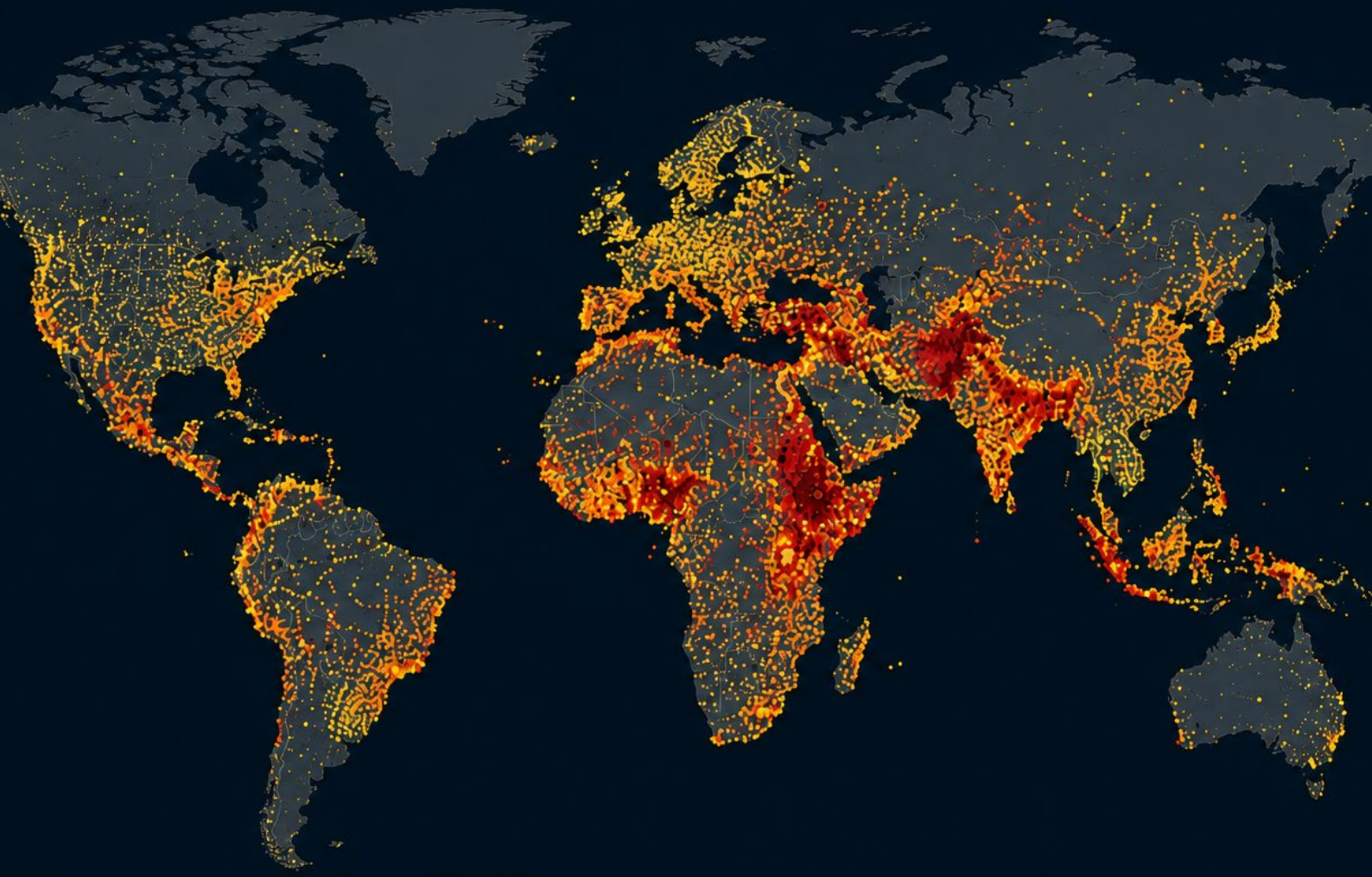
The Global Terrorism Data Deficit

The Inflation of "Terrorist" Threats and the Need for Better Data to Inform Proportionate Global Counter-Terrorism Policy

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Cover image: Heatmap generated by ChatGPT, based on terrorism incidents from 1970 to 2020 recorded by the Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland). The Special Rapporteur does not vouch for the accuracy of the map or the underlying data.

Special Rapporteur's website: https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-terrorism

Executive Summary

- There is no comprehensive, methodologically sound and reliable dataset on the global prevalence and severity of terrorist acts, groups and threats.

- Existing datasets produced by States, the United Nations, regional organizations, universities and private actors are out of date, geographically limited, and/or methodologically flawed.

- Quantitative statistical data on global terrorist threats, and qualitative analysis derived from it, has the potential to influence national, regional and international counter-terrorism policy responses, including assessments of the severity of the threat, the need for particular measures in response, and the allocation of funds and resources.

- Incomplete, unreliable and inflated data can distort counter-terrorism policy and funding decisions, including by justifying measures that are unnecessary or excessive relative to the actual terrorism threat level.

- One leading and influential dataset, the philanthropy-funded Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which is powered by raw data from a private risk analysis firm, Dragonfly Intelligence, inadvertently and grossly inflates the global terrorist threat by erroneously counting acts of non-State warfare (regular and irregular) that its own definition excludes.

- The GTI/Dragonfly definition of terrorism is not fully consistent with best practice international standards on definition, since its exclusion of warfare is not linked to international humanitarian law.

- States, the United Nations and policy makers should not rely upon the GTI until its methodological flaws are rectified, since doing so reinforces threat-inflation, may encourage unnecessary and disproportionate restrictions on human rights, and misleads the public.

- Good global data collection and analysis is impeded by the absence of a consensus international definition of terrorism.

- Best practice international standards on the definition of terrorism, which align with international community expectations, should be used as the basis for future global data threat collection and analysis efforts. The impediments to good data are political and financial, not technical.

- States should equally establish a "Global Counter-Terrorism Violations Index", to annually and systematically track which States violate which human rights while countering terrorism.

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A Introduction

No-one knows the true scale of global terrorist threats – despite the quantum investment in countering terrorism over a quarter century since the attacks of 9/11. There is no reliable global data set on contemporary or historical terrorist threats. The most comprehensive and influential attempt, by the annual Global Terrorism Index (GTI), is a useful resource but fails to apply its own terrorism definition and inadvertently – and grossly – inflates the statistics. The 5,582 deaths globally from terrorism that it recorded in 2025 would be a fraction of that number if it properly applied its definition. Terrorism is thus not as bad as it seems, which could also mean that some counter-terrorism measures adopted in response are excessive relative to the threat and that certain human rights trade-offs are objectively unjustified.

The current data deficit could result in skewed policy settings and misaligned funding priorities and undermine targeted and effective counter-terrorism responses. Good quality data could inform better quality counter-terrorism policy at the international, regional and national levels. Even if there were the funds and expertise available to collect global terrorism data, the more basic problem is that the lack of an international definition of terrorism precludes meaningfully counting the same acts as "terrorist" worldwide. Data collection is doomed to be subjective. Since the GTI's definition does not correspond with best practice international standards on definition – but is drawn from the insurance industry – even if it consistently applied its own definition, its statistics would be of limited usefulness for States, regional organizations and the United Nations in formulating global counter-terrorism policy. There is accordingly a need to collect global terrorism data based on best practice international standards on definition.

B The lack of reliable global terrorism data

The UN does not collect or publish any global data on terrorism, despite the General Assembly, Security Council and the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and its Coordination Compact (of 46 entities) urging States to counter terrorism worldwide. While the Security Council has directed all States to address all forms of terrorism, Security Council sanctions focus only on Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Da'esh) and their associates, and the Council does not directly monitor other terrorist threats. The Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team biannually analyses the threat from listed groups, records some incidents and often estimates the numbers of fighters, but does not systematically count attacks or casualties; its assessment is more qualitative. Some UN missions collect national data, such as the monitoring of civilian casualties in Somalia – for example, Al-Shabaab caused 6,586 civilian casualties in the seven years from 2017 to 2023 according to the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia, and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has collected similar statistics in Afghanistan. However, these focus neutrally on violence by categories of actor, such as armed groups, rather than applying any limiting "terrorism" category.

Those regional organizations who gather data on terrorist attacks in their regions, such as the European Union and African Union, use different definitions and thus count different things. The African Union recorded over 3,400 terrorist attacks in Africa in 2024, resulting in over 13,900 fatalities[1] – contrasting with the GTI's count of 7,555 for the whole world in that year.[2] The European Union counted only 6 deaths and 12 injuries from five jihadist attacks in 2023.[3] Many national authorities collect national data, but these too rely on diverse national definitions of terrorism that defy meaningful global statistical aggregation.

The United States appears to be the only State who produces global terrorism data. The US Department of State was legislatively tasked in 1987 with preparing annual Country Reports on Terrorism.[4] Its latest report, for 2023, covers only 85 countries, does not aggregate total global attacks and casualties, and has a special focus on threats to the US.

Global terrorism is measured unofficially by various actors. A number of well-known historic think tank and academic global databases are no longer maintained, including the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (1968 to 2009)[5] and the Global Terrorism Database (1970-2020) at the University of Maryland.[6] There are also some efforts at the regional level; the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies recorded 23,322 deaths in 2023 from "militant Islamist violence" in Africa, although violence against civilians comprised only 35% of incidents[7] and the predominant targets appears to have been State forces in armed conflict.

The GTI has been produced annually by the Institute for Economics & Peace since 2012 and is now in its 13th issue (entitled "2026", covering the year 2025).[8] It covers 163 countries with 99.7 per cent of the world's population. The GTI recorded 5,582 deaths from terrorism globally in 2025 and ranks countries by terrorism impact. In addition to the rankings, the GTI includes thoughtful analysis of trends and short essays by experts. The GTI is the most comprehensive and widely used source of contemporary global terrorism statistics. A key aim is "to help inform a positive, practical debate about the future of terrorism and the required policy responses".[9] It is a promising resource – but it needs to fundamentally fix its methodology. As discussed below, the data underpinning GTI's rankings does not follow the GTI's own definition of terrorism – particularly the exclusion of acts of warfare – and thus seriously inflates the number of incidents. It also does not apply best practice international standards on the definition of terrorism but uses an inappropriate insurance industry definition.

It is clear from this brief survey that the available data is inadequate, whether because it is too geographically limited, out of date, methodologically unsound, or over-inclusive. A key part of the problem is that different actors use different definitions to count "terrorism". None of these definitions is based on international legal standards or "soft law" guidance. Different definitions of terrorism are not necessarily problematic in academic settings, or where a particular definition is used in a single national or regional jurisdiction. But definitions underpinning global data sets that may influence policy makers and States worldwide can be problematic if they do not align with the expectations (legal or political) of the international actors who are implementing counter-terrorism measures. This is no fault of the data collectors, including companies or non-profit organizations, who are free to measure "terrorism" however they like and to sell it or promote it to whoever is willing to buy or use it. Rather, it is an error made by States and the UN to uncritically rely on data that does not correspond to best practice international normative standards or even States' own national definitions.

In addition to the problems of definition and applying definitions, different actors have also used different indicators and formulas to qualitatively gauge the threat of terrorism when assessing the quantitative data, such as by reference to: the number of attacks; deaths and injuries; methods of attack; plots failed or foiled; arrests and prosecutions; convictions and acquittals; administrative measures imposed; estimated members of a terrorist group; the number of terrorists killed and captured or who disengaged; the scale of terrorist financing; the prevalence of "violent extremism" (whatever that is supposed to mean); and so on. Fine-grained analysis is welcome, but an important methodological and policy question is what mix of quantitative indicators is most useful at the international level and for what purposes.

C Good data informs good counter-terrorism policy

At a foundational level, the absence of a global definition of terrorism constrains efforts to obtain a clear and actionable picture of the global threat of terrorism. The collection of quantitative data about the prevalence of terrorism can play an important role in informing the international community of the scale and nature of current and emerging threats, and in contextualising these relative to historical patterns. This in turn inevitably shapes perceptions, conscious and sub-conscious, about the significance and urgency of the threat among law enforcement and security professionals, policy makers, politicians, the UN, and the public. Seemingly data-driven perceptions can powerfully influence how countering terrorism is prioritized and funded relative to competing policy challenges, and what laws and measures may be considered necessary to respond to the perceived scale and nature of the threat.

The European Union, for instance, spent €559 million in 2023 to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism *outside* the EU,[10] not counting other security and development funding in terrorism-affected contexts. The US spent US$2.8 trillion on counter-terrorism (including military operations) from 2002-2017,[11] much of it outside the US; of this, US$12 billion was spent on foreign aid to 100 countries. The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) received almost $400 million through its Trust Fund from 2009-2025,[12] and now has ongoing funding for many regular budget posts. Many other UN organs (including the Security Council) and entities (such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Terrorism Prevention Branch and UN Development Programme) are deeply engaged in counter-terrorism.

Relationships between data and counter-terrorism responses are not scientifically causal in that X terrorist attacks in a year should not necessarily translate into X funds for counter-terrorism or X police or X new laws. Heavy investment in prevention may successfully dampen terrorist threats that are always latent. In the whole of the European Union, a bloc of 26 States with almost half a billion people, there were only 6 deaths and 12 injuries from five jihadist attacks in 2023.[13] That does not suggest that Europe should not worry about terrorism, although it may raise legitimate questions about whether European spending (internal and external) is proportionate to the threat. Good data is nonetheless a factor, among others, in the discourse shaping targeted and value-for-money counter-terrorism responses nationally and globally.

D The GTI and Dragonfly Intelligence

The GTI is attractively published and heavily promoted each year. The GTI asserts that it has "significantly influenced global narratives on … terrorism".[14] It has certainly made an impression. It has been cited in Security Council debates[15] and by the Deputy Secretary-General,[16] the leadership of the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)[17] and UNOCT,[18] and by UNODC, UNDP, the European Union,[19] the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum,[20] and my mandate as Special Rapporteur.[21] CTED and UNOCT hosted an event to discuss the GTI's findings in 2023.[22] The GTI has also been often cited by think tanks,[23] the media,[24] and in scholarship.

The GTI's publisher, the Institute for Economics & Peace, a philanthropy-funded think-tank based in Sydney, does not produce the GTI's raw data. The GTI essentially repackages data from a geopolitical and security intelligence company that advises businesses on security risks, Dragonfly Intelligence,[25] which is based in the United Kingdom, United States and Singapore.

In 2025 Dragonfly Intelligence was acquired by Dow Jones and operates as part of its Risk Insights service within its Risk & Compliance business. Dow Jones is a division of News Corp, a global media company.

Dragonfly Intelligence has maintained a "TerrorismTracker"[26] database since 2007, with over 70,000 entries. Entries are based on two corroborating pieces of open-source information, rather than independent fact-finding. Dragonfly states that it is updated daily by specialist research analysts "using a variety of tools and a highly defined methodology"; that every incident "undergoes rigorous scrutiny by senior specialists to maintain the highest standards of accuracy and reliability"; and that the process is "subject to robust quality control, avoiding the errors and inaccuracies inherent in automated data scraping".[27] Dragonfly points to industry-body praise through Chambers and Partners that its analysis is "typically highly nuanced, showing significant expertise and grounded in a robust methodology".[28] It also indicates that TerrorismTracker is "trusted by universities and academia globally" and is widely used by governments, militaries, law enforcement, businesses and insurers.

Since the acquisition of Dragonfly by Dow Jones, previously available public information about TerrorismTracker appears to no longer be accessible, including free non-commercial access, upon request, to recorded terrorism incidents. Until 2022, the GTI had used the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, which was publicly accessible online.

It is surprising that Dragonfly's TerrorismTracker data has attracted such praise and influence when a key aspect of its methodology appears to be broken: it consistently misapplies its stated definition of terrorism. The GTI then applies its own methodology to the TerrorismTracker data to rank countries by terrorism impact, using incidents, fatalities, injuries, and hostages weighted over five years.[29] But since the underlying data is unreliable, so too is GTI's analysis.

1 Dragonfly/GTI definition of terrorism

The GTI acknowledges that "[t]here is no single, internationally-accepted definition of what constitutes terrorism and terrorism literature abounds with competing definitions and typologies".[30] It endorses the definition of terrorism used by Dragonfly's TerrorismTracker, which is said to broadly align "with what is used in the insurance industry and other major jurisdictions", namely: "the systematic threat or use of violence, by non-State actors, whether for or in opposition to established authority, with the intention of communicating a political, religious or ideological message to a group larger than the victim group, by generating fear and so altering (or attempting to alter) the behaviour of the larger group".[31]

The definition thus mostly excludes State violence, although it could cover non-State violence "for… established authority", such as pro-government paramilitaries or civilian militias where they are not integrated into the State armed forces. It is focused on instrumental violence against "a group" larger than the victim group, which could include not only the population or elements of it, but also coercing governments or international organizations (as under the Terrorist Financing Convention of 1999 and Security Council resolution 1566), although legally these would not usually be considered "groups". It includes a requirement of a political, religious or ideological motive, which helpfully differentiates terrorism from private and profit-oriented crime. This is made express by the exclusion of "criminal violence orientated exclusively for profit, even if they emulate terrorist tactics such as car bombings and beheadings".

The definition further excludes "acts of warfare, either irregular or conventional" and "war crimes and acts of genocide".[32] Since State perpetrators are already excluded, the exclusion of "acts of warfare, either irregular or conventional" and "war crimes" necessarily covers the conduct of non-State armed groups in non-international armed conflicts (whether labelled as insurgents, rebels, terrorists or otherwise), whether compliant or not with international humanitarian law. This exclusion broadly corresponds with the exclusion clauses in six international counter-terrorism instruments since 1997, starting with the Terrorist Bombings Convention, that exclude the activities of armed forces in armed conflict, which are governed by international humanitarian law. Terrorism is thus considered mainly a "peacetime" crime.

Prior to the GTI 2022 (covering 2021), the GTI had used the different definition of the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland, namely "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-State actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation", where the act was "outside the precepts of international humanitarian law".[33] Around that time, updating of the Global Terrorism Database ceased, necessitating the switch. Thus, whereas the GTI now excludes acts of warfare altogether from being terrorism (including attacks on civilians that are contrary to humanitarian law), when previously using the Maryland definition it only excluded such acts if they complied with humanitarian law – thus broadening terrorism to include unlawful attacks on civilians in war. The GTI's data is thus not comparable between the periods when it used different definitions. The GTI noted that the new definition's "strict exclusion of acts of warfare" led, for example, to a significant drop in recorded terrorist incidents in Afghanistan in 2021-22.[34]

In excluding State violence altogether, even in peacetime, the TerrorismTracker definition (and similarly the definition of the earlier Global Terrorism Database), goes well beyond the many international counter-terrorism conventions, whose offences apply to conduct by "any person". The International Court of Justice has confirmed that such expression includes State officials[35] (subject to the law on State immunities from foreign jurisdiction). In contrast, the RAND Database captured terrorism regardless of the identity of the perpetrator,[36] while the US State Department takes a more limited approach by including only "clandestine agents".[37]

The exclusion of genocide from the Dragonfly/GTI definition is curious because there is no reason why certain acts committed with the genocidal intent to destroy a group could not also terrorize the group for a political, ideological or religious reason.

Before discussing whether the Dragonfly/GTI definition is useful for informing policy-makers, the next section shows how Dragonfly misapplies its own definition by including many acts of warfare that the definition supposedly excludes, thus grossly inflating deaths by "terrorism".

2 Misapplication of the definition

The critical flaw in the TerrorismTracker data is the failure to properly apply its own stated definition, resulting in arbitrary, unreliable and incoherent data collection and analysis. The definition excludes "acts of warfare, either irregular or conventional" and "war crimes". Yet, in practice the data frequently includes precisely such acts – namely, where non-State armed groups attack State military forces or civilians, or property, in armed conflict.

The GTI 2025 (covering 2024) starkly illustrates the problem, and other years reflect the same pattern. Of the "20 deadliest attacks" in 2024, all but two took place in armed conflicts; many involved military attacks by armed groups predominantly against State security forces,[38] with

some of them also harming civilians (but there is no analysis of proportionality under humanitarian law); most remaining incidents involved armed groups attacking civilians, with a nexus to the conflict;[39] and one incident involved combat between armed groups.[40] A similar pattern exists in the GTI 2024 (covering 2023), albeit with fighting between armed groups being more prominent.[41] In the GTI 2024 and 2025, the four deadliest terrorist groups, ISIL, Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, and al-Shabaab, were all primarily armed groups in conflict, although some (e.g. ISIL) also posed threats in other States.

Indeed, the GTI 2025 devotes an analytical section to "Conflict and Terrorism", noting that the 20 countries most impacted by terrorism in 2024 were experiencing conflict and that "[c]onflict has been the primary driver of terrorism since 2007", with 98 percent of all terrorism deaths between 2007 and 2024 (and 95 percent since 2015) occurring in conflict-affected countries.[42] The dissonance with their own definition is stark. For 2025, the GTI observed that only one percent of terrorism deaths occurred outside conflict-affected countries[43] – which suggests that almost all deaths counted by the GTI may be acts of warfare – not terrorism at all under their definition. One per cent of the 5,582 deaths it recorded in 2025 would give a grand global total of 56 terrorism deaths – a far cry from the numbers cited by States and UN officials. While some attacks in conflict-affected countries may have had no nexus to conflicts – different violent actors often co-exist under the cover of war – most cases appear to be conflict-related since the perpetrators are mainly armed groups. The GTI notes further that terrorist attacks in conflict-affected countries are deadlier than elsewhere, which is unsurprising when the data mistakenly counts non-State warfare as terrorism.

While the GTI suggests that insurgencies, paramilitaries and terrorist groups (such as ISIL and Boko Haram) may carry out both "conventional military attacks" and terrorist activity,[44] its confused methodology counts both of these as terrorism, contrary to its own definition, which emphasizes that "irregular" warfare is also excluded, just as it selectively did when it acknowledged reducing the statistics for Afghanistan after the change in definition in 2021. The GTI acknowledges that armed conflict is nine times deadlier than terrorism,[45] but in practice it does not meaningfully distinguish them. It over-inclusively counts many acts of warfare as terrorism, but it is unclear why it does do selectively and excludes other hostile acts.

Further, the data appears to count attacks on specific categories of civilian objects and infrastructure, but does not appear to exclude attacks on "dual use" civilian objects that qualify as military objectives and which could be lawful under international humanitarian law. Likewise, it does not appear to exclude proportionate, non-excessive collateral harm to civilians or civilian objects resulting from attacks on military objectives, which could also be lawful under humanitarian law. Since the data disaggregates attacks on government officials, police and civilians, it is further unclear whether officials and police are counted as "civilians" for humanitarian law purposes, or whether any police are regarded as integrated into armed forces and could thus be targetable under humanitarian law.

Dragonfly/GTI do not attempt to explain their selective approach by reference to any other limiting principles, such as by counting only acts of warfare by, for instance, groups listed under Security Council counter-terrorism sanctions (namely, Al-Qaida and ISIL and their associates). While that could be a pragmatic approach, it does not address the definitional problem. The Security Council lists groups not by applying any legal definition of terrorism, but by determining that they pose a threat to international peace and security in the exercise of its powers to maintain or restore peace and security under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Only Al-Qaida, ISIL and their associates have been so listed. The Council does not maintain a

universal list of all "terrorist" groups according to law, and its listing process is ultimately a discretionary political one that is circumscribed by "Permanent Five" geopolitics.

Separately, while the GTI includes hostage-taking as terrorism, it excludes "criminal violence orientated exclusively for profit", it is unclear whether the data collected covers kidnapping for ransom by terrorist groups, in a context where the GTI notes that terrorist groups commit kidnappings for revenue raising, political purposes and to gain strategic advantages or intelligence.[46] When the definition of terrorism changed in 2021, GTI noted that it no longer counts criminal activity by terrorist groups, such as bank robbing to raise funds, as it had previously under the Global Terrorism Database/University of Maryland definition.[47] In contrast, under international law, terrorist financing is precisely regarded as a terrorist offence. It is further unclear whether captured military personnel would be counted as terrorist hostage-taking, or not counted as instead being detention by armed groups in armed conflict.

3 The GTI's Myanmar controversy: Terrorists or rebels?

The incoherence of the data is well illustrated by the GTI's coverage of Myanmar. The GTI 2022 (covering 2021) had included Myanmar among the top ten terrorism-affected countries and observed a 2,071 per cent increase in terrorist attacks compared with 2020. Violent suppression of peaceful protests after a military coup in 2021 stimulated new armed resistance groups, adding to long-running armed conflicts involving ethnic groups.

Over 100 Myanmar experts wrote to the Institute of Economics & Peace in May 2022 to stridently object to the GTI's characterisation of resistance violence as terrorism, emphasizing that the GTI had included attacks on military targets (and possibly police integrated into the armed forces) – despite its own definition supposedly excluding them[48] – and that there was no evidence that resistance forces were terrorizing civilians. The experts were also concerned that the report excluded the worst "terrorist" attacks – those by State forces, such as the destruction of civilian settlements. They called on the Institute to retract or correct the report and apologize to "anti-junta forces" for wrongfully depicting their legitimate, lawful resistance.

In response, in May 2022 Myanmar was redacted completely from the GTI 2022, after acknowledging "the sensitive nature of the situation" and indicating that, as a non-partisan organisation, the Institute "did not intend to imply support for the junta".[49] It also undertook to reassess the situation in Myanmar for future publications.[50] It left unaddressed the definitional and methodological problems that led to the controversy.

By the following year, GTI 2023 (covering 2022) seems to have resumed business as usual, with attacks on "police and military" again being counted, terrorist attacks being reported as increasing since 2021, and Myanmar being ranked as the world's ninth most affected country. The report simply noted the context of "rebellion by democratically-elected government officials and ethnic-armed groups" against the 2021 military coup government and that the GTI does not include "State" terrorism, while noting evidence of State "repression and violence".

Myanmar remained ranked ninth in the GTI 2024 (covering 2023), despite a near-50 per cent decline in attacks, totalling 354 deaths.[51] Intriguingly, for that year the data appears to exclude attacks on the "military" completely, since it only lists as victims "government", "civilians", "police" and "other". This seems to be unprecedented since attacks on militaries are still listed for all other conflict-affected countries. This "Myanmar exception" appears to be a defensive response to advocacy pressure, not a principled correction of the GTI's methodological crisis.

Myanmar's "rebels" are, of course, not saints. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 124 reported targeted killings of civilians by armed groups in the first half of 2024, including of administrators, other civil servants, suspected military informants, and family members.[52] There were also allegations of attacks on civilian towns, sexual violence and forced recruitment.[53] The ethnicity-based "Arakan Army" in Rakhine state in particular has targeted Rohingya civilians. According to the Dragonfly/GTI definition, acts of warfare including war crimes should not be counted at all. Yet, as with alleged "State terrorism", the larger definitional question is whether violence in conflict should be addressed only as war crimes under international humanitarian law or also as terrorism, in Myanmar and elsewhere.

E Good data needs a consensus definition of terrorism

Even if Dragonfly/GTI correctly applied its methodology, the insurance-based definition used is not fit for the purpose of informing global counter-terrorism policy. It is too vaguely-worded and imprecise and does not correlate with best practice international standards. It is accordingly not suitable for informing the legal, operational and institutional counter-terrorism responses of States and the UN, which should be guided by a consensus-based international definition.

Of course, the lack of a binding international legal definition of terrorism remains a key obstacle to any effort towards collecting broadly acceptable global data on terrorism (and precedes separate questions about the reliability and comprehensiveness of data collection and analysis methods when applying a definition). There are nonetheless best practice international standards on definition that could be used as reference points for improving global data, including based on the international counter-terrorism instruments,[54] the political consensus definition in the General Assembly's Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism (1994), and the Security Council's working definition in resolution 1566 (2004).

1 The model definition of terrorism

Based on these authoritative sources, the revised model definition of terrorism advanced by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, in a 2026 report to the Human Rights Council, clearly identifies conduct that is genuinely terrorist in nature, precisely defines the elements to satisfy the principle of legal certainty, and ensures respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.[55] While its elements are certainly open to debate and contestation, the fundamental point is that global terrorism data should be based on some globally normative definition – not a private company's insurance industry one. The Special Rapporteur's model definition is as follows:

> 1. Any person commits a terrorist offence if that person, by any serious criminal act, intentionally causes death, serious bodily injury, or hostage-taking, where:
>
> (a) The purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is:
>
> (i) To provoke a state of terror in the public or a group of persons; or
>
> (ii) To unduly compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act;
>
> (b) The conduct is intended to advance a political or ideological purpose, which must be a substantial purpose; and
>
> (c) The conduct, given its nature or context, intentionally causes serious damage to a country or an international organization.

The Special Rapporteur's report explains and interprets in detail the elements of the definition. In brief, the model definition limits the physical conduct of terrorism to serious criminal acts that intentionally cause death or serious bodily injury, or involve hostage-taking, where committed for a specified terrorist purpose. This properly confines the stigma, exceptional powers, and heavy punishment of the terrorism category to the gravest threats to the right to life, security of person, and liberty. The model definition does not recommend including harm to property, infrastructure, information systems (including electronic and financial ones) and the environment as terrorism (although it recognizes that national definitions commonly cover some of these and thus proposes further model provisions to ensure respect for human rights). The model definition is thus sharper and narrower than the definitions used by Dragonfly/GTI, the Global Terrorism Database, and the RAND Database.

Since "any person" can commit terrorism, the model definition covers private individuals and State officials as perpetrators (subject to State immunities from foreign jurisdiction under international law). Conduct of equivalent moral culpability should be treated similarly regardless of the identity of the perpetrator, subject to the reasoned exceptions outlined below, including to recognize that States have a special legal status and that their use of violence is already subject to other international legal obligations that do not all apply to non-State actors.

The requirement of a political or ideological motive is inspired by the General Assembly's 1994 Declaration. It is also found in all of the efforts to collect global data on terrorism mentioned above, including by Dragonfly/GTI ("political, religious or ideological message"), the US State Department ("politically motivated"), the RAND Database ("political objective") and the wider Global Terrorism Database ("political, economic, religious, or social goal").

The Special Rapporteur's model definition contains certain exceptions to ensure the definition is not overbroad and does not infringe upon human rights or international humanitarian law:

> 2. A terrorist offence does not include:
>
> (a) An act of advocacy, protest, dissent or industrial action that does not intentionally cause death or serious bodily injury;
>
> (b) Conduct committed in armed conflict that does not violate international humanitarian law;
>
> (c) The provision of humanitarian activities by impartial humanitarian organizations in accordance with international humanitarian law;
>
> (d) The activities of State military forces in the exercise of their official duties, inasmuch as they are accordance with international law; and
>
> (e) An act intended to establish or re-establish democracy, constitutional Government or the rule of law, or to exercise or safeguard human rights.

2 Relationship between terrorism and armed conflict

Most relevantly, in relation to armed conflict, the model definition takes a middle path. It does not exclude all violence in armed conflict, recognizing that certain acts against civilians can have terrorist qualities even if they are already addressed by international humanitarian law. It does not exclude all activities by armed forces in armed conflict (as under recent international counter-terrorism instruments), since this prevents even deliberate attacks on civilians by armed forces from being treated as terrorism (in addition to applicable war crimes law).

Rather, it proposes a complementary approach, whereby conduct in armed conflict that does not violate humanitarian law is not terrorism, but violations of humanitarian law can constitute terrorism if they meet the definition. Thus, military attacks by non-State armed groups on military forces or objectives, while respecting rules on distinction and proportionality, would not be terrorism; nor would mere participation in hostilities or mere membership of armed groups. This approach also ensures that counter-terrorism law does not undermine incentives for the parties to comply with humanitarian law as well as prospects for peace-making and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

At the same time, the model definition would still treat as terrorism unlawful attacks on civilians, torture or summary execution of detained members of armed forces, or membership of armed groups that systematically commit terrorism and qualify as terrorist organizations (such as Al-Qaida or ISIL (Da'esh)). Such acts could be punished under both counter-terrorism and war crimes law, with the additional powers and liabilities under counter-terrorism law reinforcing the protection of civilians under humanitarian law.

Such approach is reflected in some progressive national laws,[56] as well as in the Terrorist Financing Convention, whose general definition of terrorism in article 2(1)(b) does not cover the killing of or serious injury to persons taking an active part in hostilities. Some of the other efforts to collect global data mentioned earlier take a similar approach: the legislative definition guiding the US State Department covers certain violence "perpetrated against noncombatant targets", albeit only by subnational groups and not also by State forces;[57] the RAND Database applies to terrorism directed against civilian targets;[58] and the revised Global Terrorism Database included only acts "outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law".[59]

The model definition takes an even-handed approach by treating both non-State and State violations of humanitarian law, where they meet the definition, as terrorism. In addition, conduct in a country affected by a non-international armed conflict which does not have a nexus to the conflict could still qualify as terrorism, as not being governed by humanitarian law and not falling within the scope of the exclusion clause.

F Conclusion

Inflated terrorism statistics make terrorist threats seem more dangerous than they really are and misdiagnose other forms of violence as terrorism. This in turn risks inducing the misapplication of counter-terrorism laws to other species of violence, as well as excessive responses relative to the true scale of genuine terrorist threats. In both cases, there is a serious risk of unnecessary and disproportionate restrictions on human rights resulting.

Terrorism is a serious challenge, but it must be put in proper perspective. It is much less significant than many other forms of violence and insecurity – not least external aggression or other violence, external and internal, by States, including on the pretext of countering terrorism: think of the many tens of thousands of civilians killed in the annihilation of Gaza after 2023, or the thousands killed in the illegal aggressive war against Iran in a space of few weeks in 2026. Even according to the latest GTI, in 2025 deaths by terrorism occurred in only 36 countries, and 70 percent of these were in five countries (Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo); as mentioned, most of these were conflict-related deaths – war not terrorism – and were often targeting soldiers not civilians.

States and the UN need much better data on global terrorism – and a common international definition underpinning it – to inform global counter-terrorism policy responses and resource mobilisation, including to substantiate any necessary human rights trade-offs. This includes when ranking terrorist threats alongside other security or public interest priorities – war, climate change, poverty and so on – which must all compete for limited and often dwindling resources and political attention, particularly multilaterally.

In an era of "big data" and artificial intelligence, the technical impediments to collecting good quality data on global terrorism threats are lower than ever, assuming a rigorous methodology is applied. As ever in the field of counter-terrorism, the real barriers are political: the failure to agree on and apply a common definition of terrorism, and to differentiate it from other violence.

Another dataset is also missing and would be equally, if not more, valuable: a "Global Counter-Terrorism Violations Index", to annually and systematically track which States violate which human rights while countering terrorism.[60] There is much source data available to power an index, including from State oversight and accountability mechanisms, UN human rights mechanisms, civil society and human rights defenders. Again, contemporary, validated data analytics would be capable of synthesizing the material into meaningful global rankings. To do so, States would need to make the resources available for greater human rights scrutiny of themselves – in the context of long-standing, systematic under-resourcing of human rights within the UN system, and recent reductions in funding making things worse.

Such rankings would constructively enable States, the UN and civil society to more sharply identify outliers in human rights, humanitarian law and refugee law compliance in counter-terrorism; to prioritize interventions including technical assistance, diplomatic protest and multilateral pressure, and retorsion and proportionate counter-measures (such as sanctions); and to ultimately raise the political costs in world awash with law-breaking.

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Endnotes

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[3] https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/TE-SAT%202024.pdf.
[4] 22 USC 2656f. See https://www.state.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-2/.
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[8] GTI 2026, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf.
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[11] https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/CT_Spending_Report_0.pdf.
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[19] https://ct-morse.eu/resource/global-terrorism-index-2024/.
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[23] E.g. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/sahel-now-accounts-43-global-terrorism-deaths.
[24] E.g. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/03/05/the-worlds-centre-of-terrorism-has-shifted-to-the-sahel.
[25] https://dragonflyintelligence.com/about-us/ (historic link). Until 2025 Dragonfly was part of the FiscalNote group of companies, including CQ, Dragonfly, Oxford Analytica, and VoterVoice: https://dragonflyintelligence.com/about-us/company-overview/ (historic link).
[26] https://dragonflyintelligence.com/intelligence/terrorismtracker/ (historic link); https://www.esri.com/en-us/arcgis-marketplace/listing/products/24f9f96b161748f58b84d32ca8f99a64 (historic link).
[27] https://dragonflyintelligence.com/intelligence/terrorismtracker/ (historic link).
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[29] https://www.visionofhumanity.org/understanding-the-global-terrorism-index-methodology/.
[30] GTI 2023, 6, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GTI-2023-web-170423.pdf.
[31] GTI 2023, 6.
[32] Other exclusions are for: violent anti-social behaviour; civil unrest; and isolated acts of violence by unbalanced individuals such as active shooter incidents, unless there is clear evidence the motives of the attack are consistent with the definition of terrorism.
[33] GTI 2020, 6, https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf.
[34] GTI 2022, 89, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-04112022.pdf.
[35] *Application of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Ukraine v. Russian Federation) (Preliminary Objections)*, 8 November 2019, para. 61 (concerning the Terrorist Financing Convention; the position is analogous under other international counter-terrorism conventions).
[36] https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents/about/definitions.html.
[37] 22 USC 2656f(d)(2).
[38] Incident numbers 1, 3, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17.
[39] Incident numbers 2, 6, 7, 10, 14, 18, 19, 41.
[40] Incident number 9.

[41] Of the 20 deadliest attacks, most involved attacks by armed groups on security forces (incident numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 20) or fighting between armed groups (numbers 8, 9, 16, 17, 19), while some attacks involved armed groups targeting civilians (numbers 4, 6, 7, 12, 13, 15, 18).
[42] GTI 2025, 34-35. See similarly GTI 2024, 2 and 33, https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf. However, the change in definitions used over that period means the data cannot be sensibly compared.
[43] GTI 2026, 4.
[44] GTI 2025, 35.
[45] GTI 2023, 3.
[46] GTI 2024, 57.
[47] GTI 2022, 89.
[48] https://teacircleoxford.com/letter/an-open-letter-to-the-institute-of-economics-and-peace/. See also Georg Bauer, "When Think-Tanks Get Terrorism Wrong: The IEP and Myanmar – Bad Definitions, Bad Data and Bad Understanding: How a Terrorism Report Grossly Misrepresented and Harmed the Revolution in Myanmar", 9DashLine, 30 May 2022, https://www.9dashline.com/article/when-think-tanks-get-terrorism-wrong-the-iep-and-myanmar.
[49] https://www.visionofhumanity.org/statement-regarding-myanmar-the-global-terrorism-index/.
[50] GTI 2022, inside cover page.
[51] Attacks reportedly decreased again in GTI 2025 (for 2024), with Myanmar slipping to 11th place, and to 14th place in GTI 2026 (for 2025).
[52] A/HRC/57/56, para. 15.
[53] Ibid, paras. 15 and 20.
[54] See https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2_en.xml.
[55] A/HRC/61/52, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc6152-defining-terrorism-respect-and-protect-human-rights.
[56] E.g. Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Switzerland.
[57] 22 USC 2656f(d)(2).
[58] https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents/about/definitions.html.
[59] https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/using-gtd/.
[60] As proposed by Poorvika Mehra of Charity & Security Network.

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