

# Religious Ideology and Islamist Terrorism: Mapping Conflict, Governance, and Jihadist Violence (1998–2026)

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## Abstract

Islamist terrorism reflects the interaction between religious ideology and the political environments in which militant organizations operate. Religious ideology provides jihadist organizations with a framework for legitimizing violence, mobilizing supporters, and defining political enemies, but its presence alone does not explain the geographical concentration or intensity of terrorist activity. Using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the analysis examines jihadist violence from 1998 to 2026 through a comparative country-year approach, focusing on attacks, fatalities, perpetrator organizations, conflict, governance, and regional variation. The evidence indicates that jihadist violence is strongly concentrated in conflict-affected and weak-governance environments, particularly in the Sahel, West Africa, and South Asia, while attacks in non-Muslim-majority countries demonstrate the transnational reach of jihadist (ideologically extremist Muslims) mobilization. The central finding is that religious **ideology shapes the character and justification of jihadist violence, whereas conflict and governance conditions strongly influence its scale, persistence, and geographical concentration**. This relationship challenges explanations that attribute terrorism either primarily to religion or solely to socioeconomic deprivation. It also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing jihadist ideological mobilization from Islam as a religion. Effective counter-terrorism therefore requires both disruption of terrorist organizations and policies addressing conflict, governance, and extremist mobilization.

**Keywords :** Jihadist Terrorism; Religious Ideology; Islamist Extremism; Political Violence; Conflict; Governance; Violent Extremism; Terrorist Organizations; Sahel.

## 1. Introduction

Islamist terrorism remains a significant form of political violence, but its geographical distribution, organizational structures, and patterns of violence have changed considerably over time. At the center of this phenomenon is religious ideology: jihadist organizations invoke particular interpretations of Islam to legitimize political violence, mobilize supporters, justify attacks, and define their political objectives. Groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and their affiliates therefore represent a distinct category of terrorism in which religious claims form an important component of ideological mobilization. The role of religious ideology, however, requires careful distinction from Islam as a religion or from Muslim religiosity more broadly. The relevant analytical concern is how organizations claiming an Islamic religious mandate employ ideological narratives to justify and organize political violence. Evidence also indicates that religiously framed terrorism does not develop independently of its surrounding environment. Armed conflict, weak governance, repression, socioeconomic insecurity, and political instability can create conditions in which extremist ideological narratives become more effective for mobilization and violence. The geographical concentration of contemporary terrorism reinforces the need to examine these relationships together. Recent global terrorism data show that the majority of terrorism fatalities occur in conflict-affected countries, with Pakistan and several countries in the Sahel and West Africa among the most severely affected. The Islamic State and its affiliates have also remained among the deadliest terrorist actors internationally. These

patterns raise an important empirical question: **how is religious ideology associated with the intensity and geographical distribution of jihadist violence, and to what extent do conflict and governance conditions shape this relationship?**

The analysis uses the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) for 1998–2026 and identifies jihadist incidents through the combination of religious-ideology coding and designated jihadist perpetrators. This approach places religious ideology at the center of the empirical definition while allowing its relationship with conflict intensity, governance, economic conditions, tactics, targets, and fatalities to be examined comparatively. A country-year analysis consequently provides a basis for mapping the development and concentration of jihadist violence and assessing the conditions under which religiously framed terrorism becomes more persistent or lethal.

## 2. Conceptualization and Operational Definitions

### Islamist and Jihadist Terrorism :

The terminology used to identify terrorism with a claimed Islamic basis requires conceptual precision. The expression “Islamic terrorism” can imply that terrorism is inherently connected to Islam as a religion. For analytical purposes, the terms “Islamist terrorism” and “jihadist terrorism” are therefore more appropriate. They refer to politically motivated violence conducted by organizations that claim an Islamic religious mandate and employ religious narratives to justify their political objectives. Examples include the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, JNIM, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This distinction is particularly important because not every act of violence committed by a Muslim individual or organization constitutes religious terrorism. Violence may arise from ethnic, nationalist, separatist, criminal, or political motivations, even when the perpetrators are Muslim. The analysis consequently focuses on cases in which religious ideology forms an identifiable component of the perpetrator's stated or coded motivation rather than treating religious identity itself as evidence of terrorism. Religious ideology is treated as the principal conceptual dimension of the analysis. In the context of jihadist terrorism, it refers to an ideological framework through which terrorist organizations invoke religious concepts to legitimize political violence, define enemies, mobilize supporters, and justify their objectives. This does not imply that religious belief alone produces terrorism. Rather, it identifies the presence of a religiously framed ideological rationale within the organization or violent act.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) provides an empirical basis for this distinction through its ideology variable, which includes a category for religiously motivated terrorism. Religious ideology therefore functions as a measurable criterion rather than as a broad assumption about the religious identity of perpetrators.

### Operational Definition of the Jihadist Sample :

The study operationalizes Islamist/jihadist terrorism through the intersection of two conditions:

- i . the incident is coded in the GTD as having religious ideology;
- ii . The perpetrator is identified as a designated jihadist organization.

The second criterion includes organizations such as the Islamic State and its provinces, al-Qaeda and affiliates, Boko Haram/ISWAP, al-Shabaab, JNIM, and TTP. This combined definition produces a narrower and more defensible sample than either religious ideology or perpetrator identity alone. Two alternative definitions are retained for robustness. The first includes all incidents coded under religious ideology, while the second includes all incidents attributed to the designated jihadist organizations, regardless of whether every incident receives a religious-ideology classification. Comparing these specifications tests whether the empirical findings depend substantially on the definition of Islamist terrorism.

## Conflict and Governance :

Conflict intensity refers to the extent of armed conflict occurring within a country-year. It is measured through external conflict indicators, such as battle deaths or conflict events, merged with the GTD country-year dataset. Governance refers to the capacity and quality of state institutions, including dimensions such as rule of law and state effectiveness. Repression is treated separately as a political condition that may influence the environment in which extremist mobilization occurs. These variables are not treated as substitutes for religious ideology. Instead, they capture the political environment in which religiously framed extremist organizations operate. This distinction permits the analysis to examine whether jihadist violence is associated with ideological mobilization alone or with the interaction between religious ideology and conditions of conflict, governance, and political insecurity. The principal outcomes are the number of jihadist terrorist incidents and the number of fatalities within each country-year. Incident counts measure the frequency of violence, while fatalities capture its human cost. A third measure, lethality, is calculated as fatalities relative to the number of attacks. Additional characteristics including suicide attacks, weapons, attack types, and target categories are used to examine differences in the operational patterns of jihadist violence. The conceptual framework distinguishes three connected but analytically separate dimensions: religious ideology identifies the ideological basis of the violence; conflict and governance describe the surrounding political environment; and attacks and fatalities measure the observable intensity of jihadist terrorism. This operational separation reduces the risk of conflating religious identity with terrorist behavior and provides a clearer basis for quantitative comparison across countries and years.

## 3. Data and Methodology

The analysis uses the **Global Terrorism Database (GTD)**, an incident-level dataset covering terrorist attacks worldwide. The study examines the period **1998–2026** and focuses on incidents associated with jihadist organizations and coded as having a religious ideological motivation. For analysis, the incident-level data are aggregated into a **country-year panel**. The main dependent variables are the number of jihadist attacks and terrorism-related fatalities. Additional measures include injuries, attack success, suicide attacks, weapon type, attack type, and target category. Religious ideology is identified through the GTD ideology classification and combined with a predefined list of jihadist organizations, including the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and affiliates, Boko Haram/ISWAP, al-Shabaab, JNIM, and TTP. Alternative samples based on religious ideology alone and jihadist-group identification alone are used to test the robustness of the findings. Conflict intensity, governance, repression, and economic conditions are incorporated as explanatory variables through relevant external country-year datasets. The principal statistical approach is **negative binomial regression**, appropriate for analyzing over-dispersed terrorism-attack counts. Country and year effects are incorporated to account for differences between countries and changes over time. Regional comparisons and alternative sample specifications provide additional robustness checks. The methodology therefore combines **religious-ideological classification with quantitative measures of violence and political conditions**, allowing patterns of jihadist terrorism to be compared across countries and over time.

## 4. Global Patterns of Jihadist Violence (1998–2026)

The global pattern of jihadist violence has changed from a relatively dispersed phenomenon into one increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected regions. The 1998–2026 period captures the expansion of major jihadist organizations, the emergence and territorial expansion of the Islamic State, its subsequent transformation into decentralized regional networks, and the continuing growth of jihadist activity in parts of Africa and South Asia. The latest available global assessment shows that the overall level of terrorism declined in 2025, but the decline was accompanied by increasing geographical concentration.

*Table 1. Selected Global Indicators of Terrorism, 2025*

| Indicator                                                             | 2025 figure |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Global terrorism deaths                                               | 5,582       |
| Change in deaths                                                      | – 28%       |
| Terrorist attacks                                                     | 2,944       |
| Change in attacks                                                     | – 22%       |
| Share of deaths concentrated in five countries                        | ~70%        |
| Share of deaths occurring in conflict-affected countries              | 99%         |
| Share of global attacks attributed to Islamic State and affiliates    | ~17%        |
| Share of fatalities caused by IS affiliates, JNIM, al-Shabaab and TTP | ~70%        |

*Source: Global Terrorism Index 2026 data reported in the supplied research material.*

The figures demonstrate an important contrast. Terrorism reduced globally in 2025, yet its impact remained highly concentrated. Approximately 70 per cent of terrorism deaths occurred in only five countries - Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel, accounted for more than half of global terrorism deaths. At the same time, the Islamic State and its affiliates remained the deadliest actor, accounting for approximately 17 per cent of attacks worldwide.

The regional distribution reveals a major shift in the geography of jihadist violence. Africa has become the principal center of contemporary militant Islamist activity, while Pakistan represents the most prominent concentration in South Asia. In 2025, militant Islamist groups were associated with approximately 23,968 fatalities and 8,375 violent events in Africa, representing a 24 per cent year-on-year increase in fatalities. Six of the ten countries most affected by terrorism were African, and all twenty of the deadliest individual attacks recorded in 2025 occurred in Africa. Pakistan presents a contrasting South Asian pattern. It recorded 1,045 terrorist attacks and 1,139 deaths in 2025, the country's highest level since 2013. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also recorded an increase of approximately 14.8 per cent in lethality, with considerable activity concentrated around international borders.

Table 2. Comparative pattern of contemporary jihadist violence

| Region / indicator                  | Recent evidence                                | Main groups / pattern                                       | Comparative significance                                                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-Saharan Africa                  | 23,968 fatalities; 8,375 violent events (2025) | JNIM, Islamic State affiliates, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram/ISWA | Current major global concentration of jihadist violence                     |
| Sahel                               | 9,928 fatalities (12 months to mid-2026)       | JNIM and ISGS                                               | Most lethal African theatre                                                 |
| Somalia                             | ~7,350 average annual fatalities since 2023    | Primarily al-Shabaab                                        | Sustained high-intensity violence                                           |
| Lake Chad Basin<br>Boko Haram, ISWA | 28% increase in fatalities in 2025             | Boko Haram, ISWA                                            | Persistent West African theatre                                             |
| Pakistan                            | 1,139 terrorism deaths; 1,045 incidents (2025) | TTP and other militant organizations                        | Major South Asian concentration                                             |
| Global terrorism                    | 5,582 deaths; 2,944 incidents (2025)           | All terrorist organizations                                 | Overall terrorism declined, despite severe regional jihadist concentrations |

Sources: Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026*; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026 regional analysis. The Africa figures measure militant-Islamist-group-linked violence and therefore should not be treated as identical to GTD's terrorism coding.

The comparison indicates that jihadist violence cannot be understood through a single geographical model. In the Sahel and parts of Africa, jihadist organizations benefit from prolonged conflict and weak state control; in Pakistan, border dynamics and militant insurgency are particularly significant. In the Middle East, the decline of the Islamic State's territorial “caliphate” did not eliminate the organization’s capacity for violence but contributed to a transition towards dispersed networks and regional affiliates.

The geographical concentration of jihadist violence does not remove the importance of religious ideology. Rather, it demonstrates how ideological mobilization operates within different political environments. Groups identified as jihadist including the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, JNIM, and TTP claim an Islamic religious mandate while pursuing political and organizational objectives. The analysis therefore treats religious ideology as a defining characteristic of the selected form of terrorism, while recognizing that conflict, governance, repression, and socioeconomic conditions influence where and how such violence develops. Overall, the 1998–2026 period shows three broad patterns: the persistence of religiously framed jihadist mobilization, the geographical shift towards Africa and conflict-affected parts of South Asia, and the transformation of major jihadist organizations from territorial projects into decentralized networks and affiliates. The decline in global terrorism in 2025 therefore should not be interpreted as the disappearance of jihadist violence; rather, the problem has become more geographically concentrated and increasingly embedded in local conflict environments.

## 5. Religious Ideology and Patterns of Violence

Religious ideology becomes particularly visible when jihadist organizations operate beyond the territories in which they are primarily based. Although the largest concentration of Islamist terrorism has historically occurred in Muslim-majority and conflict-affected countries, jihadist organizations have also carried out or inspired attacks in non-Muslim-majority countries. These attacks demonstrate the transnational character of religiously framed militancy and the ability of ideological narratives to extend beyond local conflicts. A clear historical pattern can be observed from the late 1990s onwards. Al-Qaeda's attacks increasingly presented Western states and their citizens as legitimate targets. The most consequential example was the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, in which nineteen al-Qaeda-trained hijackers carried out coordinated attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people. The FBI identifies the perpetrators as members trained by al-Qaeda and records the attacks as among the most lethal terrorist attacks in history.

India and Europe subsequently became two important arenas for jihadist violence. Mumbai attacks in 2008, The Madrid train bombings of 2004, London bombings of 2005, Paris attacks of 2015, Brussels attacks of 2016, and several later attacks demonstrated different forms of transnational and locally inspired jihadist violence. Europol identifies the Paris attacks of November 2015 as an Islamic State operation that killed 130 people and injured 368. It also records the Brussels attacks of March 2016 as part of the expanding IS-related terrorist threat in Europe.

*Table 3. Selected Islamist/Jihadist Attacks in Non-Muslim-Majority Countries*

| Year | Country        | Attack                                                                                 | Organisation / ideological affiliation | Deaths / Victims |
|------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1998 | United States  | U.S. embassy bombings were planned by al-Qaeda; attacks occurred in Kenya and Tanzania | al-Qaeda                               | 224              |
| 2001 | United States  | 11 September attacks                                                                   | al-Qaeda                               | ~3,000           |
| 2004 | Spain          | Madrid train bombings                                                                  | al-Qaeda-linked jihadist network       | 191              |
| 2005 | United Kingdom | London 7/7 bombings                                                                    | al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist terrorism   | 52               |
| 2008 | India          | Mumbai attacks (26/11)                                                                 | Lashkar-e-Taiba                        | 166              |

|      |                |                                       |                                                 |     |
|------|----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 2015 | France         | Paris attacks                         | Islamic State                                   | 130 |
| 2016 | Belgium        | Brussels bombings                     | Islamic State                                   | 32  |
| 2016 | France         | Nice truck attack                     | IS-inspired jihadist violence                   | 86  |
| 2017 | United Kingdom | Manchester Arena bombing              | IS-inspired jihadist terrorism                  | 22  |
| 2017 | United Kingdom | London Bridge / Borough Market attack | IS-inspired jihadist terrorism                  | 8   |
| 2019 | Sri Lanka      | Easter Sunday bombings                | National Thowheeth Jama'ath / IS-linked network | 259 |
| 2020 | Austria        | Vienna attack                         | IS-inspired jihadist terrorism                  | 4   |
| 2024 | India          | Reasi attack                          | Lashkar-e-Taiba-linked Islamist militants       | 9   |
| 2025 | India          | Pahalgam attack                       | Pakistan-based LeT / TRF, according to NIA      | 26  |

Source: Global Terrorism Database (GTD), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland.

The cases demonstrate that jihadist violence has not been confined to Muslim-majority societies. The United States, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, India, Austria, and Sri Lanka have all experienced major attacks associated with Islamist or jihadist organizations or networks. In several cases, the organizations had operational or ideological links to Muslim-majority conflict environments rather than representing the governments of those countries.

India provides an especially important case because jihadist violence has combined cross-border organizational links, religious targeting, and the Kashmir conflict. Pakistan-based organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-

Mohammed have been central to India's counter-terrorism concerns. India's National Investigation Agency identifies LeT/The Resistance Front among the organizations designated as terrorist organizations under the country's anti-terrorism framework. The 2008 Mumbai attacks represented one of the clearest examples of transnational jihadist violence against civilians in India. The attacks killed 166 people and were linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba. More recently, the 2025 Pahalgam attack demonstrated the continuing relevance of religiously framed and cross-border militancy. The NIA's charge sheet attributes planning, facilitation, and execution of the attack to Pakistan-based LeT/TRF and describes the killings as religion-based targeted killings; 25 tourists and one local civilian were killed. India differs from many Western cases because jihadist violence has developed alongside a prolonged territorial and political conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. Consequently, religious ideology intersects with territorial disputes, cross-border militancy, local recruitment, and regional geopolitics. This makes India particularly useful for examining the interaction between religious ideology and political conflict rather than treating ideology as an isolated cause. The European evidence further illustrates the changing organizational character of jihadist violence. The United Kingdom recorded 52 deaths from the 7 July 2005 attacks, while the 2017 Manchester Arena attack killed 22 people. British government assessments describe Islamist terrorism as a threat involving individuals who claim a religious justification for terrorism, while explicitly distinguishing that claim from Islam as a religion.

The same distinction is important in interpreting the data. The presence of religious language, symbols, or organizational affiliation does not mean that every Muslim individual or every Muslim-majority society supports terrorism. Rather, jihadist organizations selectively interpret religious concepts and employ them as a framework for legitimizing political violence. The empirical pattern is therefore better understood as religiously framed political violence operating through particular organizations and political environments. The global evidence also shows an important asymmetry. Jihadist violence has produced substantial casualties within Muslim-majority countries as well as outside them. Pakistan, for example, recorded 1,139 terrorism deaths and 1,045 incidents in 2025, while the Islamic State and its affiliates remained the world's deadliest terrorist actor. This demonstrates that jihadist organizations cannot simply be conceptualized as actors fighting non-Muslims. Their victims include Muslims, non-Muslims, state officials, political opponents, religious minorities, and civilians.

Consequently, religious ideology should be understood as a mobilizing and legitimizing component of jihadist violence, rather than as a sufficient explanation for its geographical distribution. The comparison between Muslim-majority conflict zones and non-Muslim-majority target countries suggests that ideology provides a transnational frame, while conflict, state capacity, political grievances, and organizational opportunity influence where that ideology is translated into violence.

## 6. Conflict, Governance, and Islamist Terrorism

Religious ideology provides jihadist organizations with a framework for legitimizing violence, but ideology alone does not explain the geographical concentration or intensity of Islamist terrorism. The distribution of jihadist violence since the late 1990s shows a strong association with environments characterized by armed conflict, weak state institutions, political instability, and limited governmental control. In such settings, ideological narratives can become connected to existing grievances and provide organizations with opportunities for recruitment, territorial expansion, and sustained violence. Armed conflict is particularly important. The overwhelming majority of recent terrorism fatalities have occurred in countries experiencing ongoing conflict. In 2025, approximately 99 per cent of terrorism deaths were recorded in conflict-affected countries. This relationship suggests that jihadist ideology is often most operationally effective where state authority is already challenged. Conflict creates insecurity, weakens institutions, disrupts economic and social structures, and provides militant organizations with spaces in which they can organize and operate. The Sahel illustrates this interaction particularly clearly. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and parts of Nigeria have experienced the expansion of groups including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State affiliates. The expansion of these

organizations cannot be explained only by religious doctrine. Local political grievances, intercommunal tensions, weak security institutions, porous borders, and prolonged instability have created conditions that allow jihadist organizations to establish influence. Religious ideology can then provide a broader narrative through which these organizations frame political struggles and mobilize local populations.

Governance is similarly important. Where governments have limited administrative reach or weak capacity to provide security and public services, non-state organisations may find greater opportunities to establish parallel systems of authority. Jihadist groups can exploit these institutional gaps by presenting themselves as alternative authorities, imposing their own rules, collecting resources, and controlling territory or communities. The ideological dimension is significant because these forms of authority are frequently presented as religiously legitimate rather than merely political or military. Repression can also produce complicated effects. Heavy-handed security responses may weaken militant organisations in some circumstances, but indiscriminate repression can simultaneously intensify grievances and strengthen extremist narratives. Jihadist propaganda frequently portrays governments as illegitimate or hostile to Islam and uses civilian suffering, state violence, and political exclusion as evidence supporting its mobilization claims. Consequently, the relationship between state repression and terrorism is unlikely to be linear.

Economic conditions should also be interpreted cautiously. Poverty by itself does not provide a sufficient explanation for jihadist terrorism. Many individuals living in poor communities do not participate in terrorism, while terrorist organisations can emerge in areas with different levels of economic development. More relevant may be the interaction between economic insecurity, unemployment, political exclusion, conflict, and weak institutions. These conditions can reduce the opportunity costs of joining armed organisations and make communities more vulnerable to recruitment.

The comparison between regions therefore points towards an interaction rather than a single causal pathway. Religious ideology supplies a language of legitimacy, identity, and mobilization; conflict creates opportunities for organized violence; weak governance reduces the state's ability to prevent or contain militant activity; and political or socioeconomic grievances can facilitate recruitment. The relative importance of each factor varies across countries and organisations. The transformation of the Islamic State after the collapse of its territorial caliphate further demonstrates this interaction. The loss of large-scale territorial control did not eliminate jihadist ideology or organisational capacity. Instead, the movement increasingly relied on regional affiliates and decentralized networks, including Islamic State branches in the Sahel, Somalia, and Khorasan. This shift illustrates how an ideological project can survive changes in territorial and organisational conditions.

The available evidence therefore supports a distinction between **ideological motivation and enabling conditions**. Religious ideology helps explain why particular organisations justify violence and how they construct enemies and objectives. Conflict and weak governance help explain where those organisations can operate and why violence may become persistent. Understanding jihadist terrorism consequently requires both dimensions to be examined together rather than reducing the phenomenon either to religion or to socioeconomic deprivation.

## 7. Statistical Analysis and Robustness

The quantitative analysis is designed to examine whether the distribution and intensity of jihadist violence are systematically associated with religious ideology, conflict, governance, and socioeconomic conditions. The Global Terrorism Database provides incident-level information that can be converted into a country-year panel, allowing differences across countries and changes over time to be measured consistently. The main analytical period is 1998–2025, while 2026 is used as the latest reporting year for global terrorism indicators because the Global Terrorism Index 2026 reports on events recorded during 2025.

The scale of the recent terrorism problem provides an important empirical starting point. Global terrorism deaths declined by **28% to 5,582 in 2025**, while the number of attacks declined by **22% to 2,944**. Despite this overall reduction, terrorism became highly concentrated geographically. Approximately **70% of all terrorism deaths occurred in only five countries: Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo**. Moreover, approximately **99% of terrorism deaths occurred in countries experiencing ongoing conflict**. These figures suggest that the decline in global terrorism should not be interpreted as an equal reduction across all regions. Instead, severe jihadist violence remains concentrated in particular political and conflict environments. The organisational distribution is similarly concentrated. The Islamic State and its affiliates remained the deadliest terrorist actor in 2025 and were associated with approximately **17% of terrorist attacks worldwide**. Four major jihadist group networks Islamic State affiliates, JNIM, al-Shabaab, and TTP together accounted for approximately **70% of terrorism fatalities**. This concentration is important for the religious-ideological dimension because these organisations explicitly employ religious narratives and Islamic terminology in legitimizing their political objectives.

The African theatre demonstrates the strongest recent expansion. In 2025, militant Islamist groups in the Sahel, Somalia, and Lake Chad Basin were associated with approximately **23,968 fatalities and 8,375 violent events**, with fatalities increasing by around **24% compared with the previous year**. Six of the ten countries most affected by terrorism were African, and all twenty of the deadliest individual terrorist attacks recorded during the year occurred in Africa. The figures indicate that the contemporary geography of jihadist violence has shifted substantially towards sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel. Pakistan represents the principal South Asian concentration. In 2025, the country recorded **1,045 terrorist attacks and 1,139 deaths**, the highest level reported since 2013. TTP's lethality also increased by approximately **14.8%** during the year. The concentration of attacks near international borders further indicates the relevance of territorial insecurity and cross-border militant networks in shaping the intensity of jihadist violence.

## Quantitative Variables :

At the country-year level, the principal dependent variable is the **number of jihadist attacks**. A second outcome is the **number of fatalities**, while lethality is calculated as total deaths divided by the number of attacks. Injuries provide an additional measure of the human consequences of violence. The GTD also permits examination of suicide attacks, explosives, firearms, attack types, and target categories. The central religious-ideological measure is constructed by combining two criteria: an incident must be coded under **religious ideology** and must be attributed to a predefined jihadist organisation. The organisation list includes the Islamic State and its variants, al-Qaeda and affiliates, AQAP, AQIM, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, ISWAP, JNIM, TTP, and other relevant jihadist groups. This approach prevents the analysis from treating every incident involving a Muslim perpetrator as religious terrorism. The principal explanatory variables include **conflict intensity, state capacity and governance, political repression, GDP per capita, unemployment, and demographic conditions**. Conflict measures can be obtained from UCDP or ACLED, governance indicators from sources such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators or V-Dem, and economic controls from internationally comparable economic datasets.

## Expected Statistical Relationship:

The descriptive evidence already indicates a strong association between conflict and terrorism: **99% of terrorism deaths in 2025 occurred in countries experiencing ongoing conflict**. The statistical model is intended to determine whether this relationship remains significant when differences in governance, economic conditions, and country characteristics are considered simultaneously. A negative-binomial model is appropriate for the attack-count outcome because terrorism data contain many country-years with few or no attacks alongside a relatively small number of country-years with extremely high counts. The model can therefore estimate how changes in conflict intensity, governance, repression, and economic conditions are associated with expected jihadist attack counts while accounting for over-dispersion.

Country effects are included to control for relatively persistent differences between states, while year effects capture global changes affecting all countries. Standard errors should be clustered at the country level. The resulting coefficients can be presented as incidence-rate ratios, making the substantive interpretation easier: values above one indicate a higher expected number of attacks, while values below one indicate a lower expected number.

### Robustness Tests:

Several alternative specifications are necessary because the classification of religiously motivated terrorism is sensitive to measurement choices. The first robustness test should use **all GTD incidents coded as religious ideology**, regardless of whether the perpetrator appears on the predefined jihadist list. The second should use the **jihadist-group sample alone**, including attacks attributed to designated jihadist organisations even where the religious-ideology field is not consistently coded. A further test should exclude incidents for which GTD attribution is uncertain or where the database questions whether the incident qualifies as terrorism. Regional models should also be estimated separately for **sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East**, since the political and conflict environments differ considerably across these regions.

The analysis should additionally account for the methodological change in GTD collection after 2012. Because the database documentation identifies an expansion in collection methodology during the post-2012 period, comparisons across the entire 1998–2025 period should be interpreted carefully. Period indicators or separate pre-2012 and post-2012 specifications can help determine whether the principal relationships are robust to this change. Taken together, the available evidence points towards a highly concentrated pattern of jihadist violence rather than a uniform global phenomenon. Religious ideology provides the organisational and justificatory framework, while the exceptionally high concentration of violence in conflict-affected countries suggests that political instability and state weakness are important conditions under which that ideology can be translated into sustained violence. The final regression analysis using the complete GTD country-year dataset will determine the strength and statistical significance of these relationships.

## 8. Counter-Terrorism and Policy Implications

The empirical patterns of jihadist violence suggest that effective counter-terrorism cannot depend exclusively on military operations and intelligence-led disruption. Religious ideology remains important because jihadist organisations use religious narratives to legitimize violence, recruit supporters, construct enemies, and maintain organizational identity. Counter-terrorism therefore requires measures capable of disrupting terrorist organisations while also reducing the political and social environments in which extremist narratives can gain influence. The **United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy** provides a useful framework for this approach. Its four pillars combine measures addressing conditions conducive to terrorism, prevention and combat of terrorism, capacity-building for states, and the protection of human rights and the rule of law. This framework is particularly relevant to the findings of the present analysis because the concentration of jihadist violence in conflict-affected and weak-governance environments indicates that security responses need to be accompanied by institutional and preventive measures.

### Disrupting Jihadist Organisations :

The first requirement is the disruption of organisations that use religious ideology to organise and justify terrorist violence. Intelligence cooperation, financial investigations, border security, weapons interdiction, digital monitoring under appropriate legal safeguards, and coordinated law-enforcement operations can reduce the operational capacity of groups such as Islamic State affiliates, al-Qaeda-linked organisations, JNIM, al-Shabaab, and TTP. International cooperation is especially important because contemporary jihadist organisations frequently operate through transnational networks rather than remaining confined to a single territory. Information sharing between national counter-terrorism agencies, coordinated investigations, monitoring of terrorist financing, and cooperation concerning foreign terrorist fighters can therefore prevent organisations from exploiting jurisdictional gaps. However, organizational disruption should not be equated with the

permanent elimination of extremist ideology. The experience of the Islamic State demonstrates that territorial defeat can be followed by decentralization, with affiliates and regional branches continuing violent activity. Counter-terrorism strategies must therefore address both the organizational structure and the ideological ecosystem that enables recruitment and mobilization.

### **Preventing Ideological Radicalisation:**

Because religious ideology constitutes an important component of jihadist mobilization, prevention strategies should address the misuse and distortion of religious concepts without treating an entire religion or religious community as a security threat. The United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism explicitly identifies the misuse of beliefs and political ideologies among radicalisation processes while also identifying structural conditions such as poor governance, discrimination, unresolved conflict, and lack of socioeconomic opportunities. This distinction is essential. A counter-terrorism policy that broadly associates Islam or Muslim identity with terrorism may reinforce social exclusion and provide extremist organisations with propaganda material. Prevention should instead focus on individuals and networks demonstrating credible indicators of support for terrorist violence, while strengthening community resilience against extremist recruitment.

Education can contribute to this process through critical thinking, media literacy, religious literacy, and awareness of extremist propaganda. Religious scholars and community organisations can also play a constructive role when they challenge interpretations that legitimize violence while maintaining clear distinctions between theological disagreement and support for terrorism.

### **Governance and Conflict Prevention:**

The strong concentration of terrorism in conflict-affected countries gives conflict prevention a central position in long-term counter-terrorism policy. The UN's preventive framework identifies unresolved conflict and poor governance among conditions conducive to violent extremism. Consequently, counter-terrorism strategies should not operate separately from peacebuilding, institutional reform, and conflict-resolution programmes. Strengthening state institutions is particularly important in areas where terrorist organisations exploit limited governmental presence. Effective policing, accessible justice, accountable security forces, functioning local administration, and the delivery of basic public services can reduce the institutional gaps that militant organisations attempt to exploit. At the same time, counter-terrorism operations must maintain legitimacy. Excessive or indiscriminate force can increase civilian grievances and potentially strengthen extremist narratives. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy therefore places human rights and the rule of law among the fundamental components of counter-terrorism. Security measures that violate these principles may undermine public trust and weaken the long-term effectiveness of counter-terrorism programmes.

### **Border Security and International Cooperation:**

The geographical patterns identified in South Asia and Africa demonstrate the importance of cross-border cooperation. Jihadist organisations frequently operate across borders where state control is weaker and where local conflicts extend across national boundaries. Intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, joint investigations, and mechanisms for tracking terrorist financing can reduce these opportunities. Foreign terrorist fighters require particular attention. International frameworks emphasize prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies for individuals linked to terrorist organisations. A purely punitive approach may be insufficient in cases involving individuals who are disengaging from terrorist organisations, particularly where children and other family members are involved.

## Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Not every individual associated with an extremist organisation presents the same level of threat. Effective rehabilitation programmes can distinguish between committed terrorist operatives, ideological supporters, coerced participants, and individuals exposed to extremist environments without direct involvement in violence. The UN's current rehabilitation and reintegration programme emphasises evidence-based disengagement, psychosocial support, resocialisation, community acceptance, and monitoring. Such programmes should be carefully evaluated rather than assumed to be effective. The United Nations has specifically emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluating counter-terrorism and preventing/countering violent-extremism programmes. This is particularly relevant for the quantitative approach adopted here: counter-terrorism policies should be assessed through measurable changes in recruitment, terrorist incidents, fatalities, recidivism, and community-level security rather than through programme implementation alone.

## A Balanced Counter-Terrorism Approach :

The evidence supports a **multi-dimensional counter-terrorism strategy**. Military and law-enforcement measures remain necessary for preventing imminent attacks and dismantling terrorist organizations, but they should operate alongside ideological prevention, conflict resolution, governance reform, community engagement, economic opportunity, and rehabilitation.

The central policy implication is therefore not that religious ideology should be ignored, nor that religion should be treated as the cause of terrorism. Jihadist organizations use religious ideology as a framework for legitimizing violence, but the ability to transform ideology into sustained terrorism depends heavily on political and institutional conditions. Counter-terrorism is consequently most effective when it simultaneously reduces the operational capacity of terrorist organizations, limits opportunities for ideological mobilization, strengthens legitimate state authority, and protects the rights and security of affected populations.

## 9. Conclusion

The evidence from 1998–2026 shows that religious ideology is central to the identity, justification, and mobilization of jihadist organizations, but it does not operate independently of political conditions. Groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, JNIM, and TTP use religious narratives to legitimize violence, while conflict, weak governance, political instability, and institutional weakness create environments in which such ideology can be translated into sustained violence. The concentration of terrorism in conflict-affected countries strongly supports this interaction. In 2025, approximately 99% of terrorism fatalities occurred in countries experiencing ongoing conflict, while around 70% were concentrated in Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The expansion of jihadist violence in the Sahel and the resurgence in Pakistan further demonstrate the importance of these enabling conditions. At the same time, attacks in countries including the United States, India, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, and Sri Lanka demonstrate the transnational reach of jihadist ideology. The evidence also shows that Muslims themselves constitute a substantial share of those affected by jihadist violence, reinforcing the distinction between **Islam as a religion and the political instrumentalisation of religious ideology by jihadist organizations**. The central topic is therefore that **religious ideology explains the character and justification of jihadist terrorism, while conflict and governance conditions strongly influence its scale and geographical concentration**. Effective counter-terrorism must consequently combine organizational disruption with conflict prevention, accountable governance, protection of civilians, and measures against extremist mobilization.

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