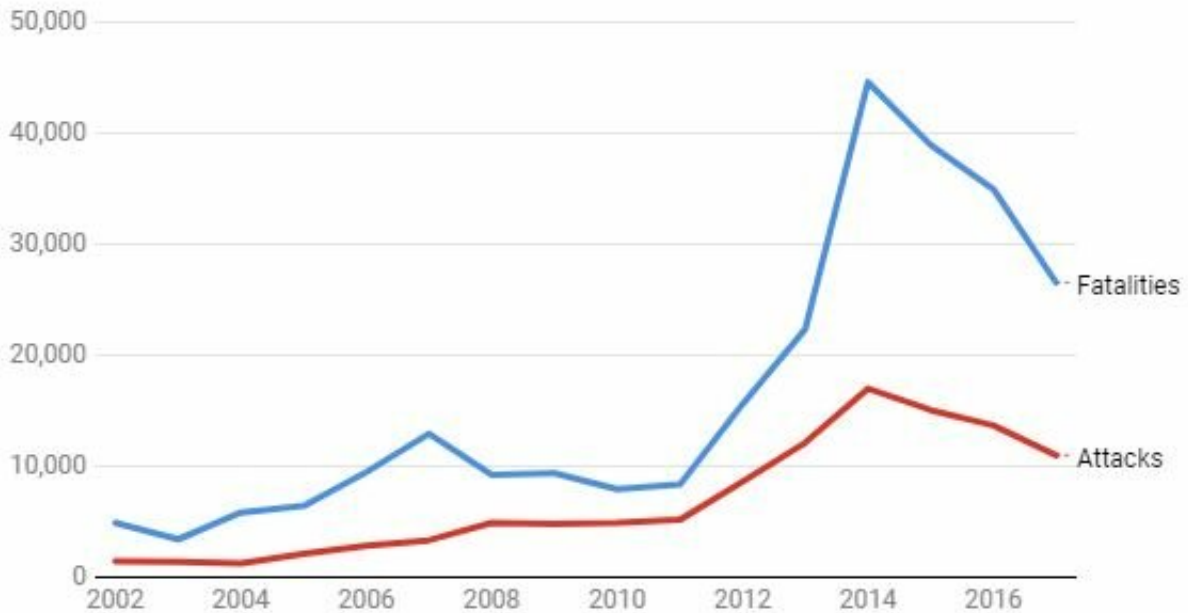


Will terrorism continue to decline in 2019?

February 27 2019, by Gary Lafree

Instances of terrorism from 2002 to 2017

The number of terrorist attacks have increased from 2002 to 2017, but the numbers are down from a spike in 2014.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: The Global Terrorism Database

Lost in the headlines, rapidly accelerating news cycles and the pervasive fear generated by terrorist threats is the fact that terrorist attacks worldwide have actually been declining – in some areas substantially.

Terrorism researchers like me have long noted that the number of [terrorist attacks rises and falls in waves – generally lasting several decades](#).

I'm the founding director of the National Consortium for the [Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, or START](#), and one of the original creators of the Global Terrorism Database. My [colleagues Laura Dugan, Erin Miller and I define terrorism](#) as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-[state actors](#) to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation." The database shows that the world has been gripped by a wave of terrorist attacks that [began shortly after the 9/11 attacks](#).

My research using the START database shows the extent of this spike. From 2002 through 2014, worldwide terrorist attacks increased by 12 times and terrorist fatalities increased by more than eight times. Especially hard hit were Iraq and Afghanistan in the Middle East, India and Pakistan in South Asia, and Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa.

The most active terrorist organizations driving this worldwide boom were the Taliban, Al-Shabaab, the Islamic State Group (also known as IS), the Communist Party of India–Maoist and Boko Haram.

But since 2014, the picture has [changed dramatically](#) – a development that has gone largely unreported in the media.

Let's examine that change.

A downward trend

In 2015 total [terrorist attacks decreased](#) by 11.5 percent and total terrorism-related deaths by 12.7 percent.

In 2016, we saw a further 9.2 percent decrease in attacks and 10.2 percent decline in total terrorism-related deaths.

The downward trend continued in 2017, the most recent data available, with a 19.8 percent drop in attacks and a 24.2 percent decline in fatalities.

Taken together, these 36 months have witnessed the single largest three-year decline in attacks and fatalities since the Global Terrorism Database began in 1970 – nearly a half century ago.

The recent declines are geographically dispersed. In the peak year of 2014, five countries – Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Somalia – accounted for 57.2 percent of the world's total terrorist attacks and more than half of the worldwide terrorism-related fatalities.

By the end of 2017, all five of these countries had experienced sizable declines in attacks.

Three of these countries also experienced a dramatic decline in fatalities: a 53.6 percent drop in Iraq, a 55.4 percent drop in Pakistan, and a 97.1 percent drop in Ukraine. The violence in Ukraine was concentrated in 2014 and 2015 and associated with the rapid rise of the [Euromaidan revolution](#) and culminated in the overthrow of the Russian-backed Ukrainian president.

During the same period, fatalities increased by 12.5 percent in Afghanistan and 203 percent in Somalia, but these increases weren't big enough to offset the declines in Iraq, Pakistan and Ukraine.

Major groups less active

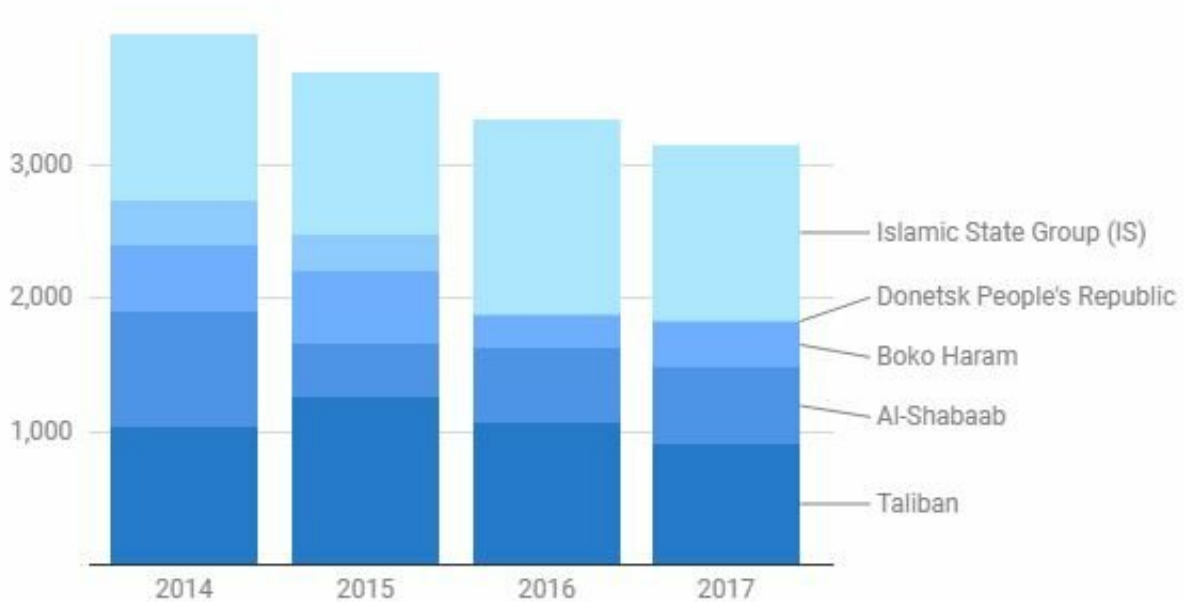
Attacks and fatalities claimed by the world's most active and dangerous

terrorist organizations have also declined during the last three years.

In 2014, the five most active terrorist organizations in the world were the Islamic State Group, or IS, the Taliban, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and the Donetsk People's Republic – a separatist organization operating in Ukraine and receiving military backing from Russia.

Worldwide terrorism is down

Attacks and fatalities claimed by the world's most active and dangerous terrorist organizations have declined over the last three years.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: START

By the end of 2017, attacks by the Taliban, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and the Donetsk People's Republic had all declined. Total attacks by IS decreased by 2.2 percent from 2014 to 2015 but then increased by 7.7

percent from 2015 to 2017.

In Western Europe and the United States, total terrorist attacks are down sharply from the 1970s. In 2017, Western Europe accounted for only 2.7 percent of worldwide attacks and the United States for less than 1 percent of attacks.

That may seem surprising given the amount of media attention generated by a small number of high profile attacks. In 2015, [attacks in Paris](#) took the lives of 130 and injured another 400. In 2016, Western Europe experienced a series of mass casualty attacks carried out by IS and its affiliates in [Nice](#), [Brussels](#) and [Berlin](#).

While the total number of attacks in the United States remains extremely low, the public was shocked in 2015 by the 14 victims of the attack by [Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik in San Bernardino, California](#), and the nine people killed by [Dylann Roof's attack at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) in Charleston, South Carolina.

In 2016, Americans witnessed the 49 deaths linked to the assault carried out by [Omar Mateen in Orlando, Florida](#). And in 2017, Americans learned of the eight deaths in New York City linked to [Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov](#) who claimed an affiliation with IS.

Some hotspots remain

Terrorist attacks and fatalities are not declining everywhere and every year.

The START database shows that in 2017, attacks and fatalities increased in India, the Philippines and Nepal. In 2016, attacks and fatalities increased in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Turkey. And in 2015 attacks and fatalities increased in Afghanistan,

Bangladesh and Egypt.

Also, while worldwide attacks have declined, a large number of countries are still being targeted. Thus, while terrorist attacks took place in a total of 100 countries in 2014, total countries experiencing attacks was 99 in 2015, 108 in 2016 and 100 in 2017. Countries only experiencing attacks in 2016 included Kazakhstan, Panama and Switzerland.

This effect was especially apparent with IS and its affiliates, which claimed fewer attacks and deaths in 2017 but at the same time carried out attacks in a larger number of different countries.

Not all reasons for declines in terrorist attacks are positive.

For example, an argument can be made that terrorist attacks have declined in [Afghanistan](#) in part because the Taliban in recent years has been [so successful](#) in [taking back control](#) of the country.

A similar outcome – but with the regime rather than the terrorist perpetrators gaining control of the situation – no doubt explains [declining terrorist attacks and fatalities in Syria](#).

While we have observed major declines in terrorist attacks and fatalities from 2015 to 2017, both [attacks and fatalities remain at historically high levels](#).

The number of attacks in 2017 is 27.9 percent higher than in 2012, and deaths 70.6 percent higher.

Even more strikingly, attacks were more than twice as common in 2017 as they were during 1992 – the peak year for an earlier wave.

An end to chaos?

One thing is certain: The number of terrorist attacks in a particular region of the world as a whole will eventually peak and then decline.

It seems logical to conclude that the chaos and disorder that follow in the wake of terrorist attacks provide strong incentives for societies to adopt strategies for countering them.

Few individuals or communities prefer living endlessly in chaos and violence. We can only hope that we have reached that tipping point in 2019. At the same time, we must humbly admit that [prediction is the most precarious](#) task of the social sciences.

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