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How Islamist Extremists Target Civilians

CO-EXISTENCE

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The Global Extremism Monitor (GEM) in 2017 recorded 6,310 civilian deaths deliberately caused by 47 violent Islamist militant groups in 1,510 attacks across 28 countries. In a manifestation of a brutal and warped ideology, these militant groups used calculated violence with varying objectives to target areas where members of the public can be reached and harmed. Using various statistical measures, the GEM has revealed significant differences between violent Islamist extremist groups operating in today's fiercest conflicts.

This chapter focuses on the violence administered by the most organised and distinct violent Islamist organisations. The violence used by these groups is widespread and not confined to militarised spaces. The patterns of their behaviour suggest a conscious effort to use civilian casualties to further their objectives. In conflict zones, the line between a perceived enemy state and that state's general public is easily blurred through a group's ideological rationale, which is often binary and reduced to 'us and them'. Although militant groups also cause civilian fatalities when targeting security forces, the focus here is on violence in which civilians were the intended targets.

Soft-target attacks, such as on schools, shopping centres and recreational spaces, can appear senseless and chaotic, designed to merely spread fear and maximise damage. The GEM has confirmed that this violence is inherent to many Islamist militant organisations. However, by dissecting this brutality, our analysis has revealed distinctions in the systematic killing of unarmed civilians and the targeting of vulnerable institutions. By recognising both the scale of this terror and the differences in nuance between the perpetrators, front-line responders can better counter this violence.

The GEM analysis has identified the primary victims of Islamist extremist groups. Islamist militant violence overwhelmingly affects Muslim civilians. By monitoring and disaggregating the activities of each group, the GEM also shows that these organisations have complex sectarian and religious prejudices, which shape groups' use of violence in public spaces.¹

¹ For background on sectarian language in jihadi propaganda, see Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford and Peter Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda*, Tony Blair Institute for Global

Identifying the differences between soft targets offers an insight into groups' varying agendas. The GEM has categorised each incident based on the intended victim or victims, drawing out specific characteristics when possible. Recording violence at this level of detail helps increase understanding of the different motivations of each organisation. The GEM has analysed attacks on government buildings and staff. Although such spaces are typically better protected than public spaces, the GEM regards them as soft targets, because a group's targeting of them is typically more symbolic than operationally critical.

Change, 6 October 2015, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/inside-jihadi-mind-understanding-ideology-and-propaganda>.

This third part of the Global Extremism Monitor 2017 focuses on violent Islamist extremist groups that purposely target civilians. The monitor recorded 6,310 civilian deaths deliberately caused by 47 groups. Access the full Global Extremism Monitor 2017 here (<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/collections/global-extremism-monitor>).

EXTREMIST GROUPS AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

EXTREMIST GROUPS AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

The GEM reveals the extent and intensity of violence caused by Islamist extremist groups and the direct impact this had on civilians and public spaces in 2017. On average, approximately 17 civilians were killed each day by the actions of Islamist militant groups across the world. GEM data show that these efforts were often the direct result of coordinated campaigns against civilians and public spaces.

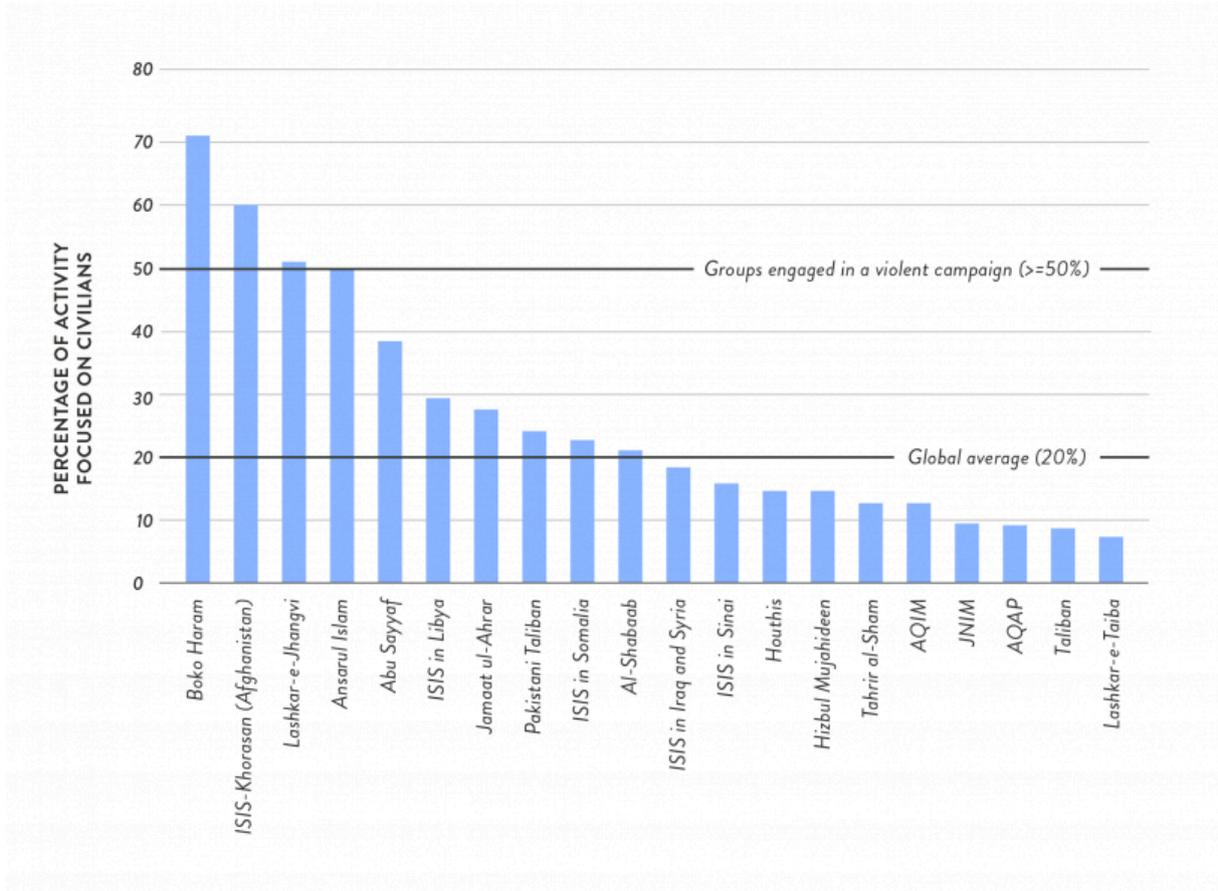
While these groups were the cause of most violence against soft targets, there are important distinctions in their methods and justifications for killing civilians. Sectarian, political and social hatreds determine the degree of a group's campaign against the

public. Similarly, access to resources and financial capacity can affect the efficacy of a group's violence towards civilians. However, all of these groups espouse a hard-line narrative, drawing on an extreme interpretation of Islam that permits the targeting of civilians in battle.

GROUPS ENGAGED IN CAMPAIGNS AGAINST CIVILIANS

Of the 92 extremist groups that perpetrated violence in 2017, the GEM identified four that were engaged in targeted campaigns against civilians—defined as campaigns in which groups focused at least 50 per cent of their violent activity on soft targets and carried out at least 15 attacks. These groups were Boko Haram in Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger; ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan; Ansarul Islam in Mali and Burkina Faso; and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan (see figure 3.1). Other militant organisations, such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, ISIS in Sinai and al-Shabaab, killed scores of civilians but dedicated a greater proportion of their activity to attacking armed forces.

Figure 3.1: Groups Engaged in Campaigns Against Civilians, 2017



The geographical spread of these civilian-focused campaigns shows that the systematic selection of soft targets is not limited to one militant group. Operational strategies that focus on killing civilians exist in various forms in numerous contexts globally, each with a different degree of severity.

Boko Haram

Of all groups, Boko Haram directed the greatest proportion of its attacks against civilian targets, focusing at least 71 per cent of its assaults on the public space. Despite the Nigerian army repeatedly declaring Boko Haram to be “militarily defeated”, the GEM recorded that the group killed on average two civilians per day in 2017.² Boko Haram’s prioritisation of soft targets affirms that it is engaged in a campaign against civilians.

² “Boko Haram Has Been Completely Defeated – Nigerian Army”, Channels Television, 4 February 2018, <https://www.channelstv.com/2018/02/04/boko-haram-has-been-completely-defeated-nigerian-army/>.

Although Boko Haram remains largely a Nigeria-based group, it is driven by an expansionist agenda that encourages attacks beyond the country's borders. This is both a product of the ISIS affiliate's ideological drive to spread its creed and a response to military operations against it. Nearly one-third of Boko Haram's attacks in Nigeria in 2017 occurred in Maiduguri, the provincial capital and most populous city of Borno state and the heart of the group's insurgency. GEM data also recorded Boko Haram attacks on civilian targets in neighbouring Cameroon and Niger, resulting in 217 fatalities. At least 79 per cent of all Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon were aimed at civilians. Boko Haram has historically increased its violence against civilians and expanded its geographical reach after increased military pressure.³ The violence in neighbouring countries allows Boko Haram to demonstrate its ability to remain a threat despite losing ground in Nigeria.⁴

In 2017, Boko Haram's attention on civilians had a demonstrable relationship with state counter-efforts. In the first quarter of the year, the group launched on average 18 attacks against civilians per month. In March, a dramatic increase in security operations against the group led to a proliferation of Boko Haram violence against civilians. Subsequently, incidents against civilians rose to an average of 29 per month. The UN has acknowledged that while military efforts against Boko Haram have diminished elements of its operations, the group has changed its tactics and is increasingly focusing on civilians.⁵

This trend suggests that Boko Haram's reduced capacity to target security forces creates a need for the group to consolidate its status by concentrating on attacks in the public space. It also points to the challenges of countering terrorist violence. The 121 extremist

3 Caitriona Dowd and Adam Drury, "Marginalisation, insurgency and civilian insecurity: Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army", *Peacebuilding* (2017): 145–146.

4 Anastasia Voronkova, "Boko Haram's cross-border attacks: tactical manoeuvring to mitigate weakness", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2017-adeb/july-eb75/boko-haram-cross-border-attacks-3066>.

5 "Peacebuilding efforts needed to tackle Boko Haram, end Lake Chad Basin crisis, Security Council told", *UN News*, 13 September 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564862-peacebuilding-efforts-needed-tackle-boko-haram-end-lake-chad-basin-crisis>.

groups captured by the GEM fall under a broad umbrella of Islamist extremist ideology. This ideology varies across a spectrum: different groups employ different tactics, justified by a variety of interpretations of Islamic law. Policy responses have to be mindful of these ideological nuances to counter the violence.

ISIS-Khorasan

ISIS-Khorasan also employed a methodical violent campaign against public targets in Afghanistan, directing 60 per cent of its attacks at civilians. The group's violence in the country draws on a highly sectarian agenda that led to the killing of 238 people in 2017 in attacks on exclusively Shia Hazara sites.⁶ While the group has been entrenched in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, 15 attacks killed 197 civilians in the state capital, Kabul, highlighting the group's attempts to instil fear in the people of Afghanistan and undermine local government efforts to rehabilitate the city.

Ansarul Islam and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi

Ansarul Islam's targeting of civilians accounted for half of the group's activity and 20 deaths in 2017. The majority of Ansarul Islam's assaults occurred in northern Burkina Faso, where the group has taken advantage of a weak security apparatus and instability caused by conflict in neighbouring Mali. Ansarul Islam, which is linked to al-Qaeda-led jihadi alliance Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), is attempting to remove Western influence from the region as well as targeting local security forces.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan focused over half of its activity on civilians in 2017, carrying out eight attacks that deliberately targeted civilians and killing 37 people. The group is motivated by a sectarian ideology that is manifested in violence against Shia Muslims in Pakistan.

DEADLIEST GROUPS

The scale of Islamist violence directed against the public in 2017 means it is necessary to look not only at those groups that focused the highest proportion of their violence on civilians but also at

⁶ See also El-Badawy, Comerford and Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*.

those that killed the most civilians overall. Exploring these violent Islamist organisations sheds light on the most prolific killers and illustrates the breadth and diversity of the problem. It is clear from the GEM analysis that those groups that most often target civilians, as above, are not typically the same groups that have the most devastating impact on civilian life globally.

ISIS in Iraq and Syria

ISIS in Iraq and Syria was the most devastating killer of civilians recorded by the GEM in 2017, using its brutality to intentionally kill more than 2,080 people in attacks specifically targeted at civilians. This violence was split roughly 3:1 between the two countries, with 1,553 deaths in Iraq and 492 in Syria. Eight of these deliberate civilian deaths were in incidents in Lebanon and Jordan.

Out of ISIS's total of 1,236 attacks in Iraq against a range of targets throughout 2017, the group launched an average of 35 attacks per month deliberately targeting civilians. In Syria, meanwhile, the group launched an average of seven attacks per month against civilians. Since 2014, ISIS in Iraq and Syria has conducted a vicious and calculated campaign against many of the people living in its so-called caliphate. The group's persistent use of cruelty and violence has been well documented and publicised.⁷

In Syria, ISIS focused its intentional targeting of the public on three provinces: Deir ez-Zor, Homs and Raqqa. This violence constituted just 5 per cent of ISIS activity in 2017, as the group prioritised engaging with military and other armed actors. However, ISIS did deliberately kill civilians in Syria who attempted to leave its territory. The group targeted refugees in six attacks, killing on average 36 civilians per assault, which is nearly ten times more than in its other attacks on civilians. ISIS ensured high casualty figures in Syria to instil fear in people and discourage them from fleeing.

In Iraq, ISIS also focused on intentionally killing those seeking sanctuary outside its crumbling so-called caliphate. ISIS killed at least 609 civilians in 2017 in attacks on soft targets in Mosul; 80 per cent of these victims were targeted while attempting to flee the city. At least half of these deaths occurred between May and

⁷ See, for example, *If the Castle Falls*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

August, coinciding with advances of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and of the Iraqi army.

The characteristics of ISIS's campaign against the Iraqi public in 2017 indicated the changing nature of the conflict. Through its violence, ISIS sought to fortify control over its territory and publicise its ideological resolve. The scale of the attacks on escaping civilians ensured that ISIS remained a danger to the Iraqi people, undeterred by encroaching military forces. In September 2017, Iraqi authorities reported that more than 1 million people from northern Iraq had sought refuge due to the conflict.⁸

ISIS's activities against civilians in Iraq were not confined to the northern conflict zones. In Baghdad, attacks in public spaces occurred on average once every two days, making the city the world's deadliest capital for Islamist extremist attacks on civilians. ISIS engaged in a sustained assault on public life in the capital in a possible attempt to undermine reports that military forces were increasing control and weakening the group. The high incidence of attacks on Baghdad also reveals a coordinated tactic that was intended to divert state resources from Mosul, preserve the group's image and undermine the Iraqi government.

ISIS's violence against civilians in Iraq was comparable with Boko Haram's public-space attacks in West Africa. Each group killed over 1,000 civilians in more than 300 incidents over 2017. However, Boko Haram's incidents made up most of its overall violence, whereas attacks on Iraqi civilians constituted less than half (34 per cent) of ISIS's overall violent activity, indicating that Boko Haram is proportionally more lethal towards civilians than ISIS. By contrast, Boko Haram directed only 20 per cent of its violence towards security targets, while over two-thirds of ISIS's activity in Iraq focused on the armed forces.

This unequal distribution of civilian-targeted operations suggests that ISIS was operating in Iraq on a different scale and with a different strength from Boko Haram. Despite being locked in a territorial battle with a coalition of military forces, ISIS was still capable of deliberately killing more civilians than any other single

⁸ Mohamed Mostafa, "Mosul, Iraq: 1.74 million refugees in 11 months of war", Iraqi News, 21 September 2017, <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/iraq-records-1-74-mln-refugees-11-months-war/>.

extremist group. Boko Haram, which lost its territorial strongholds in 2016 when the Nigerian army removed the group from the Sambisa Forest, continued an opportunistic campaign against soft targets.⁹ This had devastating consequences on the public space and consumed the majority of the group's capacity.

Other Groups

In Somalia, al-Shabaab's attitude to soft targets was different from that of Boko Haram or ISIS. Al-Shabaab prioritised military or hard targets over civilian or soft targets, with just 19 per cent of its assaults intentionally targeting civilians in 2017. Al-Qaeda helps fund and train al-Shabaab and espouses a military-focused violent agenda, calling on its affiliates to limit their attacks on Muslim civilians. However, the group remained a deadly force in the public space, killing 940 people, making it one of the four highest contributors to civilian fatalities.

Similarly, although the Taliban in Afghanistan focused 91 per cent of its attacks on armed targets, the group also deliberately killed over 267 civilians, demonstrating the extent of its terror. Primarily, the group has been associated with nationalistic goals to govern Afghanistan, attempting to reinstate the strict sharia leadership it held until 2001.

ISIS in Sinai, one of the group's Egyptian branches, claims to be fighting security forces. Yet despite focusing most of its violence on the police and military, its soft-target attacks were in fact deadlier. The group killed 415 civilians in 33 deliberate assaults targeting civilians in 2017. ISIS in Sinai killed the most civilians per targeted attack, claiming on average 12 lives per assault. While the group does not prioritise killing civilians, ISIS in Sinai was suspected of a large-scale sectarian attack in November that killed over 300 people, amplifying the number of fatalities per assault.

The GEM data gave insight into the varying priorities of Islamist extremist groups. Boko Haram, ISIS in Afghanistan and other groups have strategies that require the sustained, deliberate killing of

⁹ "Boko Haram ousted from last remaining stronghold in the Sambisa forest, says Nigerian president", Telegraph, 24 December 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/24/boko-haram-ousted-last-remaining-stronghold-sambisa-forest-says/>.

civilians, as shown by GEM data. These groups are committed to targeting the public space for ideological and strategic purposes. Other groups are less resolved to making soft targets the cornerstone of their violence. Al-Shabaab and the Taliban, for example, focus on confronting security forces, but this does not stop them from killing scores of civilians when it suits their goals.

CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

Beyond violence, extremist groups are strategic about the propaganda and messaging surrounding assaults on civilians. Militant groups have condemned attacks in the public space that were carried out by other groups. By exploiting and sympathising with public outrage, extremist groups attempt to position themselves as authoritative leaders in the Islamist landscape. Islamist militant groups are aware of the consequences of violence against civilians, including when attacks may hinder their goals and capacity to appeal to the public. Groups have become adept at tailoring their messaging and communication after an assault to control a narrative and promote their desired reputation.

After the deadly sectarian assault on a Sufi mosque in Egypt in November 2017, several extremist groups condemned the suspected ISIS in Sinai perpetrators. Jund al-Sham described the incident as “a great sin and transgression to violate the sanctities of Muslims”, and Ansar al-Islam vowed to take revenge on the “transgressors who spilled the blood of the worshipers in a house of Allah”.¹⁰

ISIS in Sinai, which was believed to have carried out the attack, did not claim responsibility. Other groups also avoided claiming assaults that killed many civilians. Al-Shabaab did not take responsibility for an October assault it was suspected to have conducted in Mogadishu, killing 587 people. The bombing targeted a government building but exploded near a fuel tanker, causing massive destruction. Al-Shabaab was unlikely to have anticipated the scale of the attack and subsequent swell of public anger.

¹⁰ Tim Lister, “Why the massacre of Muslims in Sinai was too extreme for al Qaeda”, CNN, 28 November 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/27/middleeast/egypt-sinai-attack-isis-al-qaeda/index.html>.

Similarly, reports blamed the Taliban for killing 35 civilians in July during an attack on a hospital in Afghanistan's Ghor district. The Afghan group denied that the assault had targeted patients, claiming it engaged in crossfire with the military.¹¹

Conversely, ISIS quickly claimed responsibility for an attack in the US city of Las Vegas that killed 58 people in October. The group called the perpetrator a "soldier of the caliphate" who had answered calls to "target the states of the Crusader alliance".¹² Further investigation did not establish an explicit link between the assailant and the Islamist extremist group. ISIS opportunistically took responsibility for the deadly assault against civilians to bolster its propaganda and apparent capabilities.

11 "Dozens Killed In Taliban Suicide Car Bombing In Kabul", RadioFreeEurope Radio Liberty, 21 July 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-kabul-car-bomb-death-toll/28634452.html>.

12 Lizzie Dearden, "Stephen Paddock: Isis insists Las Vegas shooter was 'soldier of caliphate' as authorities probe gunman's motive", Independent, 6 October 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/isis-vegas-shooting-stephen-paddock-repeat-claim-islamic-state-responsibility-police-gunman-motive-a7986161.html>.

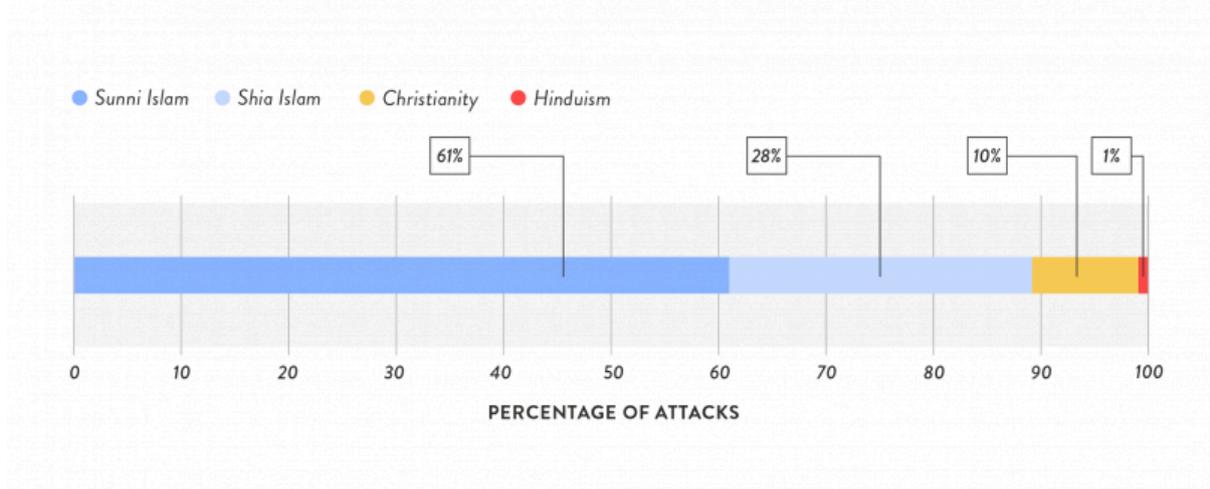
PROMINENT VICTIMS

The GEM has analysed demographic information relating to the victims of Islamist violence in 2017. This analysis reveals notable trends about the targeting of Sunni Muslims, the salience of sectarianism and the prominence of violence against Christians.

SUNNI MUSLIMS AS PRIMARY VICTIMS

The clear majority of attacks perpetrated by violent Islamist extremist groups in 2017 deliberately targeted Sunni Muslim civilians. Nearly two-thirds of all attacks in the public space occurred in states with Sunni Muslim majorities, according to the GEM (see figure 3.2). Attacks in countries where Islam, Christianity or Hinduism is not the majority religion accounted for less than 1 per cent of the total. Extremist organisations that adhere to a warped interpretation of Sunni Islam consistently targeted and killed Sunni Muslims within their reach, despite Islamic scripture prohibiting Muslims from killing other Muslims.

Figure 3.2: Religious Majorities of Countries Affected by Attacks Against Civilians, 2017



While it is not possible to verify the religion—or irreligion—of each civilian targeted, the GEM has deduced prominent demographic trends from the incidents tracked. Due to the scale of the violence in Sunni-majority states, the monitor was able to ascertain the likely religious affiliations of the victims in these states. Recognising the demographic make-up of the primary

victims of Islamist extremist groups helps ensure that counter-narratives robustly and effectively challenge these groups' claims.

Extremist groups have long justified and encouraged the killing of non-Sunni Muslims, whom they see as infidels, drawing on sectarian divides and conflict stretching back hundreds of years. However, the fact that Sunni Muslims were the principal victims of violent Islamist groups shows that the deliberate killing of Muslims goes beyond sectarian attacks.

Violent extremist organisations have claimed that the collateral killing of Sunni Muslims is acceptable because such victims will be welcomed into heaven as martyrs. Yet, these groups also use a perverse ideology to condone the direct, deliberate killing of Sunni Muslims. The perpetrators of this violence have manipulated the disputed Islamic concept of takfir, which refers to the act of one Muslim declaring another to be a non-believer, to legitimise murder. Islamist extremist groups exploit their misunderstanding of the term to justify violence against Muslims deemed apostates. It is because of this perversion of Islamic theology that Sunni Muslims disproportionately bore the brunt of Islamist extremist violence in 2017.

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

Sectarian violence killed scores of civilians in 2017 across the world. Extremist groups exploited and exacerbated historical and doctrinal divides to undermine efforts at social cohesion in otherwise pluralistic and diverse societies.

Islamist extremist groups directly targeted minority religious sects in six countries in 2017, killing 1,161 civilians. Nine groups perpetrated sectarian attacks against civilians; the biggest contributors were ISIS in Iraq and Syria, ISIS-Khorasan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami and Jamaat ul-Ahrar. Attacks against minority sects are not carried out exclusively by militant organisations, but these groups proved their ability to deliver sectarian campaigns. The scale and spread of these groups demonstrates the devastating effects of a destructive ideology that exploits historical splits within and between Muslim communities.

Ninety-five per cent of sectarian violence in 2017 focused on Shia Muslims. The GEM also monitored five communities targeted by Islamist extremist groups: Ahmadis, Alawites, Hazaras, Ibadis and Sufis. The countries most affected by sectarian-inspired assaults were Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. But sectarian violence was not confined to these countries, and the most deadly incident occurred in Egypt in November, when 40 suspected ISIS gunmen killed 311 people at a Sufi mosque.

Sectarian attacks in 2017 killed an average of 15 civilians per incident. Nearly 30 per cent were suicide attacks, indicating an intention to kill larger numbers of civilians in crowds and gatherings. Violent Islamist extremist groups design sectarian violence not only to terrify minority communities but also to eradicate them.

Pakistan

Pakistan experienced intense and diverse sectarian violence in 2017. Reflecting the multifaceted nature of sectarianism in the country, numerous Islamic sects were targeted. The GEM found that 247 civilians were killed in sectarian violence perpetrated by four distinct groups. Attacks on minority sects have historically plagued the region, and perpetrators have not been confined to terrorist militant organisations. Extremist groups have orchestrated deliberate, sustained campaigns in a society entrenched in an ongoing violent sectarian context.

The Shia community was the most frequently targeted Islamic sect in Pakistan in 2017. Anti-Shia violence killed 136 people during the year. Jamaat ul-Ahrar, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Pakistani Taliban all launched attacks on Shia Muslims, who account for 15–20 per cent of Pakistan’s Muslim population.¹³ These extremist groups justify the killing of Shia civilians by classifying them as apostates. A member of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi stated that the group intended to “get rid of Shias” in Pakistan.¹⁴

13 Uzair Hasan Rizvi, “The Rising Threat Against Shia Muslims in Pakistan”, Wire, 11 June 2016, <https://thewire.in/41862/the-rising-threat-against-shia-muslims-in-pakistan/>.

14 Michael Georgy, “Special Report: Pakistan’s threat within the Sunni-Shia divide”, Reuters, 24 October 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-militants/special-report-pakistans-threat-within-the-sunni-shia-divide-idUSBRE89N00W20121024>.

In Balochistan province, violent Islamist extremist groups targeted and killed Hazaras, an ethnic group that mostly follows the Shia branch of Islam. This minority community has suffered the violent manifestation of an ideology that drives and feeds off local sectarian divides. In 2017, suspected Islamist militants killed seven Hazara civilians and injured eight more in three separate attacks. In an open letter to the Hazara people, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi said that “all Shias are worthy of killing, and the intention is to make Pakistan their graveyard”.¹⁵

Ahmadi civilians were also targeted in brutal sectarian violence in 2017. In the Punjab region of Pakistan, Islamist militant groups assassinated three Ahmadi professionals. In March, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi said it killed an Ahmadi lawyer for “spreading Ahmadi beliefs in the region”.¹⁶ Ahmadiis have long been oppressed globally due to beliefs that contradict mainstream Islamic sects and because extremist groups in Pakistan exploit and inflame anti-Ahmadi attitudes in the country.¹⁷

The GEM also recorded ISIS-Khorasan activity in Pakistan. The group focused its sectarian violence in Pakistan on attacking Sufi sites. In February 2017, ISIS-Khorasan killed 90 people in a suicide attack on a Sufi shrine in Quetta. Although Sufism is not a distinct sect, ISIS views this Islamic strain as idolatrous because of its interpretation of Islamic scripture and the addition of rituals rooted in mysticism. The group therefore seeks to suppress and eradicate support for Sufism through intimidation.

ISIS-Khorasan has previously formed allegiances in Pakistan with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami, and the two have conducted joint attacks on Sufi communities. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami has confirmed its joint efforts with ISIS, saying in 2016, “Wherever there are attacks taking place [in Pakistan] Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami is cooperating with [ISIS] either directly or indirectly.”¹⁸ Such an

15 Rizvi, “The Rising Threat Against Shia Muslims in Pakistan”.

16 Dawn Report, “Ahmadi lawyer killed in ‘Lej attack’”, Dawn, 31 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1323873>.

17 Usman Ahmad, “Ahmadi Persecution, A Global Issue”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 21 June 2017, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/ahmadi-persecution-global-issue>.

18 Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, “An Alliance Between Islamic State and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan Was Inevitable”, Diplomat, 15 November 2016,

environment creates the potential for cross-fertilisation between highly sectarian groups and factions, with the possibility of increased violence.

Afghanistan

ISIS-Khorasan's sectarian violence has not occurred only in Pakistan. The group's Afghan branch killed 238 civilians in sectarian-fuelled assaults. The GEM found that 26 per cent of its attacks against public targets in Afghanistan in 2017 were sectarian, exclusively targeting Shia Muslims and Hazara communities.

ISIS-Khorasan was involved in all of Afghanistan's sectarian violence in 2017, although in a rare case in August, alleged Taliban and local ISIS fighters killed at least 55 people from a Hazara-majority Shia village in Sar-e Pol province.¹⁹ This was the only sectarian attack linked to the Taliban in 2017, although the group denied involvement in the assault. This incident took place over three days and included brutal violence and hostage taking. The prolonged nature of the assault was an atypical example of sectarian violence in Afghanistan, and the apparent alliance between the two groups was an anomaly.

Iraq

ISIS's sectarian agenda can be traced back to its origins in Iraq. The group has exploited entrenched tensions in Iraq between Sunni and Shia communities to inflame unrest and social tensions. Over 71 per cent of ISIS's sectarian assaults occurred in Baghdad, the Shia-majority capital city. Other ISIS attacks may also have been sectarian in nature, as much extremist activity in Iraq occurs in a context laced with underlying sectarianism, which ISIS may not always articulate or choose to emphasise.

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/an-alliance-between-islamic-state-and-lashkar-e-jhangvi-in-pakistan-was-inevitable/>.

¹⁹ "UNAMA Human Rights Report on Mass Killings in Mirza Olang", UN Missions, 20 August 2017, <https://unama.unmissions.org/unama-human-rights-report-mass-killings-mirza-olang>.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

The GEM shows that violent Islamist extremist groups focused their persecution of non-Islamic faiths on Christian communities in 2017, killing 134 people in direct attacks. These assaults took place in four countries and were perpetrated by five violent Islamist extremist groups. Persecution of Christians ranged from large-scale and coordinated assaults that killed up to 30 people in one incident to calculated assassinations. Over half of the fatalities occurred at Christian places of worship.

This violence was not unique to 2017. These groups have long victimised non-Muslims. ISIS has employed extreme brutality towards religious minorities since it declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Nor is this phenomenon confined to a single region. In West Africa, Boko Haram has declared war against local Christians, promising to attack “every church” and kill all “citizens of the cross”.²⁰ Violent Islamist extremist groups demand that all people subscribe to their warped doctrine, and those who resist or adhere to other beliefs are actively persecuted.

Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority bore the brunt of Islamist extremist persecution of Christians in 2017. ISIS’s operations across Egypt, including its Sinai insurgency, intentionally killed 97 Copts in 18 attacks. This violence was concentrated in the restive Sinai Peninsula, where ISIS in Sinai has taken root. Attacks against Coptic Christians comprised 53 per cent of the group’s public activity, including 11 assassinations. The deadliest incident occurred in April, when two suicide bombers coordinated attacks on Palm Sunday celebrations, killing 47 people. ISIS carried out a number of multi-casualty assaults against Copts, killing a total of 69 people in only three incidents, including April’s bloodshed.

ISIS has declared that Coptic Christians are apostates who must be eliminated from Egypt. The group outlined its hatred in a video in February 2017, describing Copts as its “favourite prey” and vowing

²⁰ Danielle Ogbeche, “Kill christians, target churches not mosques – New Boko Haram leader, Al-Barnawi”, Daily Post Nigeria, 4 August 2016, <http://dailypost.ng/2016/08/04/kill-christians-target-churches-not-mosques-new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi/>.

to “kill every infidel” and “liberate Cairo”. In the footage, the group threatened to wipe out all “worshippers of the cross”, specifically referring to the Coptic pope and wealthy Copts.²¹ Hundreds of Copts reportedly left Sinai in response to increased violence and fear in February, coinciding with ISIS’s threats.²² Overall, the Middle East’s Christian population is in decline. Christians make up some 4 per cent of the region’s population today, compared with 20 per cent before the First World War.²³

ISIS’s anti-Coptic campaign has inflamed existing tensions between Egypt’s Islamic and Christian communities. ISIS’s brutality against Copts threatens cohesion and peace in Sinai and beyond. It was the only group to target Coptic Christians in the Sinai in 2017, according to the GEM.

Al-Shabaab also pursued a violent campaign against Christians. The group directed its religious persecution outside its stronghold of Somalia, focusing this violence on northern Kenya. Two-thirds of the assaults took place in Kenya’s Lamu county. Al-Shabaab used the impact of violence to traumatise the Kenyan population, which is predominantly Christian. The group killed 19 people in deliberate assaults on Christians. On average, three people were killed per attack.

Syria’s largest Christian city, Muhradah, was frequently targeted by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham throughout 2017, and at least nine people were killed in deliberate shelling. A Christian church was also targeted by rebels in the Syrian province of Daraa during a morning service. In Pakistan, two ISIS suicide bombers killed ten people in an attack on a Christian church in December.

21 AP, “ISIS vows more attacks on Egypt’s Christians”, Catholic Herald, 20 February 2017, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/02/20/isis-vows-more-attacks-on-egypts-christians/>.

22 Ahmed Aboulenein, “Egypt’s Christians flee Sinai amid Islamic State killing spree”, Reuters, 24 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-violence/egypts-christians-flee-sinai-amid-islamic-state-killing-spreedUSKBN1632BF>.

23 “Middle East’s Christians are dwindling, despite deep roots,” Times of Israel, 8 July 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/middle-east-christians-are-dwindling-despite-deep-roots/>.

BREAKDOWN OF PUBLIC TARGETS

Beyond the general population, there are specific targets in the public space that fall victim to Islamist extremist groups. Dissecting and exploring the nature of these attacks offers a deeper insight into why extremist groups designate targets such as media organisations, schools and governments.

"The targeting of particular sectors of society has detrimental effects on the public beyond the killing of individuals. It erodes public confidence and fosters fear among populations." Read @InstituteGC's Global Extremism Monitor report

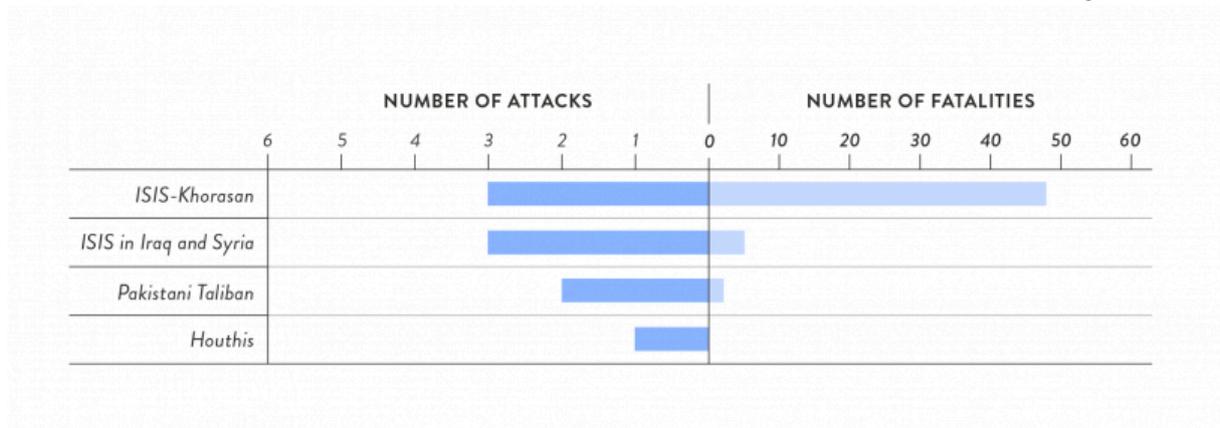
(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=%22The%20targeting%20of%20particular%20sectors%20of%20society%20has%20insight/co-existence/why-islamist-extremists-target-civilians>)

Such an understanding shows the significant effect violence has on these sectors and allows for a greater focus on protecting the public space. The targeting of particular sectors of society has detrimental effects on the public beyond the killing of individuals. It erodes public confidence and fosters fear among populations. The GEM analysis has revealed common targets and identified similarities in the strategic and ideological purpose behind the focus on the public space. At the same time, the incidents recorded in each country and carried out by each group are highly context specific.

MEDIA ORGANISATIONS

Four extremist groups targeted journalists and media organisations in four countries in 2017—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen—leading to the killing of 55 people (see figure 3.3). These countries are plagued by long-standing insurgencies that continue to attract media coverage.

Figure 3.3: Violent Islamist Extremist Groups Responsible for Attacks Against Media Organisations, 2



The GEM recorded four assassination attempts on journalists in 2017, most in Pakistan. Two attacks on media organisations were coordinated assaults, with numerous perpetrators employing guns and suicide vests.

Extremist groups portray the media industry as representing secular and Western values, such as freedom of speech and human rights. The industry is seen as antagonistic to the binary and absolute worldviews of Islamist extremist teachings.

The discourse provided by media outlets can offer competing narratives to extremist groups. The Taliban has accused Afghanistan’s media of attempting to “inject the minds of youth” with ideas that run counter to its violent ideology.²⁴ By attacking journalists, Islamist extremist groups can also prevent an independent, robust media from reporting the realities of conflict and extremism.

Case Study: ISIS Targets Afghan Media

In 2017, ISIS in Afghanistan targeted the media and journalists on three occasions, killing at least 48 civilians.

In May, ISIS used armed suicide bombers to attack Radio Television Afghanistan in Nangarhar, killing at least six people and wounding 17. In November, ISIS militants disguised as police officers

²⁴ Roy Greenslade, “Taliban threaten Afghan TV journalists with ‘elimination’”, *Guardian*, 14 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/oct/14/taliban-threaten-afghan-tv-journalists-with-elimination>.

attacked Shamshad TV station in Kabul. The assault, which also involved suicide bombers and gunmen, killed one staff member and wounded 20. The station responded to the assault by calling it an attack on the “freedom of media” and vowing the group would not “silence” it.²⁵ Also in the capital, 41 people were killed in December when ISIS suicide militants targeted a Shia cultural centre and news agency. The group said the outlet was attacked because it was spreading Shia beliefs.

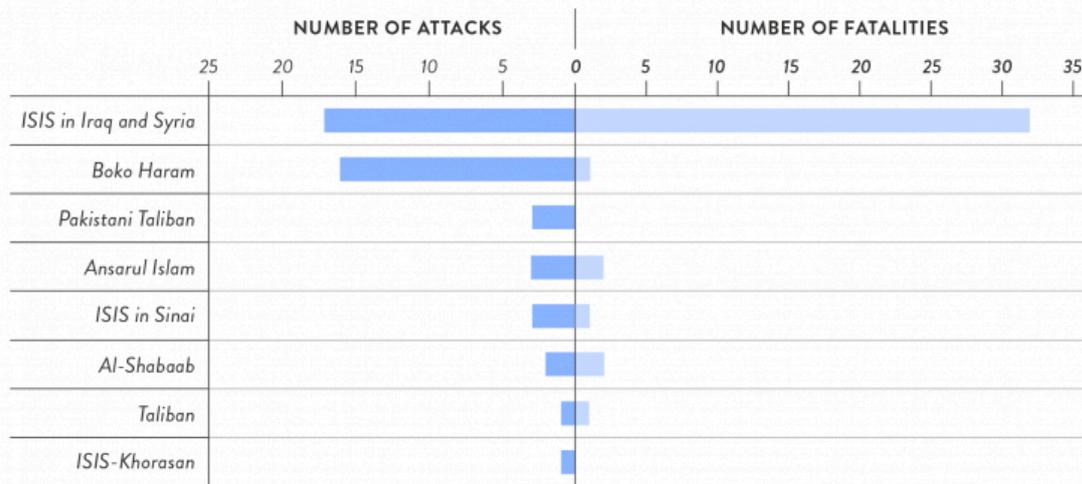
ISIS is undermining efforts to inform citizens in countries where it is active. Free and independent media are vital for the populations of regions suffering from conflict and extremism. ISIS’s violence aims to disrupt this process and further destabilise security.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Islamist extremist groups launched 46 attacks on educational institutions in 2017 (see figure 3.4). ISIS in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram carried out most of this violence. Thirty-nine people were killed in these attacks, which occurred in ten countries: Nigeria, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Afghanistan, Egypt, Kenya and Niger. Seventy-four per cent of these assaults were concentrated in areas of existing violent insurgencies, where extremist groups were highly active. The targets of this violence included teachers, schools, colleges and universities.

²⁵ “Kabul TV station defiantly resumes broadcasting moments after Isis attack ends”, Guardian, 7 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/07/gunmen-attack-kabul-tv-station-after-explosion>.

Figure 3.4: Violent Islamist Extremist Groups Responsible for Attacks Against Educational Institutions



Most assaults on educational sites involved suicide bombers. Eighty-six per cent of attacks on universities used this tactic. The GEM recorded the killings of five teachers in 2017. There were also six arson attacks on educational institutions.

Many of the extremist groups the GEM monitored hold an ideological opposition to mainstream, state-led education. These groups conflated schools and universities with Western, secular values and culture. The ideology of Islamist extremist groups concludes that secular education produces, and is taught by, apostates who should be stopped. The systematic targeting of these institutions narrows the space for open-mindedness, reiterating a destructive and binary worldview.

Violent Islamist extremists intend their ideology to fill the vacuum after school systems break down. Groups such as ISIS have indoctrinated children in their territory with their own violent and perverse ideological syllabus. ISIS aims to brainwash and train its youth, whom it dubs “cubs of the caliphate”, in tailored educational programmes.²⁶ Groups can see a value in both destroying normal education and instilling their own beliefs.

²⁶ “Lion Cubs of ISIL: Children of the Caliphate”, Al Jazeera, 25 October 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2017/10/lion-cubs-isil-children-caliphate-171023104745430.html>.

Islamist militants view education systems as part of the state that their insurgency is fighting to overturn. Following attacks against academic institutions, the Pakistani Taliban has warned that it views government schools as producing military personnel who go on to kill the Taliban and its followers. The group has identified schools and learning as a strategic threat that is part of the state it hopes to dismantle.

Case Study: Extremism Impedes Education in West Africa

Islamist extremist groups in West Africa sought to undermine educational institutions in 2017. Espousing a binary ideology that despises secular teaching, these groups have exploited countries in a region that has the world's highest rates of educational exclusion.²⁷

In Burkina Faso, Ansarul Islam was responsible for three major attacks on schools during the year. All these attacks occurred in the north of the country, which neighbours war-torn Mali.

In March, Ansarul Islam warned teachers in the Kongoussi area to abandon their syllabus, exclusively teach the Quran and speak in Arabic. The same day, the group assassinated a headteacher in Djibo. Ansarul Islam also burned down a primary school in October. This violence led to Burkina Faso closing hundreds of education facilities in the northern provinces of Soum and Oudalan.

Boko Haram, whose name roughly translates as “Western education is forbidden”, has been systematically targeting educational institutions since 2008. The group carried out three attacks against schools and 12 against university sites in 2017. Seventy-five per cent of these incidents occurred in northeastern Nigeria, where the group's insurgency originated, and the remaining 25 per cent in Cameroon and Niger. In 2017, the UN said that 3 million children required emergency educational support due to Boko Haram's violence.²⁸

27 “Education in Africa”, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, last modified 28 February 2018, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/education-africa>.

28 “More than half of all schools remain closed in Borno State, epicentre of the Boko Haram crisis in northeast Nigeria”, United Nations Children's Fund, 29 September 2017, https://www.unicef.org/media/media_100953.html.

Boko Haram's ideological stance on education led to at least seven attacks against Borno state's University of Maiduguri in 2017. In August, university staff reportedly resigned in response to the violent assaults.²⁹

Boko Haram's insurgency risks exacerbating a regional education deficit, furthering economic frustration and susceptibility to radicalisation. This dynamic illustrates a wider strategy employed by violent Islamist extremist groups in West Africa. By explicitly attempting to dismantle educational establishments in unstable areas, Salafi-jihadi groups are creating dangerous environments in which their ideology can flourish.

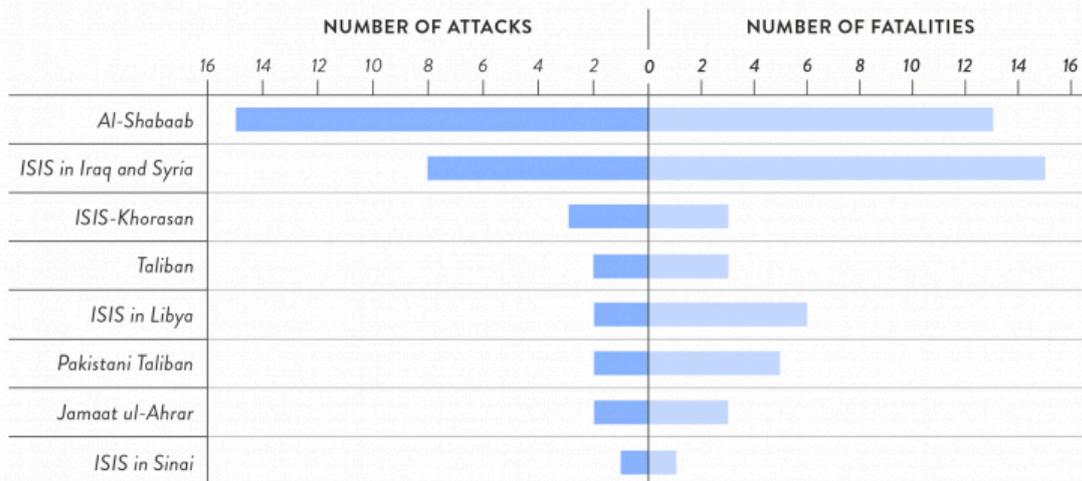
The targeting of educational institutions is not unique to groups operating in West Africa. In Afghanistan, the Taliban launched a concerted campaign against secular education, which continues to be one of the group's main targets. Attacks on non-religious schools and students who attend them are a demonstration of an ideology that is threatened by secular values.

PROFESSIONS AND MANUAL LABOUR

Nine violent Islamist extremist groups deliberately targeted professionals and labourers in 2017, killing 49 people in 35 attacks (see figure 3.5). This violence occurred in seven countries. The types of professionals attacked included bank workers, judges, doctors, business people and lawyers. Labourers comprise various infrastructure workers, including people who work for gas and water companies, farmers, traders and telecommunication workers. Nearly half of those targeted were subject to assassination attempts. At least 43 per cent of all attacks against these targets involved gunfire. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) accounted for 20 per cent of these incidents.

²⁹ Friday Olorok, "Boko Haram attacks: 70 lecturers quit UNIMAID", PUNCH, 6 August 2017, <http://punchng.com/boko-haram-attacks-70-lecturers-quit-unimaid/>.

Figure 3.5: Violent Islamist Extremist Groups Responsible for Attacks Against Professionals and Labo



Legal systems are an integral component of secular society and have been targeted by Islamist extremist groups, which see lawyers and judges of secular law as defenders of concepts such as human rights and democracy. Jamaat ul-Ahrar has attacked lawyers in Quetta, threatening violence “until the imposition of an Islamic system in Pakistan”.³⁰ In Nigeria, Boko Haram’s disputed leader said the group does “not believe in the Nigerian judicial system” and pledged to “fight anyone who assists the government in perpetrating illegalities”. The corrosive ideology of Islamist extremist organisations justifies and encourages killing civilians who work for secular legal systems.

These groups also intentionally target industries that support, aid or provide financial gains to the government. Islamist militants use violence against national infrastructure workers to undermine state functionality and further economic objectives. Insurgent groups use such tactics to weaken the state that they are attempting to overthrow and to deter citizens from working in affected sectors.

Systematically targeting individuals who participate in trade and agriculture similarly produces tactical gains for extremist groups.

30 “Pakistan Hospital Blast Kills At Least 70”, Sky News, 8 August 2016, <https://news.sky.com/story/at-least-53-killed-in-pakistan-hospital-blast-10527560>.

These workers are valuable to the government and ensure the vitality of a country's economic structure. Three of ISIS in Iraq and Syria's attacks on professionals and labourers, which killed 15 people in total in 2017, targeted those working on oil and gas fields and power plants. In February, a senior official at a state-owned gas company was assassinated in a bombing, and in September militants used three suicide bombers to target a power plant north of Baghdad. In the same month, two alcohol traders were assassinated within a week in September in attacks using IEDs. . A third of these incidents in Iraq were assassination attempts.

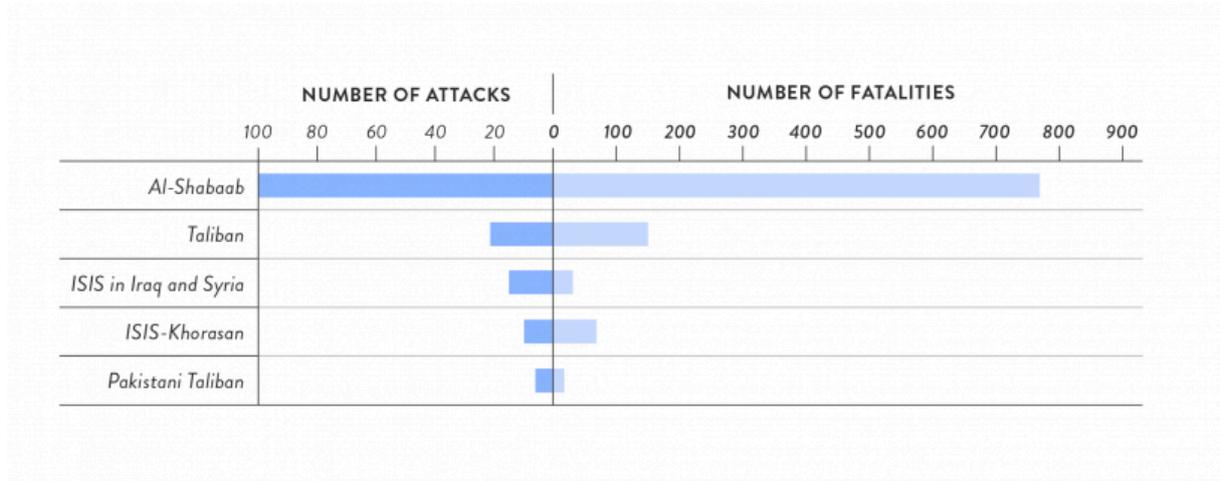
Undeterred, attacks on professionals and labourers can destroy a society's economic potential and discourage prosperity and investment. In turn, this degradation can remove opportunities and potential for citizens, increasing a community's mistrust of the state and susceptibility to radicalisation.

GOVERNMENTS

As part of its efforts to clarify and disaggregate the activities and motivations of violent Islamist extremists, the GEM has categorised government targets as separate entities that require distinct analysis. Governments could be considered hard targets, as they are often militarised and protected by armed forces. However, Islamist extremist organisations reason that attacking government figures can fulfil wider strategic aims. While in some settings the army and state are indistinguishable, the GEM's data collection has separated the two authorities to reflect distinctions in militant groups' violent behaviour. For this reason, the GEM analysis has included government targets as part of the public space.

These targets, which include politicians, mayors, tax collectors, electoral candidates and civil servants as well as government buildings, made up 10 per cent of Islamist extremist attacks on the public space in 2017. The GEM recorded that 1,157 people were killed in these assaults (see figure 3.6). Twenty-three groups targeted government figures in 16 countries.

Figure 3.6: Violent Islamist Extremist Groups Responsible for Attacks Against Governments, 2017



Additionally, violent Islamist extremist groups launched 44 attacks against local leaders in 2017. These victims included community and traditional leaders, tribal elders, and representatives who held positions of power and seniority in local societies. Although these are generally not official government roles, these figures connect the state and communities.

Most attacks on governments globally involved IEDs, while 11 per cent used car bombs. The GEM recorded 86 assassination attempts on government-related individuals, resulting in the deaths of 93 people.

A combination of strategic and ideological motivations explains why extremist groups target governments. Many of the groups the GEM monitored are insurgent forces looking to rival and gain power from a state they view as illegitimate. Extremist groups have the potential to undermine governments with these assaults, making them seem weak and incapable.

Boko Haram’s disputed leader, Abubakar Shekau, has said that the group does not “believe in any system of government” and will “keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism [and] socialism”.³¹ Purist interpretations of Islam, including Salafism, regard popularly elected governments as unlawful. Such interpretations are based on

31 Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, “The Ongoing Campaign of Terror in Nigeria: Boko Haram versus the State”, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 52, no. 2 (October 2013), <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.cl/>.

the premise that God is sovereign. This doctrine does not accept that legislators can create laws, favouring interpretations of sharia law instead.

Islamist extremist groups see secular governance as Western and un-Islamic, condemning political figures as symbols of apostasy. Violent Islamist extremist groups also view governments as a source of competition and have attempted to rule countries and land themselves. ISIS seized territory and declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014, brutally imposing a violent ideology. The Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, administering its own version of governance and a harsh penal system.

Attacks on a state can deter people from taking up positions in government, undermining the state's legitimacy. This violence plays into the hands of extremist groups, as a strong government is essential in countering extremism. Moreover, groups can exploit public frustration with the state in their recruitment.³² Islamist extremists use grievances stemming from government corruption, growing social inequality and insecurity in their propaganda.

Case Study: Al-Shabaab's Government-Focused Violence

Al-Shabaab displayed a concerted effort against the Somali and Kenyan governments in 2017. The group directed one-third of its attacks in the public space at government targets. Al-Shabaab killed 715 people in these assaults in both countries, which were mostly aimed at politicians. Thirty people were killed in attacks on local leaders, mainly in Somalia's Banaadir region. The country's capital, Mogadishu, is in this province. Gun attacks accounted for 34 per cent of the violence against government and local leaders, while IEDs comprised 10 per cent and suicide attacks 8 per cent.

Al-Shabaab made assassinations a consistent element of its antigovernment campaign in 2017. On average, the group carried out five assassination attempts a month, killing 46 people. The GEM's findings corroborate reports that al-Shabaab has designated "assassination squads".³³

³² For a mapping of the journeys to militancy of prominent jihadis from the Middle East and Africa, see Ahmed, Comerford and El-Badawy, *Milestones to Militancy*.

Al-Shabaab has voiced its motivation for targeting governments, describing state representatives as “disbelievers” and “enemies”. It has warned against collaboration with governments, stating that “anybody who joins the line of non-Muslims is an apostate who can be killed”.³⁴ The group views the Kenyan and Somali states as illegitimate and un-Islamic, favouring its own warped ideology and interpretation of sharia law.

Al-Shabaab’s ideological stance has manifested itself in synchronised efforts to disrupt electoral processes in Somalia and Kenya. In February, Somali parliamentarians elected Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed as the country’s president. In August, Kenya elected its president, members of parliament and devolved government. During this six-month period of political sensitivity, the GEM recorded over 72 per cent of attacks on governments and local leaders. Despite these attempts, all the elections went ahead successfully.

It is essential that the targeting of governments does not undermine the rule of law and progress in this fragile region. Somalia has suffered due to political, economic and security weaknesses. According to the UN, the success of the February election provides “an opportunity for the country to embark on a new and more positive trajectory”.³⁵ Civilians in Somalia and Kenya need the safety and stability of a functioning state that is robustly countering al-Shabaab’s violence and ideology.

33 Avraham Ben Adam, “Al Shabaab Activates Assassination Squads for Asymmetric Warfare”, Strategic Intelligence, 23 March 2015, <https://intelligencebriefs.com/al-shabaab-activates-assassination-squads-for-asymmetric-warfare/>.

34 Abdi Sheikh, “Somalia’s al Shabaab denounces ex-spokesman as apostate who could be killed”, Reuters, 16 January 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-somalia-insurgency/somalias-al-shabaab-denounces-ex-spokesman-as-apostate-who-could-be-killed-idUKKBN1F50IN>.

35 Ibid.

THE FULL REPORT

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