

How Do You Measure Success Against Jihadists?

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BLUF Highlights:

- *Measuring success against a militant organization requires understanding the group's objectives and how far it has progressed toward achieving them, as well as the types of warfare it is capable of waging.*
- *Instead of gauging a group's strength through the number of terrorist attacks, it is necessary to examine the quality of the assaults and determine how they fit into the group's other operations.*
- *Defeating a group requires more than victory on the physical battlefield; it also needs progress in the much more difficult ideological realm.*

It was just last week that I was talking to a person who is working to help a country combat a significant jihadist threat. In the course of our chat, we started thinking, how do you actually measure success against jihadist groups? As operations the world over have shown, simply destroying a high number of Toyota Hiluxes driven by militants isn't necessarily the defining mark of success in the "war on terrorism," and a tally of terrorist attacks doesn't necessarily signal failure. I've written before on [terrorism and insurgent theory](#) and the [trajectories of specific groups](#), but never on how to gauge militant groups. As it turns out, there's more to assessing a jihadist group's strength than straight numbers.

The Big Picture

The United States and its international allies are involved in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations against jihadist groups across a wide swath of the globe from West

Africa to the southern Philippines. As the strength of militant groups waxes and wanes, it is important to consider how to measure the success of such operations.

[See The Jihadist Wars](#)

The Spectrum of Militancy

With very few exceptions — including single-issue terrorist groups such as animal rights or anti-abortion activists — most terrorist acts are committed in pursuit of larger political goals. Marxism, anarchism, white supremacy and jihadism are all examples of ideologies that encourage the use of terrorism, albeit with the aim of becoming a more formidable military force. Accordingly, terrorism is not typically an end in itself, but a tool that is often, though not always, used by a weaker military force against a stronger one. Because of this, Stratfor generally refers to Marxist or jihadist groups as "militant groups," because they seek to use a wide spectrum of military tools to achieve their stated ends; ultimately, terrorism is merely one of those tools. The nomenclature has led some to accuse us of being "soft on terrorism" by referring to groups such as the Islamic State as a militant group instead of a terrorist group, but describing an organization that uses terrorism, insurgent warfare and — when possible — hybrid and even maneuver warfare as a "terrorist group" severely understates the threat they pose.

Organizations such as the Islamic State are far more than just terrorist groups.

For revolutionary and radical thinkers from Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap and Che Guevara to even Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr Naji, terrorism occupies a comparatively small place on the military spectrum. In Cuban Focoist, Maoist, Marxist and even jihadist thought, it is a small vanguard that engages in terrorism to plant the initial seeds that will eventually lead to revolution. Terrorism is "the propaganda of the deed" and is intended to publicize the existence of the group and its ideology. More importantly, the goal of terrorism is to raise popular support with the aim of creating friendly human terrain that can provide protection, financial support and recruits — or, to quote Mao, a terrain that allows a guerrilla fighter "to move among the people as a fish moves in the sea."

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Naturally, the purpose of such operational freedom is not simply to conduct terrorist attacks but also to construct a military force that can conduct guerrilla warfare, thereby permitting a group to expand its areas of influence or control. And by always expanding its capacity, the group will evolve beyond mere insurgent warfare to conduct maneuver warfare, defeat the enemy and establish a new government — or maybe even an empire.

The basic concept behind [insurgent or guerrilla warfare](#) is to reject battle when the enemy is superior and attack when and where the enemy is weak. In general, insurgents adopt a long view of armed struggle, seeking to minimize losses and "live to fight another day" rather than risk total destruction at the hands of a superior enemy by remaining in fixed positions. At times, however, guerrilla leaders can misjudge and overestimate their popular support, resulting in a crushing blow from the state as in the case of Islamic State supporters who seized [Marawi City](#) in the southern Philippines.

For insurgents, merely surviving to continue the fight while forcing the enemy to disproportionately expend soldiers and resources represents a victory. In this asymmetrical form of warfare, time is on the side of the insurgents, who bank that a protracted and bloody struggle will exhaust and demoralize the opposition.

Many Maoist and Marxist leaders, including Mao, Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh, have advanced along this revolutionary military path, graduating from terrorism to insurgency, victory and, ultimately, governance. The story is similar among some jihadist groups, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in parts of Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali and al Shabaab in parts of Somalia.

Measuring Progression

Differences in focus undoubtedly exist between jihadist groups, because some have more nationalist goals (the Afghan Taliban) while others are more transnational in nature (Islamic State). Yet all such organizations share the desire to establish an Islamic polity ruled by Sharia. Accordingly, it is possible to gauge a militant group's success by examining how far it has progressed toward achieving its goals and which forms of warfare it is capable of waging. For example, the Islamic State controls far less territory than it did four years ago, and its ability to field large military units to engage in maneuver warfare has significantly declined. Simply put, the group does not possess the same number of tanks, artillery pieces and other military equipment that it did in 2014. Likewise, it does not wield control over as many people or as large a territory as it did. The group certainly has not been destroyed, but there is no doubt that it is significantly weaker than it was four years ago.

The problem, however, is that the group's leadership has not abandoned the struggle and that its followers continue to fervently believe in its ideology. The organization's insurgents continue to conduct lower-level terrorist and insurgent attacks in an attempt to regain footing and re-establish credibility within the human terrain of the Sunni portions of Iraq and Syria. The group has [previously experienced such a situation](#), only to emerge stronger after a period of weakness. Today, members of Islamic State believe that their long-term insurgent campaign will foster renewed growth and eventual victory. Other jihadist groups, such as AQAP, the Afghan Taliban and al Shabaab, have also gone through boom-and-bust cycles, but these organizations have successfully regrouped and regained strength after significant losses of men, materiel and territory by maintaining a long-term focus. As in any military campaign, a group's progress along the militancy spectrum is not always smooth, because changes of direction can result in surges, plateaus and setbacks.

It is also important to understand that the tools on the militant spectrum are not mutually exclusive. An organization that boasts the ability to conduct peer-to-peer maneuver warfare can also engage in insurgent warfare or terrorism to augment its capabilities. Indeed, groups such as al Shabaab have frequently used terrorism in addition to insurgent tactics and hybrid warfare. Terrorist attacks serve to tie down security forces protecting the capital or other population centers, thus providing insurgents with more operational latitude in the hinterland. Such groups

can also stage terrorist attacks to punish foreign actors for their support of their enemy and apply pressure so they withdraw and weaken their foe.

Critically, however, no direct correlation exists between the number of terrorist attacks and the strength of a militant group. Terrorist attacks are fairly economical to conduct in terms of fighters and materiel; indeed, a single conventional battle could exhaust a group's supply of fighters and ordnance, while the same amount of resources could last many years if it restricts itself to terrorist attacks. Hit-and-run insurgent attacks are unsurprisingly also more economical than set battles — especially against a foe with superior forces and firepower.

Although it is not an iron rule, resorting to terrorism often highlights a group's weakness — rather than its strength. As a group weakens, it becomes more dependent on terrorism to destabilize its opponent and remain militarily relevant.

The Islamic State exemplified this phenomenon in 2010, when it launched a number of significant vehicle bomb attacks against government targets inside Baghdad at a time of comparative weakness for the group. Conversely, a reduction in terrorist attacks may occur as a group becomes stronger and requires its resources to hold and govern territory, ensuring it feels little obligation to conduct spectacular terrorist attacks to remain relevant.

Quality over Quantity

Ultimately, holding and governing territory requires far more personnel and resources than do insurgent operations or terrorist attacks. Because of this, I would argue that **the sheer number of terrorist attacks in population centers is not necessarily a good measurement of a militant organization's strength**. More than that, I'd argue that it's crucial to closely examine the quality of an organization's terrorist attacks and not merely the quantity. For example, Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) conducted an [unprecedented number of terrorist attacks](#) over nine days in May, but the attacks were poorly planned and executed, revealing as much about the group's weaknesses as its strengths. **A "quality" terrorist attack hinges on the number and type of weapons used, the tactics employed and the degree of planning and execution**. Abubakar Shekau's Wilayat al Sudan al Gharbi, better known by its former name, Boko Haram, has launched an unprecedented number of suicide bombings — including the most in the world since 2015 and [the most using women suicide bombers in history](#) — since the Nigerian military ejected it from its strongholds in the country's north and into the bush. Boko Haram's attacks, however, are poorly planned and executed, giving the group an air of weakness and desperation rather than strength.

In the end, it is difficult to definitively measure a group's status and forecast its trajectory. However, a close look at the group's goals and position along the militant spectrum, as well as an assessment of its available manpower, level of funding, access to weapons and ability to plan and execute attacks, provides an effective indication of whether counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations are making an impact on the physical battlefield.

But any meaningful assessment must progress beyond the physical battlefield to examine its ideological counterpart. Revolutionary militant organizations are [heavily dependent upon](#)

[ideology](#), and as long as the group's ideology continues to gain traction to provide it with favorable human terrain, eradicating the group will prove difficult. And because [firepower alone can't destroy a militant movement](#), mitigating the threat with force while combating the ideology underlying it is the name of the game. Any real progress must move beyond the first stage of the "clear, hold, build" counterinsurgency model, as lasting success will only occur when militant fighters lose their ability to "swim" among the people.