

Cameron Lee - Economics of Crime - Spring 2026

Trends in Global Terrorism: Geography, Attack-Type, and September 11th

In the period between 1970 - 2019, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) recorded 201,183 official counts of terrorism. (Global Terrorism Database, 2020) Within this array, incidents of both the domestic and international variety saw perpetrators commit violent, criminal acts motivated by political, religious or social ideology against victims who suffered psychological harm, physical injury, or death. While international cases of terrorism are tied to the perpetrator's execution of a designated foreign agenda, the distinct motives of terrorists across the world remain inconsistent, and the factors that give rise to a propensity for terrorism the subject of debate. After 9/11, Princeton economist Alan Krueger disproved that poverty is a key factor in the radicalization of a terrorist, echoing literature that terrorists tend to draw from well-educated, middle or high-income families. Some correlations have emerged across incidents, for the Muslim covariate was found to be a statistically significant predictor of terror in one model carried out by Meagan Smith, yet, reporters such as Matt Apuzzo also present persuasive counterarguments that by and large, attempts to create terrorism "checklists" fail. (Apuzzo, 2016) Government prescriptions are rarely backed by credible evidence, leading to a threatening amount of potential for false-positives which subject innocents to invasive investigation. The Justice Department's flags on groups that distrust law enforcement and suffer from discrimination toe a line resemblant to outright racial profiling. While terrorism is no doubt a malicious phenomenon, such considerations of the social and fiscal costs to terrorism prevention are important in the grander analyses of global terrorism to follow.

The 201,183 accounts of terrorism logged by the GTD in 2020 were synthesized into a dashboard to reveal trends in global region and attack-type. The first visualization, a packed

bubble plot, parsed total terrorism attacks by province/state within a global region. Resultingly, a bubble's size corresponded with number of attacks, placing regions of higher activity closer to the center of the huddle. From this, it could be observed that the Middle East, followed by South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have seen the highest totals of terrorism across time. The second visualization, re-arranging the same measures into a proportional area chart, displayed how terrorist activity within each region compared with its regional counterparts per year. While Western Europe held dominance through the 20th century, the 21st century contributed to the steep ascension of the Middle East and South Asia, as previously mentioned. Speaking to the Middle East, substantial reports have illustrated that many extremist groups have concentrated presences in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq, often coinciding with fundamentalist agendas. Next, a third visualization separated attacks within a region into six categories: armed assault, assassination, bombing (& explosion), facility (& infrastructure) attacks, hostage-taking, and other (encompassing outlier cases). Originally nine categories, two hostage measures were fused, along with hijacking, unarmed assault, and other in one. Lastly, highlighter tools were created to enable users to interact with the dashboard by region and attack-type, and a map color coded by region allowed users to search for any country.

For the purpose of analysis, trends in attack-type provide a rich starting place. Bombing by far accounted for the greatest share of incidents between 1970 - 2019 followed by armed assault and infrastructure attacks, due to the scale of damage that explosives inflict while requiring only one person to detonate. At 46%, nearly half of all international terrorist attacks recorded since 1968 have relied on bombs. (Council, 1995) Bombing as the most common attack type illustrates that some attacks serve purely economic interests. In 1980, a homemade bomb caused over \$12 million in damages to a Nevada casino after it failed to appease demands.

(Council, 1995) Other cases demonstrate that the primary goal for terrorists is general publicity, where they seek to instill fear in a population in any way possible. New York City presented a particularly harrowing case on September 11th, 2001. On this date, two commercial aircraft hijacked by terrorists affiliated with Al-Qaeda, an Islamic fundamentalist group, were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The incident led to 2,753 fatalities, yet its costs beyond lives taken estimated \$3.4 trillion dollars in physical damages, economic impact, homeland security, future war, and veterans' care. (9/11 Memorial & Museum, 2023) Such findings support the "big effect" economic view of terrorism, which indicates that society is significantly affected long-term by attacks despite infrastructural and economic rebuilding. This event pried at deeper-rooted truths about terrorism, namely that society at large finds itself to be a target due to the second-wave shocks of psychological harm (PSTD) and capital losses incurred. Up to 20% of adults directly exposed to the disaster had PTSD symptoms five years after the attack, translating into a rate four times the national average. (NYC 9/11 Health, n.d.) 9/11 was just one of New York's 536 terrorist incidents between 1970 - 2019, where promisingly, the count of incidents in New York began at 86 incidents in 1970 and decreased to 10 by the end of the period. 9/11 catalyzed the War on Terror, initiating widescale counter-terrorism measures and increased diligence towards preventative action. However, tracing back to Matt Apuzzo's original claim, pinpointing solutions to stop future attacks hinge on numerous uncertainties in motive and socio-religious biases, indicating that there is much future research to be conducted.

Appendix

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AI Statement

"No generative AI tools were used in the creation of this assignment. All research, writing, and revisions were completed independently by the author to develop foundational writing and research skills."