



## Global terrorism is in decline. For victims, it doesn't feel like it

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LONDON – Moments after Christine Delcros was hit by a van that mounted a sidewalk during the [London Bridge terror attack](#), she thought to herself: "That's how one dies."

Delcros, 46, was seriously injured in the 2017 vehicle assault that, along with a stabbing rampage, killed eight people. Her fiance wasn't as lucky. Xavier Thomas' body was later found in the River Thames, where it was knocked by the terrorists' speeding van.

"Where is Xavier?" Delcros, who is French, asked a passerby who was cradling her head as she regained consciousness, according to emotional testimony she gave recently to a British inquest court. A day before the incident, Delcros had a premonition: "Just as we reached the bridge I told (Thomas) we shouldn't go there. He replied: 'Why are you saying this to me now?' I told him: 'I do not know ... I can feel it.'"

Stories of terrorism include mass shootings at [New Zealand mosques](#), bombings that struck churches and hotels in [Sri Lanka](#); an attack in [Paris by gunmen and suicide bombers](#) on a concert hall, stadium and restaurants; and New York City's deadliest [post-9/11 assault](#), when a man killed eight people as he drove a truck down a bicycle path.

They are stories of grief, chance, unlikely heroes and families turned upside down by terrorism – all becoming more familiar as groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, as well as lone-wolf white extremists, use digital platforms to inspire copy-cats, divide communities and trigger heavy responses from governments.

Thousands of terrorist attacks take place each year, most in regions suffering from broader patterns of political violence such as the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia. Assaults in the U.S. and Europe comprise a small percentage.

However, data show that the number, prevalence and lethality of terrorist incidents has decreased significantly around the world since a recent near-term peak in 2014.

At the same time, security experts say the threats are more widespread geographically, more liable to amplification as social media lowers the barrier of entry, and as terrorists and would-be

extremists appear intent on adapting and changing their methods in an extremely worrying direction: less sophistication but higher impact.

Terrorism, it seems, has gone mainstream.

"I call it the McDonald's of terrorism. It's accessible to all," said Olivier Guitta, a London-based terrorism expert who runs GlobalStrat, a risk and security consultancy. "You just have to make a video, name-check the Islamic State, and that's it, you're part of it."

Guitta said that the appearance in April of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for the first time in five years in a video recording – after the militant group lost all the territory it once controlled in large parts of Iraq and Syria – was less important than it might seem.

"If Al-Baghdadi were dead it wouldn't really matter. Even if ISIS is a virtual caliphate, the fact that the caliphate is announced, that's their genius," he said.

### **Most Americans die abroad in cars**

Robert Muggah, a security specialist and co-founder of the SecDev Group – an Ottawa, Canada-based consultancy that analyzes open-source, or freely available, intelligence – said the "measurement and mapping" of terrorism and its threat is an "imperfect science," partly because there is a tendency to focus on a narrow range of reported incidents and body counts. Also, because some countries, especially authoritarian ones, increasingly use the moniker of terrorism to describe anyone they are fighting.

Most researchers describe terrorism as the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by an individual not explicitly allied to a nation to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.

As of early July this year, there have been 1,264 terrorist attacks around the world, leading to 5,763 fatalities, according to crowd-sourced data highlighted by PeaceTech Lab, a nonprofit, in collaboration with Esri Story Maps, a mapping and analytics platform.

In 2014, there were 16,903 attacks and 44,490 deaths, according to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which tracks terrorism incidents since 1970 and identifies dozens of variables, such as weapons used, targets, number of casualties and claims of responsibility. GTD's global data only runs to the end of 2017.

So far, in the United States, there have been eight terrorist attacks in 2019, resulting in one death, according to the crowdsourced data published by Esri, when a man who claimed he was inspired by the mosque shootings in New Zealand and a separate 2018 attack on a synagogue, in Pittsburgh, killed a woman in a synagogue near San Diego. In 2014, there were 26 U.S. terrorism-related deaths, according to the GTD, which is run out of the University of Maryland.

Six Americans died in foreign terror attacks in 2018, according to U.S. State Department data. Four of them were in Afghanistan, where the U.S. government has been taking part in its longest-ever war, and where insurgency-related threats are extremely high.

Still, despite the media focus on terrorism, the leading cause of American deaths abroad from 2002-2018 was car accidents (3,887), according to the State Department data. Suicides (1,914) and drownings (1,798) also figured prominently. In the 17-year period, terrorism-related actions accounted for 381 American deaths abroad.

In fact, Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C., has calculated that the chances of an American dying in a terrorist attack at home is exceptionally low: 1 in 3.2 million.

This "annual terrorism murder rate" is based on the number of fatalities from terrorism beginning in 1975 to June 2017 and is heavily skewed by the 3,000 people killed during the 9/11 attacks in New York City. Over the same period, the chances of dying in a terror attack in South Korea was 1 in 213 million. In Iceland and Luxembourg, it was zero.

Nowrasteh has further calculated that the annual chance of being killed by an animal in the U.S. was 1 in 1.6 million per year from 2008 through 2015. The chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack on U.S. soil was 1 in 30.1 million per year during that time.

"It may not feel like it, given the multiplier effect of social media, 24/7 news, Trump and all the (cultural and political) polarization we're seeing, but if we look beyond the optics of just incidents, we're in a better place. The terrorism trend lines continue to go downward," said Muggah, of the SecDev Group. "Although that doesn't mean for a moment that we can be complacent or that the risks from terrorism aren't real."

European countries thwarted 16 terrorist plots in 2018, according to Europol, the law enforcement agency for the European Union's 28 member states.

Muggah said the surge in terrorism attacks around 2014 can be linked to numerous different geopolitical events, including an increase in sectarian violence in Iraq and Afghanistan; civil war in Syria that facilitated the rise of ISIS; the impact of the Arab Spring anti-government protests across the Middle East that started in 2010; and an emboldened Boko Haram, the ISIS-aligned jihadist group in Nigeria that has killed at least 30,000 people since 2009, and displaced over two million.

Yet Muggah said that while overall there have been fewer incidents and deaths in recent years, terrorism is also spreading outwards.

"There's far more places where attacks and terror events have happened compared to previous years," he said, adding that terrorism incidents in the U.S involving white supremacist violence – attacks on non-white, non-Christian and principally Muslim immigrants – while less deadly, are rising.

Over the last decade, according to the [Anti-Defamation League](#), a non-governmental organization, nearly three-quarters of all extremist-related deaths in the U.S. can be linked to domestic right-wing terrorists, while just under one-quarter can be attributed to jihadist extremists.

The rest were carried out by extremists who did not fall into either category. Last year, right-wing extremists were linked to at least 50 murders in the U.S., the highest number since 1995, according to the Anti-Defamation League. (Because of diverging definitions of terrorism, not all these murders were classified as terrorism.)

However, Erin Miller, a researcher who manages the University of Maryland's GTD, said even as the number of terrorism incidents around the world has declined since 2014, the number of attacks in the U.S. has steadily increased: In 2018, there were 54 attacks, leading to 44 deaths, an increase of 86% and 69%, respectively, over the period.

She said that white supremacist beliefs and violence in the U.S. are "nothing new" and that it is difficult to disentangle an increase in domestic terror attacks of this kind in recent years from President Donald Trump's use of divisive language and rhetoric.

"Looking at the numbers year to year, it's useful to get hold of trends, but all you need is that one outlier, that one "Orlando," and the year looks totally different," said Colin Clarke, a terrorism researcher at The Soufan Center, an organization that provides security intelligence services to governments and multinationals. In 2016, a gunman opened fire inside one of Orlando, Florida's biggest gay nightclubs, killing 49 people.

### **Difficult to monitor**

Muggah, the SecDev Group security expert, said that the reason for the decline in terrorism internationally is to do with the winding down of the Iraq and Syrian conflicts, massive investments in counter-terrorism policing and intelligence and because governments, multilateral institutions like the United Nations and technology companies such as Facebook and YouTube appear to be "getting smarter" about collaborating to reduce terrorist and extremist content online.

Although he cautioned that terrorists are still finding ways to re-post material through encrypted platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp and murky digital ecosystems such as the "Dark Net," areas of the Internet that are not open to public view, remain very difficult to monitor.

Still, global patterns that show that the number of terrorism incidents are declining offers little comfort to victims and families caught up in fatal violence.

Megan Hurley, 15, from Liverpool, died when a suicide bomber targeted a concert full of young [Ariana Grande fans in Manchester](#) in 2017.

"The only thing we didn't agree on was how long cuddles should last. She would always tell me to 'get off' but holding on is the one thing I will never regret," her brother Bradley, 22, said at her funeral.

Naeem Rashid, 50, described as a "caring" teacher and father of three, died alongside his 21-year-old son Talha as he tried to tackle the gunmen who killed 51 people at two mosques in New Zealand, in March. Talha Rashid was preparing to get married.

Mercedes Marisol Flores, 26, was murdered during a "Latin Night" at the Pulse night club in Orlando in June 2016. Her killer, a U.S.-born security guard, pledged allegiance to ISIS shortly before he carried out one of the worst acts of domestic terrorism in U.S. history. Flores was an avid music fan, her family said.

Guitta, the London-based terror expert, said that for international jihadist-linked terror groups a major attack on U.S. soil still represents – 18 years after the 9/11 – the "Holy Grail" to the terrorists.

He said it is hard to predict where the next significant attacks on western nationals and targets might occur, but because of the FBI's success in infiltrating and thwarting plots at home they are more likely to take place in a European city such as London, Berlin or Paris, where Americans visit in sizable numbers.

"It's killing two birds with one stone," he said. "Targeting the U.S., but outside the U.S."

The next step for more traditionally-organized groups like al-Qaeda are chemical and nuclear weapons and dirty bombs, he said, adding that unlike ISIS, in the al-Qaeda model of waging a terrorism war "everything has to come from the top."

Nineteen al-Qaeda militants hijacked the airplanes used in the 9/11 attacks. Two of the planes were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. A third plane hit the Pentagon. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.

Al Qaeda, Guitta said, is looking at "big, mind-blowing sophisticated attacks," not just "isolated incidents here and there where someone can just claim responsibility."

Phil Gurski, a former counter-terrorism intelligence officer in Canada who now runs his own global threat and risk consultancy, said security services around the world are constantly trying to understand how big threats are, and where to prioritize resources.

"Do they have enough resources to do it all? The answer is No."

Gurski said the Easter Day attacks in Sri Lanka that killed at least 253 people and wounded hundreds more confirmed to him that, "Yes, the far-right is a concern, with its Nazis, fascists, Islamophobes, anti-Semites and everything else, but pound for pound they don't hold a candle to jihadists" in terms of the number of plots and their lethality.

The 1995 bombings in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people remain the deadliest terrorist assault on U.S. soil by a homegrown extremist. Timothy McVeigh, an anti-government militant, was executed by lethal injection while a federal prisoner in 2001.

'He looked evil'

"What's wrong you with?" an off-duty nurse asked one of the London Bridge attackers as she confronted him on the night of June 3, 2017, according to testimony she gave to the British inquest court. Helen Kennett was trying to save the life of a French waiter when she herself was stabbed in the neck. The waiter, Alexandre Pigeard, 26, later died.

In her testimony, Kennett described being convinced that she too was going to die but wanting to do so with her mother and sister who were hiding nearby.

"He looked evil and he was smiling. He was holding the waiter and he was stabbing him from behind," Kennett said of the attacker, who amid it all, responded to her question.

"No, what's wrong with you?" he said.