

Historical Implications of 'War on Terror' to Politics and Policy of Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the Middle East has been plagued by a series of conflicts linked to terrorism, which have disrupted the stability of several countries in the region. Since the war on terrorism was declared, terrorism has influenced politics and policy in the Middle East. Furthermore, terrorism has also hindered economic prosperity, development, and social welfare in countries caught up in conflict. This article aims to examine terrorism and its impact on the political and policy spheres in the Middle East, specifically in the selected countries: Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This article uses a case study method to examine this topic in detail for each country. This article utilizes several global indices, including the Global Terrorism Index 2017–2024, the Global Peace Index, the Conflict Index, the Fragile States Index, and the Failed States Index. The findings indicate that regime change, clashes over ethnic and religious differences, and regional power politics are the underlying causes of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the context and conditions of Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan as post-conflict states remain fragile and are influenced by terrorism, the impact of the war on terror, and regional competition, which have serious long-term implications for each country. This article contributes to the development of the Regional Security Complex Theory by Buzan and Waver (2003) regarding the War on Terrorism, which relates to the Middle East security dilemma and the balance of power.

Keywords: Middle East, regional security complex theory, conflict, terrorism, war on terror

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Introduction

Since the war on terror was declared by the United States in response to September 11 attacks in 2001, terrorism has become the key concern for states and communities in the Middle East (Mueller & Stewart, 2015; Smith & Zeigler, 2017). The root causes of terrorism are resistance to intervention to resolve the conflicts, group grievances for regime changes and war on terror (Franks, 2006; Polo & González, 2020). Over time, the states' counterterrorism mechanisms have led to the decline of terrorist attacks and violence. Notwithstanding, the Global Terrorism Index 2017, and Global Peace Index 2017 have indicated that the majority of the Middle Eastern countries as highly prone to terrorism, violence and regional instability. Following, 2024 Global Terrorism Index, the state of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions are still at very high risk and at risk of terrorism. Terrorism plays a destructive role in shaping the history of the Middle East politics and policies, in which military means are used for achieving the terrorist organizations' interest in each country. Each state in the Middle East has its political, economic, social, legal, and policies shaped by regional and global challenges and crises. Terrorism is used as a

policy means to deter or to achieve certain objectives, thus policy responses to terrorism supposed to consider the terrorist, the target, and the victim besides of causes and effects. Terrorism has traits of "globality" therefore; policies and means to confront require clear analyses of conditions and circumstances of a state (de Nardis, 2020).

Security dilemma and security externalities are threats to state survival; hence security is interdependent in its nature. In other words, great powers engage in regional security dilemma for securitization purposes and deterring existential threats abroad (Buzan & Waver, 2003). Addressing security in the context of balance of power theory and regional security complex theory a state has to survive as an independent entity. (Baviera, 2015; Levy & Thompson, 2010). As it has been outlined in the introduction of this study war on terror has not achieved its security and military goals in particular for the countries the regime changes have undertaken as Iraq and Afghanistan, while Syria has become another story of security dilemma and victim of regional rivalries. In this study, the concept of terrorism, regional security and war on terror will be analyzed according to country contexts, the study outlines the main findings associated with the logic of balance of power theory and regional security complex theory, where security, and terrorism clashes. Apparently, regional power in certain conditions is considered as if they matter to the global balance of power such as case of Iraq during and in post-Cold War. With regard to great power Regional Security Complexes, it is vital to consider that if great powers are involved, their spillovers are far more influential on regional and global levels such as the war on terror in case of Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, regional security is influenced by the involvement of external great powers, where regional powers are interdependent for their security concerns. As they operate according to their specific structures and process (Amable, 2022; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012).

According to the existing literature terrorist groups and organizations have used ideology and religion to justify their actions in their conduct. Accordingly, terrorism has been the main factor for destabilizing the Middle East, in the last decades there has been clashes and conflict with terrorist groups especially in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya. The most recent groups have been in Iraq after the fall of the Ba'ath Regime since 2003, the Islamist groups have been resilient and pushed government to a critical condition of fighting and coping with political transition in Iraq. For the Iraqi government, Syria and Afghanistan struggle against terrorism has been multidimensional and complex, as existing terrorist groups have connections and similar approaches in confronting government. Moreover, rule of law, respect to human rights, the desire for promoting democracy and good economic conditions are the necessary elements to confront terrorism, while Middle Eastern countries are poor in the conduct of governance based on these principles (Herlin-Karnell & Matera, 2014; Kounert, 2018; Store, 2006). Understanding terrorism requires profound analyses of the history of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups as well as their ideology and political intentions behind their creation. The implications vary based on each country context, the grievance of people, and the intervening powers' policies in particular the United States's war on terror campaign.

For Afghanistan, it has all started as a movement against the Soviet occupation in 1979, it has got support from the United States and allies for confronting the red army, meanwhile al-Qaeda transformed politically from 1979 to the September attack on the US, and forward. Following the declaration of the 'War on Terror' Iraq has come to the for front of the political tension with the United States, where Al-Qaeda since

2001 played a serious role in confronting the US intervention in Iraq. Since the rise of terrorism, homeland security has become a crucial component of each country's foreign and security policy, especially the West and US. The Bush has uttered regarding 'war on terror' as either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists (Lansford et al., 2009; Nordenman, 2013). Scholars are divided in their debate concerning deterring terrorism with military means and use of force. Meanwhile, use of military force as a means for eradicating terrorism is justified in accordance with self-defense and collective security. It is important to consider that the use of force is a clear failure in deterrence. According to International law, the first means that states are supposed to count on is law enforcement, diplomacy and other peaceful means to control international terrorism and resolve threats to international peace and security. The US foreign policy in using force against al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan has been extended to military efforts on Iraq. This has been the US military action to deter state support to terrorism and deterring terrorist groups (Casaca, 2017). At the context of war on terror, the United States and other global powers have been successful in aligning their foreign policy means and politics to take the shared responsibility in deterring terror and protecting global peace and security.

With the Arab Spring 2011, the Al-Qaeda group and their affiliates have shifted their concentration to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and Afghanistan. In every circumstance, al-Qaeda sought to plan attacks and developed justifications, legitimize and promote other jihadi groups to conduct further attacks. The group has worked on gaining public sentiment and displaying public in front of the doctrine. Alongside this al-Qaeda could attack foreign fighters who have been living or born in West, Europe, North American and other regions to join and support the organization (Holbrook, 2014). Contemporary Terrorism in the selected countries and its aftermath still exists and has left multi-effects on society, state, and economy in general (Abadie & Gardeazabal, 2019; Haupt & Weinbauer, 2011). Thus, this research analyzes the three countries, which are influenced by terrorism in different phases, while the influences of the various waves of terrorism have been persisting and the consequences have been critical and long-lasting, on state, and society alike. In response to terrorism, the three countries have paid heavy prices in combating and eradicating threats of terrorism.

This research contributes to the research gap in studying cross-country analyses of terrorism, its effects on politics and policies of each country in the Middle East that is besides of investigating the root-causes of terrorism. There is lack of pure studies of why community grievances merged and transformed to terrorist groups, with the regime changes in Iraq, Afghanistan and lately Syria. There is a gap in literature regarding the root-causes of consistent terrorism and how to transform terrorism to reconciliation in state-building after conflict and war. Yet, in the foreseeable future there might be similar waves of terrorist attacks in each of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as the political status and governance are not ready for combating the aftermaths of War on Terror and integrating proper counterterrorism mechanisms to afford security and stability.

Research Method

Methodologically, this article adopts content analysis based on case studies, and reviews existing literature for exploring terrorism and war on terror in the selected countries. A few countries have been selected from the Middle East including Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan as sample of the study, all the three cases have been potentially

chosen, as conflict in one has spill-overs on the other countries, like in Iraq, followed by Afghanistan and Syria, and reversed over time.

Case study method has its importance based on the posed questions of 'why' and 'how, in this case studying why these countries are fragile to terrorism and how to combat counterterrorism at the context of each country in the region (Yin, 2003). Regardless of critics, case studies have been considered appropriate just in case of exploratory phase of an investigation particularly if the problem of the study is complicated, in which terrorism is. Furthermore, case study selections must be selected based on understanding the properties of the population the cases are selected for (Ritchie et al., 2005).

For data collection and information, a desk review has been conducted while considering resources from the Web of Science, Google Scholar, Scopus, and relevant publishing sources. Besides, a few global indices, which have been considered to give a clear picture of terrorism and conflict in the Middle East including Global Terrorism Index 2017/2024, Global Peace Index 2017, Conflict Index, Fragile States Index, and Failed States Index. The databases contain specific information on the status and circumstances of each country, and improvements between 2017-2024. This study considers military history regarding terrorism and war on terror, its political and policy implications for the three countries from the 2017-2024 period for the selected countries. Meanwhile, reference has been made to regional security complex theory and balance of power in regard of the Middle East.

Results and Discussion

Review of Historical Understanding of Terrorism in the Failed States in the Middle East

A historical understanding is necessary for knowing how the state functions and in what conditions a state fails. The tragic failure of states in the history of the Middle East has dire consequences for citizens in the region and neighboring regions. To elaborate on state failure, a deep knowledge of each country's history and conditions is required. There are a few factors, which affect state failure including: lack of economic and institutional infrastructure, authoritarian system of governance, poverty, political stability, and lack of the rule of law. Terrorism has been one factor for leading state systems and power of state to collapse, as the political structure and governance have been in crisis and turmoil in the Middle East (Howard, 2016). In the history of several countries' terrorism remains the threat and means for insecurities that people must live with. From this view, in the failed states there is an absence of a functioning political system, which leads to violence and lack of security where citizens are prone to radical terrorist attacks or violence (Howard, 2016). The September 11 attacks and the 'War on Terror' defined terrorism threats to international community, where deterring terror has been serious issue in global politics. Based on Fragile States Index 2024, Syria is the fourth top in the ranking, Yemen comes among the top positioned as six states in the index, followed by Iraq, which moved to thirty-one a better position than before. In 2008 Index for State Weakness positions Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and Syria among weak states. Likewise, 2011 Failed State Index also ranked Iraq, and Yemen among the top failed states.

The rise of terrorism and violence in the Middle East is associated with several co-factors as internal economic challenges, political system, resource dependent and youth unemployment, and authoritarian regimes in Iraq, Syria and similarly Afghanistan

over the past few decades. As defined, "failed states fail in providing security of the public, guarantee rights at home or abroad and fail to maintain functioning institutions and steering the governance." Moreover, when the state fails to control the use of force within their borders, this leads to a situation where outbreak of violence is possible. In certain cases, loss of control gives non-state actors in all forms like Militias to break out violence and spread chaos. Not just control of power, but lack of service delivery, failure in administrative duties and meeting the needs of citizens negatively affect status of state. Furthermore, there is no failed state without disharmony between communities. Aligned, border control is another critical issue, in which majority of the failed states fail to control their borders and border security. Corruption flourishes, food shortages and lack of services, loss control of security and authority (Boloix, 2019; Chomsky, 2007; Ezrow & Frantz, 2013).

Among the few conditions and factors which lead to state failure, poverty and poor economic conditions have been root causes which are to be debated. Terrorist groups have been pursuing their socio-economic needs to influence population and conduct their acts of violence. As financial means support terrorist groups to survive and remain, while some groups disappear. Wealth assures terrorist groups success and impacts the organizational capacity of terrorist groups. There are various methods of sponsorship and capital creation for the terrorist groups thus deterring them needs strategic plans such as Al-Qaeda, and for those groups who define themselves as self-defense and resistance. Taking the case of Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003, state failure in Iraq triggered instability and violence, caused by militias and extremist groups to contribute to the rise of activities of violent and terror acts. Meanwhile the situation has improved till early Arab Spring, especially the case of Syria, which has a direct spillover for Iraq. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2014 has paralyzed the security of Iraq and increased terrorist threat and violence. Iraq was just liberated from a military- regime, which has supported terrorist groups as a foreign policy means to deter existential threats. While, in post liberation till the end of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2017 sectarian and violence have threatened many lives in Iraq (Underhill, 2014) Importantly, the terrorist or terrorist groups try to disorient the population by showing that the government is unable to fulfil primary security function for its means as safety and order. As well as, indicating that government is unable to provide necessary services and needs of the citizens timely and effectively.

The perception of terrorism has changed especially with the abrupt and deadly attacks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In 2014, the Iraqi security and stability have been triggered again, weak border security allowed entrance of ISIS terrorists groups to the Iraqi territory. Responding to terrorism has become a security policy tool in which state uses force and power to deter terrorist groups. In the case of both countries in different phases of conflict, and instability, states have lost control of borders, failed in preventing external interventions, and state failed in retaining a monopoly of force (Larres & Hof, 2022; Taylor, 2013)

It is hard to address war on terror at the context of Middle Eastern regional security context, and its complexities, as regional security has its regionalism in nature, and it is interdependent, its success is associated with the process and the structure it operates. Within this framework, regional powers like Iraq have been a key insecurity as Iraq and Afghanistan were engaged in the September 11 attack on the United States, thus war on terror was considered for deterring terrorism as a global security threat. As the debate on whether war on terror has achieved its targets or not is left open, the regime changes has fueled terrorism and regional rivalries in the Middle East. The

transfer and regime changes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria are yet questioned, but conditions have security implications. (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Mansour-Ille, 2021; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012)

Just war Doctrine: Counterterrorist Policies and Politics: Historical Review of the Middle East

The Middle East has a deadly history of wars and persistent conflicts. Peace and security have been serious components of regional security and balance of power. From this perception, the Middle East encounters a series of persisting terror and security threats, in the conflict-affected countries, where states must consider counterterrorism measures at home and abroad. Terrorism has crippled security and governance in several countries in the Middle East. Countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, have dark history in combating domestic and regional threats centered in terrorist groups within the countries and outside. The United States foreign policy targets reducing terrorism in the Middle East and containing it abroad. From George W Bush to the Trump administration the US foreign policy means target peace and security in the Middle East (Morris et al., 2021).

In Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan exclusively internal security is at risk of terrorism and terrorist groups operation. This has resulted from poor security and defense systems, lack of well-trained and skilled forces in combating terrorism, financial needs and resilient economic system. Each country in the region focuses on its challenges and considers specific counterterrorism measures aligned with their foreign policy, while still there is lack of regional cooperation and the past attempts has been incompatible so far. Terrorism is both a foreign policy issue and national security concern, where a state's interests are put at risk. Considering the United State government who deployed specific policy tools to combat international terrorism such as diplomacy, international operations and constructive engagement to economic sanctions, protective security and military measures. For certain cases economic means are enforced such as economic sanction from 1996-1997 the Clinton administration has enforced these measures of freezing assets belonging to Bin Laden and individuals associated with terrorist organizations (Zelikow & Pillar, 2001).

Since, the war on terror was declared, each Middle Eastern country has introduced a few policies and practices associated with counterterrorism responses and as respond to terrorism in their territory. It is important to consider policies and strategies as appropriate as for context specific counter response. In each Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan the use of force as a military mean has been enforced to combat terrorism, assure security and public safety. The 11th September 2001 has reshaped global policies and politics with the Middle East for the United States of America and other global powers. It is argued that there is a clear interactive relationship between the type and foreign policy behavior. As mentioned, a few things trigger the status of transnational terrorism for a state as: active engagement in foreign policy with other states, and allies, and intervention in civil wars, and affairs of a state. Another important issue is the political environment, which restricts what foreign governments are willing to do in countering terrorism (Zelikow & Pillar, 2001). Alongside the argument of the 'war on terror' is the justification of the use of force based on the United Nations resolutions and legitimation of the war on terror in Afghanistan and around. Besides of the regime change in Afghanistan, the American containment approach has been successful while the cost of wars on Afghanistan has been heavy.

Anti-terrorism policy formation is aligned with the state's foreign policy targets, and the intersection with international law. Some policies only target short term recoveries or are temporal remedies without a potential for eradicating the root causes of terrorism in the Middle East and globally. The United States has been a leading global power to deal with terrorism at home and abroad. The American response has come as responding to "Axis of Evil" where Iran, Iraq and North Korea addressed, while the US invaded Afghanistan to deter terror. This is where American Deterrence practice has started, while the foreign policy practice of Obama has been different than Bush on "war on terror", as the US Foreign policy was addressed as war, while Obama has limited the boundary of war and the enemy as Al-Qaeda (Bentley & Holland, 2014)

Meanwhile, the European response to Middle East terrorism is driven from soft-power policy while combating terrorism at home and abroad is tackled strategically. As noted, Europe's response to terrorism is centered to humanitarian tools, military and diplomatic means for preventing and eradicating terrorist attacks and root-causes of terrorism within Europe and Middle East. As counter response to 9/11 attack, the European governments agreed for an EU action plan on counterterrorism. In Which the EU initially fight terror internally, later action has been taken abroad (Bindi, 2010). It is worth mentioning that Europe as a neighboring region is the most vulnerable one for any crisis which may occur in the Middle East. The terror attacks in Europe create fear and terrorists seek various means to infiltrate to Europe, and it has been possible as record of attacks indicate it. After the deterrence of ISIS, Europe faced a serious challenge while dealing with returning foreign fighters from the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria, who pose a potential threat while returned home (Stockhammer, 2025)

Sentiments and perceptions about terrorism against Europe and the US have been due to certain issues including religious and political motives. Combating terrorism is driven from Osama bin Laden's declaration of Jihad against Americans, which has indirectly targeted West. With the aim of combating terrorism, both the US and European powers have supported the Iraqi forces trainings and their combat of terrorism. The European Union like the US has declared acting and a need for a serious response in combating terrorism, while Europe has been late in counterterrorism. For Europe, security at home and borders is pivotal for securing the region, as well as in the neighboring countries and cooperating with third countries to address major international threats (Pereira & Martins, 2014). Countries have worked on counterterrorism strategies and formulating foreign policy since early 2000, where Europe and the United States have been seriously involved in forming alliances and partnerships with the Middle Eastern powers to deal with terrorism abroad. As in 2014, the EU's counterterrorism strategy only targeted Syria and Iraq. Importantly, combating cross-border crime and terrorism has been a common European responsibility, while ensuring security of Europe is the frontline responsibility, which requires the EU countries proper cooperation to fight terrorism. To be mentioned, for the European Union internal and external security is interconnected, the regional security depends on peace beyond the EU borders (European Union Global Strategy, 2016)

The European response to combat and support countries in conflict has been through humanitarian aid and diplomatic means. Such as aid to Syrian and Iraq in different phases of conflict and integrating to peace and dialogue missions within the Middle East. Aligned, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) aims to offer the states neighboring to the European Union to become stable, secure and prosperous. Furthermore, the importance of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Europe has entered a new era of security in which regional fears have

provoked over the several numbers of Europeans who have joined Da'esh as foreign fighters, who have been trained and got combat experiences from ISIS (Bakowski, 2025)

Followed by the Establishment of the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC), it oversees coordinating the counterterrorism work with the EU and ensure implementation and evaluation of the EU counter terrorism strategy, integrating all aspects of fight against terrorism. Besides, of promoting better communication between EU and third countries while dealing with counter-terrorism actions. The Council of Europe has adopted new counterterrorism strategy for 2023-2027, the strategy specifically targets strengthening counterterrorism efforts in Europe and Beyond by addressing roots causes and drivers of terrorism (Council of the European Union, 2023). Combating the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq has been difficult for Iraq alone, as Syrian government has lost control of most of its territory, and ISIS fighters also occupied Mosul and Sinjar areas. Deterring terrorism in the twenty first century is associated with the current crises in the Middle East as: Israel-Palestinian conflict, tensions between Israel and the rest of the regional powers including the June 2025 attacks on Iran, and Iranian retaliation attacks. Besides, ISIS terrorist groups have been capable of attracting foreign fighters to join ISIS particularly 20,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries, approximately 3,400 of these people came from Europe and some from the US and other countries. Thus, destroying the caliphate has not been easy, but only possible with military counterterrorism campaign with the support of the US and allies (Council of the European Union, 2024). The US and European foreign policies are required to deal with multiplied issues as: Hizballah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Assad's Syria, the Houthis in Yemen and ISIS to combat terrorism.

Military History and Regional Security Complex Theory in Accordance with the Middle East

The Middle East regional security is complex in nature and practice; the historical records assure the complexity based on the series of wars and persisting conflicts the region has and is going through. Analyzing the Middle East security in accordance with the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), indicates a firm's regional interdependence where a state's security is bound by the regional security it belongs to. Moreover, each state's security is shaped by the security environment of the region within which it belongs to and the international system that contains them (Hampson et al., 1998)

For Buzan security is 'relational', which means the national security of each state is not understood unless the international dimensions are counted. Moreover, relationships among states can establish a broad network of friendships and alliances whereas some feel threatened. In other words, the given definition of Buzan for security complex is: "a group of states whose security concerns are closely interconnected, which seems impossible to separate security of one state from another." The Middle East is a subcontinental in terms of size, geography, and history (Hampson et al., 1998)

Regional interdependence and connectedness prevent external actors from imposing regional security structures. The historical and socially constructed hostilities avoid regional actors from proper cooperations and integration at the expense of rational choice, which could be better for the region (Legrenzi & Harders, 2008). As noted, a few disruptions create threats to state security such as poverty, population movement, humanitarian crises, and terrorism. Considering terrorism as the main threat to collective security, it has changed a softer approach of international relations to hard security practices. Thus, states are more interconnected with security terms than

economies and other aspects. Furthermore, the post-Westphalian states are more vulnerable to the influence of non-state actors. The non-state actors fill the gaps left by evaporation of sovereignty attending the transformation of the state. The qualified sovereignty of the post-Westphalian state left it unable to meet their national security requirements by themselves and has transformed security into a structurally conditioned collective good (Amour, 2020).

Within the argument of regional security comes the balance of power, in which states seek to get power in regional and international systems. As the Middle East holds a few regional identities as regional power, addressing security is tightened to the balance of power among the countries within the region. The regional powers compete for power and influence, yet no country has been able to be a strong regional power. Each state's security is affected by the security of externalities that arise from a common geographic center. And the security externalities in general are influenced by the key factors such as the quality of hierarchy and regional order. States seek power, while power is not absent in a security community, was seen as an alternative of managing interstate relations. In addition, the security community is the absence of war between states in a security community (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Schmoll, 2016). When it comes to terrorism as a global and regional security challenge, self-reliance of state is not compatible with the Middle East. Terrorism threats have created persisting security dilemmas. Importantly, a balance of power within a region is as important as a balance of interests (Fawn, 2009). The Middle East security concerns are highly complex over the Arab interdependence, Arab nationalities and conflict deadlocks over Palestine, and global interest in the region's oil (Bilgin, 2011).

The regional deadlocks particularly the Palestine case, the Iranian political support and supplies to Hamas have further complicated regional tensions. At the crossroads of various interests and disagreements, it is not possible to think about the idea of common security concerns, where the interests of all are secured (Kane & Murauskaite, 2014; Maoz, 1997). Regional challenges have given room for external power engagement in the region in the excuse of regional stability and international security. There has been series of historical engagements including the NATO-led intervention in Afghanistan, as well as the US-led intervention in liberating Kuwait, and securing the region from motives the Iraqi aggression during 1990/91. The US-led coalition against Daesh as in 2024 Islamic State attacks have increased in Iraq and Syria, created serious fears for the regional powers and the US that ISIS may reconstitute over time. Urgency of Syria and Iraq pushed global powers to unit for a Global Coalition against Daesh in 2014 with participation of 82 member countries and five leading organizations (NATO, the Arab League, the European Union, Interpol and Community of Sahel-Saharan states) (Loft & Brooke-Holland, 2025).

To this end, the nature of security-related problems in the Middle East is changing, but the region is not as secure as in the past. Since 2011 the region has become more dangerous, as there have been a few wars and conflicts, the majority of them centered in the Middle East. Significantly, another serious security challenge is nuclear compliance, which has been a major challenge for global peace and security. Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons interact with the ongoing struggle to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in the Middle East. Besides, Israel and other regional powers all have attempted to have nuclear powers and capabilities of chemical and biological weapons program. The Iranian nuclear program has been a challenge for the region and global powers. While it has been under intense scrutiny by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Meanwhile,

escalations between Israel and Iran since June 2025, has further deteriorated regional security. Furthermore, the Middle East countries work on modernizing their military capacities and keeping an eye on balancing power, where latency in pursuing nuclear power has been a serious concern comparing each power to Israel or other global powers (Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2006).

The nuclear deal and regional transition to a multipolar Middle East, where Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel compete to achieve regional leadership. As addressed situations may address the collectiveness of terrorist groups; as terrorist groups are interactive and connected with possibility of types being combined with one another, dependent on circumstances. The fears have been since 1979 about Iran and Iraq, while, Israel, India, Pakistan and even Saudi Arabia are working on pursuing nuclear weapons. The claims on nuclear weapons on the Middle East are complicated as global powers including: the United States, Russia and China have been involved by different means. While transferring nuclear weapons and means to non-state actors and terrorist groups have created serious fears for global powers and international community. The nuclear power concerns are becoming serious as Iran and other countries in the region have been investing in military necessities and utilities. The perception associated with pursuing military means is that regional powers think of restoring regional conflicts by using force as a necessary instrument of foreign policy. (Russell, 2006). In the history of the Middle East, in a few cases weapons of mass destruction and chemical weapons have been used by Saddam Hussein and Bashar Assad. Meanwhile, Israel has attempted destroying nuclear capacities development in Syria, Iraq and Iran too. The regional alliances and relation between Iran-Syria have been based on mutual benefit over the regional conflicts and protecting each other (Abhyankar, 2020).

The state response in the case of the Middle East for the three selected countries as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan have been different and situational. As in each state, the emergencies and state's response to terrorism have been defined by the necessities, and the experienced attacks. For the case of Iraq and Syria it has been regional and influential as ISIS has spread in Syria and moved to Iraq. On the contrary, the vacuum of power and conflict in Syria give room for terrorists to move from Iraq to Syria and then attack Iraq when its security was fragile. Similar narrative is true for Afghanistan, as state response against terrorist was supported by the United States and counterterrorism coalition. 'Conditions in Iraq are almost identical to Afghanistan (Dawoody, 2016)

Since the war on terror, a few countries in the Middle East including Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan have experienced persisting conflict and security challenges over the past few decades. Meanwhile, the post conflict circumstances and context within each country is not yet promising. The ground and mechanisms for combating terrorism and security challenges are crippled by politics, economic down-turn and regional rivalries. Meanwhile, the geopolitical risks affect each country differently.

For the case of Iraq, regional instabilities in Syria have affected the Iraqi internal stability, and led to division, there is still community grievance in forms of terrorist remittances against regime change and US intervention in Iraq. That is to say, the terrorist organizations are so far the pressing threats and danger for the Iraqi security and stability. Whistle, Iraq is more stable than 2017, yet spill-overs of conflict and war on terror have severe domestic implications on state, society and economy. For post-conflict Afghanistan, the country is not free from threats of terrorism, the economic status, governance and rule of law are under-developed. The aftermath of war on terror in Afghanistan has not brought freedom, reform, rule of law, civil liberties

and economic development, rather it has exhausted security, stability, and deterred economic well-being and development, while Afghan people have paid a heavy price for war on terror.

Furthermore, Syria has witnessed political instability and over a decade of violence and the country has been trapped in conflict, which has been far deadliest than war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the war on terror has not been won, other diplomatic means and development approaches could be more reliable to regime changes, and settling geopolitical challenges in particular in the Middle East.

Accordingly, Global Terrorism Index ranked Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan among the top countries affected by terrorism, as each country suffered highest number of casualties due to terrorist activities and attacks. Comparing the situation of these countries at different periods such as the case of Iraq in Global Terrorism Index 2024 Report, the Iraqi case has a notable improvement in terrorism with 99% lower cases compared to 2007 the peak, Iraq is no longer at the top ten ranked countries which are affected by terrorism. Alongside of Iraq comes Afghanistan with improvements with death and incidents fall by 84 percent. Within this, 2023 is the first year since 2019 in which Afghanistan is not among the most affected countries by terrorism. The previous records in Global Terrorism Index 2014 report indicated that over 80% of the lives lost to terrorist activity in 2013 have been in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria. This shows the three mentioned countries have high number of terrorist incidents.

Table 1. Global Terrorism Index (2024)

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE
1	Burkina Faso	8.571	↑1	28	Thailand	4.219	↓5	55	Spain	1.669	↑5
2	Israel	8.143	↑24	29	Türkiye	4.168	↓8	56	Lebanon	1.562	↓5
3	Mali	7.998	↑1	30	United States of America	4.141	↓1	57	Australia	1.475	↓2
4	Pakistan	7.916	↑3	31	Indonesia	3.993	↓7	58	Italy	1.447	↓4
5	Syria	7.890	↔	32	Bangladesh	3.317	↑14	59	Central African Republic	1.445	↓2
6	Afghanistan	7.825	↓5	33	Sri Lanka	3.072	↓2	60	Saudi Arabia	1.366	↑5
7	Somalia	7.814	↓4	34	Greece	3.028	↓1	61	Argentina	1.274	↓3
8	Nigeria	7.575	↔	35	Russia	3.016	↑8	62	Ethiopia	1.272	↓3
9	Myanmar	7.536	↔	36	Tunisia	2.914	↑4	63	Kosovo	1.218	↑28
10	Niger	7.274	↔	37	Germany	2.782	↓2	64	Japan	1.189	↔
11	Iraq	7.078	↓5	38	France	2.647	↓4	65	Venezuela	1.174	↓13
12	Cameroon	6.98	↓1	39	Libya	2.469	↓7	66	Slovakia	1.092	↓5
13	Democratic Republic of the Congo	6.514	↑1	40	Burundi	2.434	↓4	67	Mexico	1.04	↑1
14	India	6.324	↓1	41	United Kingdom	2.373	↑3	68	Austria	0.953	↓5
15	Mozambique	6.267	↓3	42	Tanzania	2.267	↓3	69	Tajikistan	0.871	↓16
16	Colombia	6.188	↓1	43	Angola	2.254	↑48	70	Sweden	0.735	↓4
17	Chile	5.679	↓1	44	Algeria	2.197	↓6	71	Switzerland	0.627	↓4
18	Kenya	5.616	↑1	45	Nepal	2.163	↓8	72	Cyprus	0.616	↑3
19	Philippines	5.383	↓1	46	Côte d'Ivoire	2.06	↓5	73	China	0.582	↑21
20	Egypt	5.221	↓3	47	Peru	2.045	↓6	74	Netherlands	0.577	↓4
21	Chad	4.987	↓1	48	Djibouti	2.035	↓3	75	Jordan	0.455	↓4
22	Palestine	4.966	↑6	49	Brazil	1.988	↓2	76	Armenia	0.423	↑18
23	Yemen	4.951	↓1	50	New Zealand	1.947	↓2	76	Uzbekistan	0.423	↓4
24	Benin	4.898	↑3	51	Belgium	1.904	↑11	78	Paraguay	0.241	↓5
25	Togo	4.67	↑5	52	Canada	1.753	↑4	79	United Arab Emirates	0.233	↓2
26	Iran	4.464	↓1	53	Norway	1.747	↓3	79	Iceland	0.233	↓2
27	Uganda	4.377	↑22	54	Ukraine	1.686	↑20	81	Malaysia	0.192	↓5

Source: Global Terrorism Index 2024

For the time being, while GTI shows improvement of Iraq and Afghanistan, Middle East is not yet free from threats of conflict, wars and terrorism, as Conflict Index identified Syria as the top 3rd extreme condition, for the Iraqi relatively improved, and Afghanistan case has worsened. Furthermore, the Global Peace Index provides depressing status for Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan as all of them are at the worst conditions with relative progress in scores. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has deteriorated possibility of peace building; the region remains the least peaceful for the nine years in record.

Table 2. Global Peace Index Rank: Middle East & North Africa

Regional Rank	Country	Overall Score	Score Change	Overall Rank
1	Kuwait	1.622	0.009	25
2	Qatar	1.656	0.093	29
3	Oman	1.761	-0.044	37
4	United Arab Emirates	1.897	-0.186	53
5	Jordan	1.998	0.058	67
6	Tunisia	2.044	-0.025	73
7	Morocco	2.054	-0.067	78
8	Bahrain	2.072	-0.071	81
9	Algeria	2.110	0.008	90
10	Saudi Arabia	2.206	-0.030	102
11	Egypt	2.212	-0.057	105
12	Libya	2.528	-0.077	128
13	Iran	2.682	-0.129	133
14	Lebanon	2.693	0.086	134
15	Palestine	2.872	0.195	145
16	Iraq	3.045	-0.012	151
17	Israel	3.115	0.297	155
18	Syria	3.173	-0.029	156
19	Sudan	3.327	0.134	162
20	Yemen	3.397	0.075	163
	Regional average	2.423	0.011	

Source: Global Peace Index 2024

To be noted, the Islamic State and its affiliated groups Hamas, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam Muslimeen, and Al-Shabaab, remains as the global threats for regional and global peace and security. The situation of Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan is also addressed in the Fragile States Index published by the Fund for Peace. As data shows the status of Iraq has improved from 4th rank in 2006 to 31st in 2024 respectively. Where Syria has been ranked as 4th in 2024, but it was 33rd in 2006 ranking records. Likewise, Afghanistan was 10th in 2006 report, while worsened to 7th most fragile state in 2024. This indicates that three countries in particular Syria and Afghanistan are still fragile states compared to Iraq (Haken et al., 2014). Based on Failed States Index 2024 Syria and Afghanistan are among the top in the ranking, while the Iraqi case seems more improved, according to this index failed states are unable to fully defend national boundaries, lack ability to police its territory, unable to provide public services and lack economic stability, and loss legitimacy in government. Coincides with this, in combating terrorist attacks, citizens face threats and risks of violence from terrorist attacks, and the state policies in response to terrorist attacks. Another serious concern is these countries are influenced by interregional connectivity, longer genealogies of violence, and ethno-religious combinations (Ahmed, 2025; Hannun et al., 2022)

To conclude this discussion, the indices and data stipulate that conditions of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are still not free from terrorism and threats of conflict. In this regard, inducing a long-term security means and strategies within each country is required, enforcing proper counterterrorism mechanisms strengthen internal and boarder security. As addressed, the needs of each country are contextual and country-based thus, international support is crucial for peacebuilding and a balance of power in the Middle East. In the end, terrorist incidents might be probable if security measures are not in place in each country especially in Syria (Mueller & Stewart, 2015)

Conclusion

Based on available data and review of the literature, this study found out that state conditions have led to violence and a rise in terrorism, particularly in the Middle East. Moreover, terrorism is influenced by the regional security complex and power rivalries in which countries seek to ensure their security, stability, national-interest, and balance of power. Meanwhile, states have failed in addressing key challenges associated with security as regional security and inter-state security dynamics have been influenced by ethno-religious patterns.

Despite the disagreement on war on terror and its implications on Iraq, and Afghanistan, lately Syria, there has been potential targets of war on terror campaign, the existential threats are deterred, regimes are changed, yet terrorism and instability are persisting spill-overs that require time and regional effort to uproot.

Drawn from the experiences of Iraq and Syria in particular during 2014-2017 the rise of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq, it indicates that regional security is interdependent for fragile countries; therefore, any circumstances and insecurities upheaval will influence neighboring countries in the region. From the experiences of these countries, it can be noted that the 'war on terror' has not achieved its goals for the people living in these countries and this war has never been successful. According to United Nations Security Council terrorism remains a serious threat to international peace and security, that peaceful measures are ineffective in responding to such threats (Corn et al., 2015). As analyzed, confronting terrorism is addressed in the state's foreign policy to respond to terrorism. Counterterrorism has become vital in confronting terrorism activities and enforcing proper means to prevent and deter terror threats in the present and future. Notably, when it comes to counterterrorism combat, no specific strategy and policy can identify ahead of time the threats that a government encounters, thus persuading public and media is a difficult task (Larres & Hof, 2022). Existing challenges and identifying threats require necessary policies and means to deal with them. It is significant for the government to address structural problems including social problems, economic challenges, political violence, and other weaknesses.

To this end, the conflict in the Middle East has always been influenced by regional and global interfering factors. History provides various examples where clashes of interest have led to conflict or war between states. Conflict has been rooted in the regional rivalry for balance of power, where multiple conflicts and regional challenges create regional and domestic insecurities as well as political instability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to literature on terrorism and war on terror in the context of the Middle East. Based on literature, the regional deadlocks and persisting terrorism threats create challenges for securitization and interdependence create severe spill-overs for the countries in the region. In which, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan have for years become victims of terrorism and bear the cost of war on terror. Consistent conflict has destabilized the region as nation states have tried to pursue regional balance of power. Besides, terrorism threats have had passive implications for global powers in the last decades. Searching through out the military history many conflicts have been in the Middle East, regional and superpowers have been exercising power and have interfered in the affairs of nation states in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Most significantly, Iraq and Afghanistan have been trapped in the aftermath of war on terror, with acute economic and political implications for decades. In terms of policy implications, the policy makers in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria have to readdress counterterrorism mechanisms and strategies to deal with the dire

consequences and spill-overs of war on terror and conflict. Each country has to identify the key challenge that threat the security system, political stability, economic development and geopolitical risks to be prepared for any unprecedented challenges in the future. As Margolin & Cook, (2024) have stressed that terrorist use a diverse toolbox of tactics thus counterterrorism response to be aligned with the means that terrorists use.

One of the major challenges for states and policy-makers is financial capability of terrorist organizations as the terrorist groups have strong interdependence ties, hence cutting and restricting financial means is an effective mechanism for reducing their effects. Moreover, strong collaboration is required among the regional counties that have experienced same terrorism experiences to prevent future terrorism rise and inducing containment and deterrence strategies for assuring peace and regional security based on global best practices. Thus, "forming partnerships to benefit from security apparatuses can be beneficial for all countries in the region" (Mansour-Ille, 2021)

In conducting this research, there has been a few limitations including available data on yearly base, which could have been useful for making comparison more proper, thus data limitation has restricted the findings. Meanwhile, terrorism is a complex topic, which makes is difficult to study it accurately, and country contexts change over time especially for Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

In terms of research on terrorism, counterterrorism and war on terror, there are many research papers which makes it difficult for authors to choose from, as majority of the articles are published in non-terrorism journals. Moreover, there is clash of thoughts and ideas regarding the main concerns and issues associated with broader terrorism, and the Middle East. In certain cases, there is a clear discrimination and lack of proper knowledge and fair information, ideas are personalized and politicized. Thus, author has read and picked proper articles and books that are neutral and fair. Similar challenges have been addressed by a few authors such as Kim and Sandler (2020)

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