

Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the War on Terror: An Interim Update

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In Brief

- Terror attacks by Islamist extremists accelerated dramatically in 2008.
- Russia and the Philippines joined previous hotspots Pakistan and Somalia in driving the increase in violence.
- Trends in governance and economics raise significant concerns for 2009.
- There is as yet insufficient data to assess whether an “Obama effect” has done anything to change public perceptions of the United States in the Muslim world.

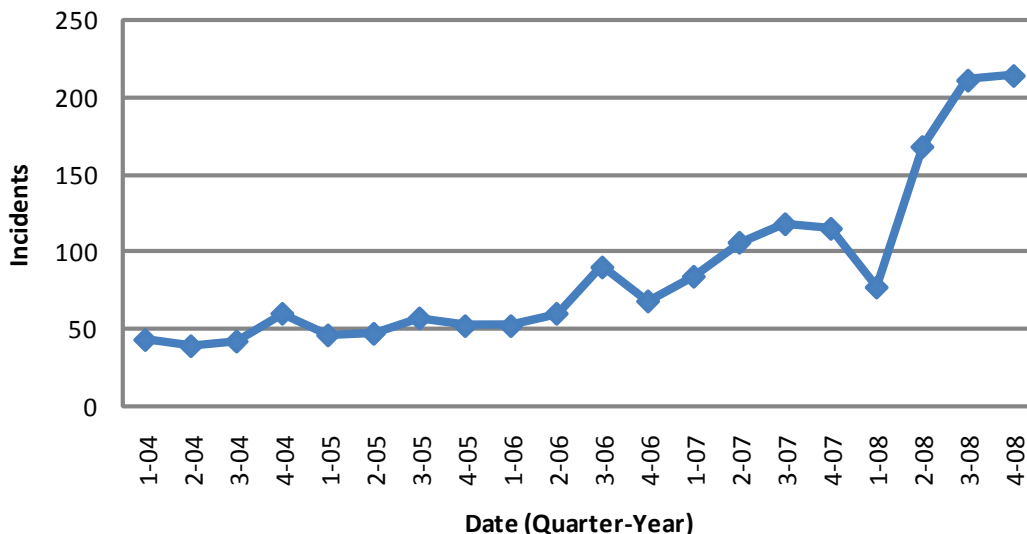
In the six months since we issued the 2008 version of our annual survey of terrorism trends, “Are We Winning?” there have been several major developments that further raise concerns about our counter-terrorism policy. Violence by Islamist groups has surged around the world, led by dramatic increases in Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, and the Philippines. The situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to worsen. Initial optimism in the Muslim world about the election of Barack Obama seems to have been dampened by continued U.S. support of Israel in the wake of its intervention in Gaza. Finally, the global financial crisis places at risk a major bright spot in previous reports, namely the generally solid economic growth in much of the Muslim world over the past several years. This interim update will address each of these trends in turn.

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Jihadist Violence

Chart 1: Incidents of Islamic Terrorism (excluding Afghanistan, Israel, and Iraq)



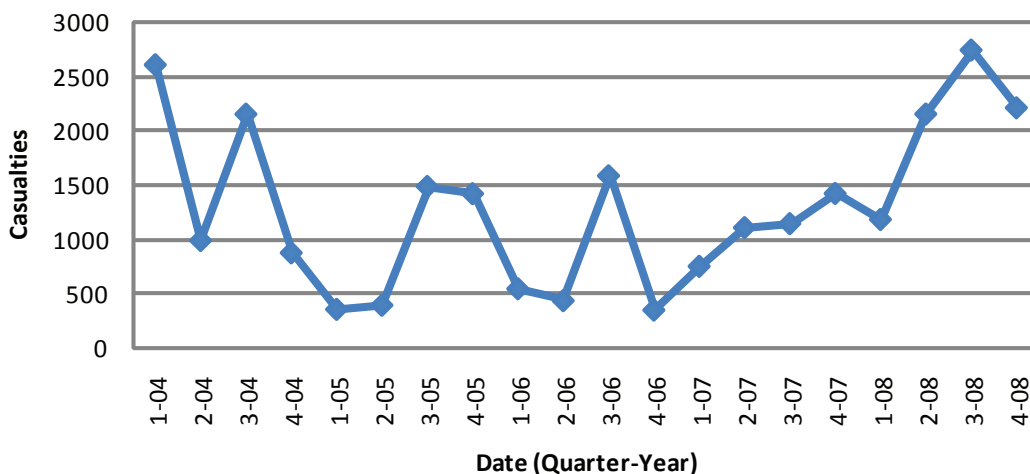
The increase in attacks by Islamist extremists in 2008 was dramatic. Outside of the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan and excluding attacks in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank, there were 670 attacks by Islamic extremist groups, with 214 alone occurring in the fourth quarter. This increase marks the fourth consecutive increase in annual

attacks (see Chart 1).

There is reason to believe that the NCTC was undercounting Islamist attacks in 2005 and 2006, but nevertheless, Islamist violence is at record levels, building on the previous highs of 2007, which in turn

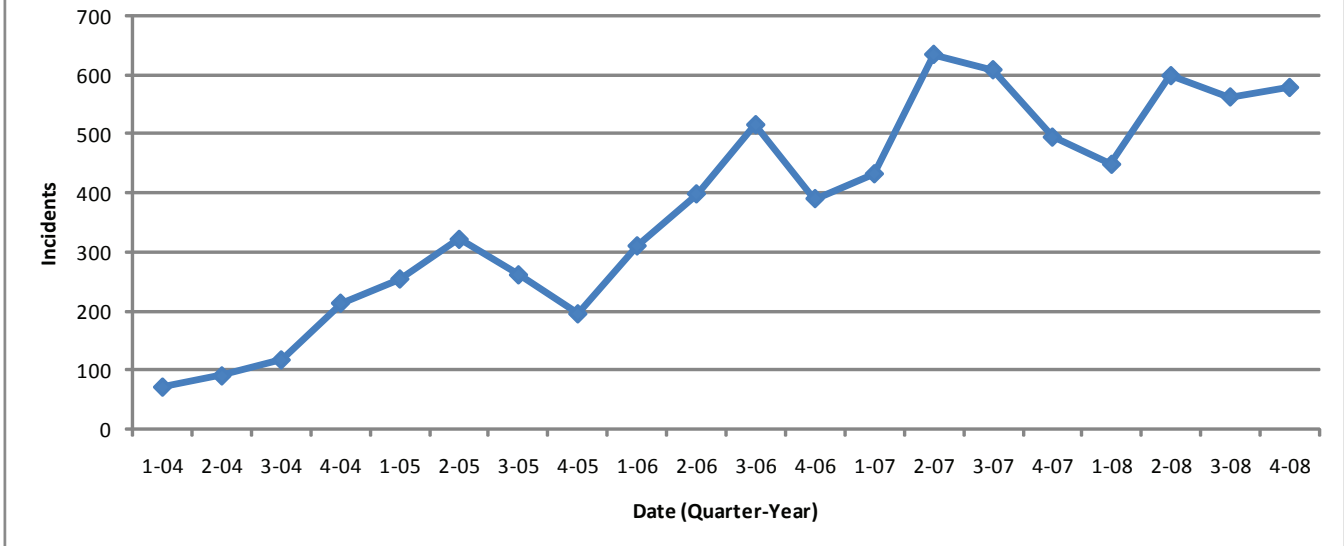
built on the record levels of 2006. Islamist terrorism around the world is conservatively ten times more common today than in the late 1990s.

Chart 2: Islamist Terrorism Casualties (excluding Afghanistan, Israel, and Iraq)



The number of casualties in any quarter varies dramatically due to what are essentially random variances

**Chart 3: All Incidents of Islamist Terrorism
(including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel)**



in the number of casualties that result from a handful of particularly devastating attacks. Our analysis shows no systematic variance in methods or targets that result in these larger-than-normal attacks. Nevertheless, we will continue to examine this issue in future reports since the pronounced variability of the 2004-06 period seems to have diminished, and at this juncture attacks are regularly producing 8-12 casualties each on average (in contrast in 2004-06 these figures ranged quarter to quarter from a low of 4.8 to 56.1) (see Chart 2).

Part of the dramatic increase in violence outside of Iraq may be paradoxically a function of improving conditions in Iraq. Most analysts believe that the flow of “foreign fighters” to Iraq has diminished, but the consequence may be that these would-be jihadists are now engaging in violence at home instead. That said, the increase in violence is not just a displacement effect. Islamist violence is increasing worldwide even when accounting for a generally improving situation in Iraq as Chart 3 demonstrates.

Aside from Pakistan, the most significant increases in Islamist violence occurred in Somalia, Russia, and the Philippines. Somalia continues its downward trajectory dating to the western-backed Ethiopian invasion of that country to remove the Islamist regime of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). There was little evidence to suggest that the ICU was interested in promoting global jihad, but the remnants of that movement have merged with preexisting, al-Qaeda affiliated groups, in the post-invasion environment. Our tendency to see all Islamist movements as an undifferentiated threat has encouraged precisely the outcome we hoped to avoid – namely, the establishment of a safe haven for violent radicals with connections to anti-American terrorists.

The situation in Russia is murkier, and it would be a mistake to assume that Islamist violence there is necessarily going to turn anti-American. However, the radicals from this region, particularly

the Chechens, have been very active in other hot spots around the world, notably recently in Iraq and Somalia. As a result, the continued growth of a reservoir of Islamist activity in the Caucasus is worrisome, even if it is currently focused on local grievances.

The upsurge of attacks in the Philippines is a disheartening consequence of the collapse of an autonomy agreement between the Philippine government and the rebels of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) due to a Supreme Court ruling that invalidated a designation of certain “ancestral” rights for the Moro.¹

Afghanistan and Pakistan

There is no good news to report from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Governmental weakness in both states has created opportunities for radical Islamist groups on both sides of the border. Terrorist attacks are up, but worse, territory controlled by the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban has also increased.

By some estimates, in Afghanistan, the Taliban now has a persistent presence in roughly 75% percent of the country up from 50% last year.² While this does not suggest that the Taliban *controls* these areas, the trendline of increasing Taliban activity is problematic.

In Pakistan, the government has been reduced to trying to negotiate another round of autonomy agreements (following the 2006 agreements in the FATA) in the hopes that some of the energy can be drained from the radical Islamist forces. As part of that initiative the Pakistani government has expressed its willingness to accede to demands for the imposition of Sharia law in the Swat Valley.³

Unfortunately, the Pakistani government is itself suspect, and it continues to maintain ties to anti-Indian Jihadist groups. As a practical matter, the Pakistani government is trying to walk a tightrope between reducing Islamist violence, maintaining political control, and continued support of forces that harass and pressure India. The terror attacks in Mumbai by Lashkar-e-Taiba – a Kashmir-focused jihadist group tacitly supported by the Pakistani government – highlight the dangers in Pakistan’s current policy.⁴

Obama and Public Attitudes in the Muslim World

In January of this year, polls suggested that Muslims were optimistic about the new Obama administration. During the Bush years issues such as the Iraq War, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo Bay damaged the image of the United States in the Muslim world. The good news is that the damage appears not to be irreparable. In the Palestinian Territories, 28% of people state they are more optimistic about solving the Arab-Israeli conflict after the Obama election.⁵ There was a significant rise in Muslims who predict that US relations with the rest of the world will improve. January polls in Egypt, Indonesia, and Turkey all had double digit increases from their September 2008 polls indicating that they thought US-Islamic world relations would be better under an Obama administration.⁶

Agree that it is Definitely/Probably US Goal to Weaken and Divide the Islamic World



Unfortunately, after Israel's war in Gaza, a January poll in the Palestinian territories showed an increase in popularity and overall level of trust for the Hamas movement.⁷ Polling data also indicates that there was an increase in Muslims in Egypt and Pakistan who believe that it is a US goal to weaken and divide the Islamic world (see Chart 4). While an overall decrease in support of al Qaeda attacks on Americans can be seen in Egypt, there was a disproportionate increase in the number of Egyptians who share al Qaeda's attitudes, while Pakistan saw a jump in both categories.⁸ The numbers also look gloomy in Afghanistan, where there was a significant decline in favorable opinion of the United States. Approval numbers have decreased from 83% in 2005 to 65% in 2007 to 47% in 2008. These BBC numbers correlate with an increase in the number of Afghans who believe that attacks on foreign forces can be justified. Unfortunately, only 21% of Afghans believe that an Obama presidency will make a positive difference in their country, compared to 16%, who think it will make it worse.⁹

The Global Financial Crisis

While most countries in the Muslim world – particularly in North Africa and the Middle East – have limited exposure to the current financial crisis in the developed world, we can expect a significant slow-down in economic growth in the region due to several trends. First, equity (and some real estate) markets in the region have suffered significant losses, creating a negative wealth effect, whereby individuals curtail spending because of declines in net worth irrespective of current income. Second, declining oil prices have reduced revenues for producers. Third, remittances from developing countries are likely to decline. Fourth, foreign direct investment will also decline. Finally, tourism from the developed world will decrease.

Nevertheless, these are largely indirect effects. The World Bank estimates that economic growth in North Africa and the Middle East will only decline from 5.8% in 2008 to 3.3% in 2009.¹⁰ The World Bank further estimates that 2010 growth will be 5.2% in 2010 assuming a relatively robust economic recovery in the developed world.¹¹ For a region that needs rapid growth to absorb a large pool of young men entering the workforce any downturn is dangerous. Nevertheless, at present North Africa and the Middle East seem well positioned to weather the financial storm.

Conclusions

The situation in regard to the “war on terror” remains tremendously fluid, with hard data lagging events on the ground. Over the next several months as we prepare a full update of our annual survey, we will continue to assess the impact of the global recession and financial crisis, trends in Muslim public attitudes towards the United States, and developments in South Asia. Ultimately, however, the explosive growth in Islamist violence in 2008 forces us to have a very pessimistic outlook on the struggle at the start of the Obama Administration.

Endnotes

- 1 “Govt drops precondition in peace talks with MILF.” *GMA News*. March 3, 2009, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/151581/Govt-drops-precondition-in-peace-talks-with-MILF>.
- 2 “Struggle for Kabul: The Taliban Advance.” *The International Council on Security and Development*, http://www.icosgroup.net/modules/reports/struggle_for_kabul.
- 3 The Associated Press. “Pakistan agrees to more Islamic rules in Swat.” *International Herald Tribune*, March 5, 2009, <http://www.ihrt.com/articles/ap/2009/03/05/asia/AS-Pakistan-Peace-Deal.php>.
- 4 Siddique, Abubakar. “Pakistan Attack Muddies Regional Cooperation.” *Radio Free Europe*. March 5, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Pakistan_Attack_Muddies_Regional_Antiterror_Cooperation_/1504913.html.
- 5 Jerusalem Media & Communications Center. “Press Release” January 31, 2009. http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2009/67_jan_english.pdf.
- 6 BBC World Service. “Growing Optimism That Obama Will Improve US Relations: Global Poll.” January 20, 2009. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/01_january/20/poll.shtml.
- 7 Jerusalem Media & Communications Center.
- 8 “Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies.” February 25, 2009. http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/591.php?nid=&id=&pnt=591.
- 9 “Global poll uncovers growing optimism that Obama will improve US relations.” *BBC*, January 20, 2009. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/01_january/20/poll.shtml.

10 “World Bank Updates Global Economic Forecasts.” The World Bank, March 31, 2009. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:22122200~menuPK:51062078~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.

11 “World Bank Medium-term outlook Global Economic Prospects 2009: Middle East and North Africa.” The World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/4S5G2WFTH0>.

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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