Global Terrorism Forecast 2026

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By Rohan Gunaratna

SYNOPSIS

In 2026, intensified geopolitical competition and rivalries will influence and shape the global threat environment. In parallel, non-state armed groups driven by religious, ethnic, and hard-line ideologies will threaten both governments and social harmony in various countries around the world.

COMMENTARY

Insurgent and terrorist entities will mount attacks in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the West in 2026. Based on the monitoring of terrorist communiques and reporting by government sources, while over 95 per cent of the attacks will occur in conflict zones of Sudan, Mali, Somalia, Libya, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, isolated attacks will happen in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Several major Western cities scaled back or cancelled New Year's Eve celebrations for 2025-2026 due to heightened security and public safety concerns, as well as recent local tragic events. Nonetheless, the primary theatres of terrorism will be in the Global South, notably in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The fewer attacks staged in the West will draw global attention like the family-based attack in Bondi Beach in Sydney in December 2025. As long as migrant and diaspora communities are not integrated, extremism will linger in the physical and digital spaces, radicalising communities, and the West will suffer from periodic attacks in 2026.

The epicentre of global terrorism has shifted out of the Middle East into Africa and Asia. Nonetheless, threat groups remain active in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Iran's Axis of Resistance – Shi'ite groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, as well as Sunni groups in Gaza – failed to deter Israel from attacking Iran.

To contain Israel, Iran seeks to restore its ring of fire by renewing support to Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemeni Ansarallah, both severely weakened by Israel in recent times. Except for Iran, a state sponsor of both Shi'ite and Sunni threat groups, Middle Eastern governments have publicly rejected terrorism. Following the devastating war in Gaza after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, there is a considerable erosion of public support or appetite for violence.

The West will see the steady rise of both the extreme right and the extreme left, leading to intermittent attacks. The rise of far-right political parties will enable far-right extremism in 2026 and in the foreseeable future. Due to enhanced security and intelligence cooperation in the West, most attacks by the far left and the far right, and Islamist groups will be detected and disrupted in the planning and preparation phases. The FBI in the US disrupted coordinated bomb attacks across five locations in Los Angeles on New Year's Eve. The Turtle Island Liberation Front – a far-left, pro-Palestine, anti-government, and anti-capitalist group has 939 followers, and its Instagram features images with the phrases "Death to America" and "Peaceful Protest Will Never Be Enough".

As in 2025, most attacks in 2026 will be in the Global South. According to information gathered by counter terrorism databases, around 60-70 per cent of the terrorist attacks will occur in African countries. Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates in Africa remain the deadliest terrorist organisations in 2026.

Unless the war between Israel and Hamas and its allies resumes, based on my own interviews with counterterrorism practitioners and terrorist leaders in custody, around 15-20 per cent of attacks will be in the Levant and the Gulf. In 2026, attacks by Tareek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) targeting Pakistan will surpass the attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP).

Al Qaeda-aligned TTP attacks mounted from Afghanistan could prompt a war between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Similarly, attacks by Pakistan and India could prompt a war between the two nuclear powers. Extremism is on the rise in Bangladesh. With Bangladeshi Islamists and the Afghan Taliban exchanging visits throughout 2025, there will be calls for implementing Shariah, and minorities in Bangladesh, notably Hindus and Christians, will suffer more attacks in 2026.

Most South and Central Asians are recruited by ISKP, both when in their own countries and in the diaspora. With Central Asian governments regulating the religious space, the potential for radicalisation and recruitment in-country has diminished. Nonetheless, Central Asians working overseas have been enlisted by both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda to mount attacks in Russia, Europe, and elsewhere.

The threat in Southeast Asia has diminished, but the remnants of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda continue to operate. Two foreign terrorist fighters visited Mindanao in the Philippines for three weeks in November 2025 in the lead-up to the terrorist

attack in Bondi Beach. Manila has maintained its efforts to integrate the identified Islamist elements and supporters into the mainstream community.

In Indonesia, the counterterrorism force, Detachment 88, dissolved Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), both an Al Qaeda and an Islamic State affiliate. A game changer in the fight against terrorism, JI supreme leader Para Wijayanto and Detachment 88 Intelligence Chief Ami Prindani worked together to remove the region's biggest threat after two decades of JI attacks.

The Malaysian Special Branch dismantled an Islamic State in Bangladesh network in Johor, bordering Singapore. At the same time, other threat groups based in Bangladesh and Myanmar continue their subversive activities overseas through their respective labour diaspora communities.

Conclusion

In a rapidly evolving global and political landscape, all nations require an unblinking eye to prevent and preempt threats from seeding, taking root, and manifesting, harming the state and hurting its citizens. Public spaces in urban settings, especially open facilities, will be vulnerable to mass fatality and mass casualty attacks.

The threat will come from state and non-state actors, including lone-wolf attackers. In addition to disinformation and misinformation operations, states will also engage in attacks on information infrastructure.

The threat of cyberattacks by both state and non-state actors will rise, compelling nations to secure their online domains. With threat groups setting up dedicated digital entities, including an Al Qaeda digital command, governments will need to partner with community organisations and stringently regulate the digital space, including punitive measures against tech companies if necessary. With a fourth to a fifth of the attacks being perpetrated by youth and children, governments will need to address online radicalisation in 2026.

Unless all governments collaborate to mitigate common security threats, risks, and challenges, threat actors will continue to exploit gaps, loopholes, and weaknesses in the global security systems.

Religious spaces should be tightly regulated, hate preachers and their institutions should be investigated, charities and their donors should be monitored, and protests and campaigns instigating violence should be banned. In partnership with community leaders, government leadership must focus on promoting moderation and coexistence.

Terrorism will remain the preeminent national security threat to most countries throughout 2026. Driven by extremist ideologies, terrorism will damage social cohesion between ethnic and religious communities. The focus of governments should shift from downstream counterterrorism to upstream counterterrorism to preempt and prevent attacks.

Terror is not only a tool exploited by non-state actors, but also by state actors, mainly through their partners and proxies. As they need plausible deniability, hostile governments will employ criminal organisations to conduct terrorist attacks. The crime-terror nexus and its infrastructure must not be left unattended. The challenge posed by politico-religious ecosystems of threat groups, networks, cells, and personalities should be tackled with urgency and strategic oversight.

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