

The Upshot
PUBLIC SAFETY

Is Terrorism Getting Worse? In the West, Yes. In the World, No.

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If it feels as if terrorism deaths are rising in the West, it's because they are. Yet the numbers remain relatively small, and globally, deaths from terrorism appear to be declining, not rising.

According to two big databases, the number of people who died in terror attacks in North America and Western Europe rose markedly in 2015, claiming more than 200 lives. This year, according to one count, it is on track to be even worse.

But terrorism in the West is rare. In the parts of the world where it is more common — deaths in those regions are in the thousands rather than the dozens — terror attacks appear to be decreasing.

And as bad as terrorism has been in the West recently, it was worse in the 1970s and 1980s.

High-profile attacks in cities that include Brussels; Paris; Orlando, Fla.; and San Bernardino, Calif., have fed public fears of terrorism in the United States and made it a big issue in the presidential campaign. President Obama, Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump have all highlighted the risk of terrorism at home.

Analysts who monitor terror attacks around the world note that risk perception doesn't always correspond to actual risk. The groups committing acts of terrorism

over time have changed, of course. But data from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland, which has cataloged terrorist attacks since 1970, shows last year's terrorism death toll would have been fairly typical for an earlier era.

The Global Terrorism Database releases public data on attacks once a year. That means the accompanying chart doesn't include any information about 2016, omitting the big attacks in Brussels; Nice, France; Orlando; and several smaller ones in Europe.

IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, which monitors terrorist events in real time for militaries, intelligence agencies and defense contractors, is one source of more recent numbers. The Jane's numbers for 2015 are different from those in the Global Terrorism Database, so it's impossible to make a direct comparison. But Jane's documented a total of 204 terrorism deaths last year in North America and Western Europe, compared with 219 through Aug. 3 of this year, meaning this year's total is on track to be higher than last year's, according to this count.

All methods of measuring terrorism involve imperfect data and rely on judgment calls. Analysts must comb through news media and other credible reports of violence, then decide what is terrorism and what is more typical criminal attacks. The counters generally look for violence committed by nonstate actors conducted for a political purpose.

They don't always agree. Jane's included the Nice attack in its total for 2016. But Erin Miller, the program manager for the Global Terrorism Database, said analysts there were still waiting for more information from the event's investigation before they made a final decision on whether the attack had a political motivation necessary to count as terrorism.

Because the number of terrorist fatalities in the West are small, individual decisions can make a big difference. If you don't count the Nice attack, which killed 86 people, including the perpetrator, the Jane's 2016 number would look a lot smaller.

Tactics associated with the Islamic State have made these judgments particularly tricky. The group, which commits acts of direct violence primarily in

Iraq and Syria, has encouraged sympathetic individuals to carry out attacks overseas in the group's name. While the Islamic State has trained terrorists who have carried out attacks in the West, like those involved in the Paris attack last year, more Western attacks were carried out by people who have described their violence as "inspired" by the group. The result is that some acts of violence are now more likely to be presumptively described as terrorism.

"Increasingly these days, the operating assumption is it is likely to be terrorism," said Matthew Henman, the top analyst at Jane's. "Especially if the attacker fits a certain profile."

Several recent crimes in Europe, initially described as terrorism, were ultimately determined not to be. In a past era, such crimes might never have been covered as terrorism or even considered by analysts for inclusion.

In the United States, the terrorism threat is even smaller than it is in the West generally. With the exception of the huge Sept. 11 and Oklahoma City attacks, there is no year since 1970 when terrorism killed more than 50 people in the United States. Last year, the number was 44, according to the Global Terrorism Database. That means that terrorism typically kills about as many Americans as lightning strikes do.

The vast majority of terrorist events in the world occur in a handful of countries experiencing civil unrest. More than three-quarters of all terrorism fatalities over the last five years took place in six countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen.

Because of the way the Global Terrorism Database has measured terrorism over time, its numbers throughout history are not all equivalent, but data from the last few years show a big peak in 2014, in part because of continuing conflict in Iraq and Syria and the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Last year, global terrorism deaths declined by 12 percent. Data from this year won't be available until after the year is complete.

Jane's provided numbers on terrorism deaths in the world through Aug. 8. They show a decline relative to similar periods last year and the year before. Analysts at

Jane's draw on reports of terrorism from a wider array of sources than the Global Terrorism Database, which means they count more deaths every year.

Tracking terrorism globally is even more challenging than doing so in the West. The big differences between the counts from Jane's and the Global Terrorism Database — both widely respected sources — highlight the challenges. To count in the databases, the attacks must be reported and require verification from trusted sources.

That means that attacks in countries that lack a free press or are too dangerous for reporters (think Syria and Somalia) may go unrecorded. There are also risks of overcounting. Because most terrorism deaths occur in places with civil wars, it can be hard to untangle what counts as terrorism and what is traditional armed conflict.

“In a war like Syria and Iraq, you're going to get a lot of terrorist attacks that are just part of fighting,” said Seth Jones, the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation, which compiled its own database of terrorism through 2009.

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