

Foreign Policy Responses to Terrorism: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Military vs  
Diplomatic Approaches in the Middle East

Qamar Mansoor

[Qamarmansoor1964@gmail.com](mailto:Qamarmansoor1964@gmail.com)

M.Phil Scholar, IR Department, Karachi University, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Qamar Mansoor [Qamarmansoor1964@gmail.com](mailto:Qamarmansoor1964@gmail.com)

Received: 05-02-2026

Revised: 20-02-2026

Accepted: 08-03-2026

Published: 22-03-2026

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the effectiveness of the military and diplomatic foreign-policy responses to the issue of terrorism in the Middle East. Whether states ought to employ force or diplomacy is not an issue but the effectiveness of each tool against various dimensions of effect: immediate disruption, operational degradation, long-term reduction of attacks, terminating conflicts, legitimacy, and humanitarian cost. The paper integrates a process tracing approach with descriptive secondary data using the Global Terrorism Index, ACLED, RAND, and United Nations documents, and the broader counterterrorism literature, through a structured focused comparison of Iraq-Syria, Gaza-Israel, and Yemen-Red Sea dynamics and the multilateral counterterrorism regime. This evidence suggests that military action can be extremely successful when terrorist groups occupy land, concentrate their warriors, have visible command centers, or pose dangers to the civil population that necessitates urgent security action. This tactical and operational usefulness is depicted in the territorial meltdown of Islamic State. Nevertheless, military intervention is seldom a total cure to terrorism and can backlash, increase displacement, civilian casualties, or power gaps when unconnected to political resolution. The diplomatic tools such as ceasefires, mediation, sanctions coordination, intelligence cooperation, political accommodation and preventive development are more effective in lowering the recruitment incentive and maintaining the de-escalation, however, it relies on plausible enforcement and bargainable ends. The paper views the best Middle East counterterrorism foreign policy neither as a purely militarized one nor as a purely diplomatic one. This is a sequenced hybrid approach where force is used to protect the civilians and interfere with the capacity to commit violence and diplomacy is used to alter the incentives, establish legitimate governance and provide escape points in violence.*

**Keywords:** terrorism; counterterrorism; foreign policy; Middle East; military intervention; diplomacy; Islamic State; ceasefires; violent extremism

INTRODUCTION

Extremist forces in the Middle East have time and again drawn external and local forces into two distinct foreign-policy impulses. The former is military: annihilate training camps, kill or arrest leaders, reclaim territory, defend civilians, and penalize groups that employ spectacular violence. The second is diplomatic: negotiate ceasefires, limit financial support, coordinate intelligence, solve grievances, negotiate releases and provide political solutions that diminish motivation to mobilize forces. These strategies tend to be laid out in opposition. Before our eyes, they co-exist within the same war ecosystem and influence one another.

The Middle East is the place where one can examine this issue most carefully since the terrorist violence in the area is closely intertwined with civil war, foreign intervention, weakness of the states, regional conflict, polarization according to sectarianism, displacement, and unresolved political issues. Military pressure demolished a quasi-state project by Islamic State (IS), as the emergence and territorial loss of the group demonstrated that, in certain cases, defeating a terrorist organization in a conventional conflict is possible.

The presence of IS cells in Syria and Iraq, the strength of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and Houthi attacks during the Gaza war have demonstrated, however, that coercive action can stifle the violence without necessarily correcting the political conditions that reproduce violence.

Recent information portrays both weaknesses. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026, the number of terrorism-linked deaths worldwide dropped by 28 percent to 5,582 in 2025 and terrorism attacks were reduced by almost 22 percent to 2,944. It also indicates that the epicenter of the terrorism no longer lies in Middle East and North Africa but has shifted towards the Sahel, even though the Middle East still hosts some the biggest flashpoints such as Syria, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Yemen, and Lebanon (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2026). In the Middle East and North Africa, the number of incidents decreased by 646 in 2024 to 286 in 2025, and the number of deaths by 1,064 to 205. Syria alone declined from 430 incidents and 744 deaths in 2024 to 243 incidents and 156 deaths in 2025 (IEP, 2026).

The underlying research question these trends evoke is which response, military force or diplomacy, to foreign-policy best counters terrorism in the Middle East? It is necessary to define the question. Military action might seem to be better if effectiveness involves instant interference with the ability of the group of attackers. Diplomacy can be more valuable, should effectiveness consequate long-run lessening of terrorism, demobilization, legitimacy, or long-term peace settlement. In the event that the criterion of effectiveness is stipulated on both short- and long-term parameters, the response will most presumably be conditional, as opposed to categorical.

There are three arguments in this article. At one extreme, military force works best with territorialized terrorist groups (and concentrated military formations), and at our most extreme, as an alternative to governance, reconciliation, or legitimate security provision. Second, it is observed that diplomatic tools work best to change incentives, decrease the explosiveness of conflicts, the cooperation of intelligence and law-enforcement, and the establishment of plausible political escape routes out of violence. The third way is responsible, measured hybrid approach: military help with a threat of instant violent strength in one hand and diplomatic apparatus that includes hiring, legitimacy, funding, and political war on the other

### **Conceptual Framework: What Counts as Effectiveness?**

Counterterrorism performance is most commonly defined in a limited way. Leaders who died, weapons seized, or land reclaimed are often enumerated by governments. Such are pertinent paradigms, yet they cannot be complete since terrorism is a strategy employed by groups that are rooted within a social and political context. A group may lose areas, but maintain underground cells. A leader is replaceable but not killable. The air campaign will decrease direct attacks and will augment grievances in case of high civilian casualties. Diplomatic concessions have the capacity to defuse violence but it cannot work when those offering the concessions do not enforce them.

In this paper, effectiveness is assessed based on six dimensions. Immediate disruption is the impairment of immediate attack capacity. Operational degradation means the undermining of command, logistics, financing, recruiting and important controls over the territory. Reduced behavioral means reduced frequency and severity of attacks. Strategic termination is the process of the end of a terrorist campaign of a group, using the methods of demobilization, policing, political integration or organization breakdown. Legitimacy is the lack of invalidation of domestic and international support. Humanitarian cost is civilian casualty, displacement, damage to infrastructure and threat to radicalization due to collective punishment.

Some of the military instruments are airstrikes, special operations, partner-force training, maritime interdiction, targeted raids, border security assistance and coercive strikes. The diplomatic instruments are mediation, ceasefires, prisoner or hostage exchange policies, sanctions diplomacy, counter- financing

agreements, intelligence-sharing policies, preventive diplomacy, development and governance aid, reintegration, political settlements. No category is internally homogeneous. An attack on a plot about to occur is not a mass attack. Ceasefire that is overseen by various guarantors is not the same as an unenforced diplomatic statement.

A figure of analytical logic in the article is provided in Figure 1. The influence of military and diplomatic tools on terrorism occurs in various manners. The military mainly reduces capability and increases violence expenses. The tools of diplomacy mostly modify incentives, enhance cooperation and concern legitimacy. Their interactions are important since the military pressure may produce a bargaining leverage, whereas diplomacy may transform a war-tactical success into political stabilization.

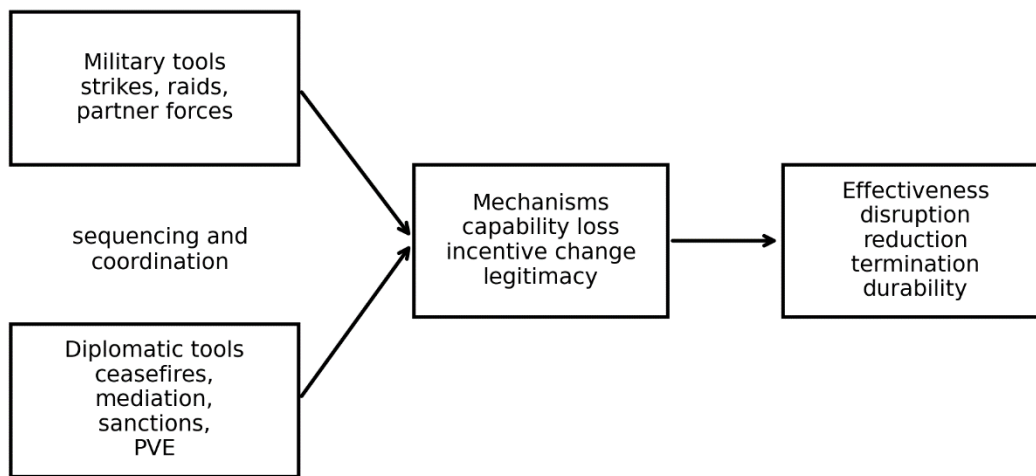


Figure 1. Analytical framework linking foreign-policy instruments to counterterrorism effectiveness.  
Source: Author's synthesis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Military Approaches and The Logic Of Coercion

Military strategies are founded on the premise that terrorism can be diminished by decimating the material capability of terror organizations. This reasoning took center stage in the Middle East, particularly following 2001 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the overall act against al-Qaeda and the IS. Military action is visible when groups rely on physical territory, fixed infrastructure, training camps, revenue sites, and visible command structures. The most evident example is the campaign against IS during 2014-2019. It took away control of key cities by IS, incapacitated its oil and tax income, assassinated or took captives of commanders, and weakened its capacity to act as a proto-state.

The literature, though, cautions that there are limits to military force. Cronin (2009) reveals that, terrorist campaigns end on various pathways such as decapitation, negotiation, repression, failure, success and reorientation. In a study by Jones and Libicki (2008) out of the combinations of terrorist groups in operations between 1968 and 2006, entries to the political process or work in the police and intelligence sphere were often the most common end to the group, and rarely the military power. This does not imply the irrelevance of force. Instead it signifies that most of the time military force is a disruption, and containment mechanism rather than an entire termination theory.

Especially disputable are targeted killing and decapitation of leaders. Other studies believe that researchers can disorganize smaller, newer, and less institutionalized groups by removing their leaders (Johnston, 2012), whereas other scholars have found that decapitation is ineffective in organizations where bureaucracies are deep-rooted, ideological, or where the organizations hold strong networks (Jordan, 2009). In the Middle East, when high-profile members of the IS and al-Qaeda organizations were killed this weakened coordination of certain times, but failed to wipe out the movements. It is a hint that organizational structure, local government, and whether the social base of the group are weakened as well make the difference in military success.

### **Diplomatic Approaches, Political Accommodation, and Prevention**

The premise of diplomatic strategies is different: Terrorist groups cannot be eliminated because of arms possession; terror can be perpetuated due to the existence of the political environment permitting recruiting, mobilizing, hiding, funding and proclaiming legitimacy. Diplomacy could deal with those conditions establishing ceasefires, de-escalation, opening up channels of political collaboration, restricting funding, and reinforcing multilateral collaboration, and enabling legitimate governance. The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy conceptualizes counterterrorism as a four-pillar initiative to target the following conditions that promote terrorism: prevention and combating terrorism, building the capacity of states and the role of the UN system, protection of human rights and role of law (United Nations General Assembly, 2006).

The diplomatic literature does not kind of greenwash talks with the terrorism-using groups. Moral and political costs of negotiation can be high and not everything in any group has viable or bargainable goals. According to Cronin (2010), governments ought to use talks in cases where the negotiations can separate militants, lessen violence or move organizations to political processes but not where talks buy time in cases of rearmament. The same is pointed out by Neumann (2007) who insists that negotiations are helpful when they are a part of a larger plan and when potential armed actors possess political constituencies that can be manipulated.

There is a counterterrorism logic of development and governance assistance, but the evidence is mixed. According to Savun and Tirone (2018), governance and civil-society assistance can minimize terrorism through enhanced freedom and the empowerment of proper avenues of grievances. Walsh and Piazza (2010) discover the violation of physical integrity rights to be a potential growth of terrorism as it will isolate communities and diminish intelligence sharing. The results have implications to the Middle East since counterterrorism campaigns are being conducted where citizens lack trust in security agencies, external actors, or central leaders.

### **The Military-Diplomatic Sequencing Problem**

Sequencing is the critical gap in theory. Military and diplomatic instruments are not applied in usual situations without each other. The war on IS featured airstrikes, special operations, training of partners, stabilization efforts, diplomacy with partners in the alliance, financing sanctions, and among the actors in

the region. Peacekeeping in Gaza and Yemen is conducted with military deterrence, sanctions, intelligence operations, and humanitarian bargaining. This implies that it might be wrong to pose questions such as which tool is better. The more important question is what tool must prevail at what point in a terrorist threat cycle.

There are four stages of that cycle conceptualized in this paper. Coercive protection and intelligence-led disruption could be necessary in the emergency phase when the civilians are under assault threat at hand. At the degradation stage, command structures and territorial control can be minimised by force. Diplomacy, governance, reconstruction, and law enforcement should solidify gains in the stabilization stage. During the termination stage, battlefield attrition is less salient in comparison with political integration, amnesty, prosecution, deradicalization, and monitoring. Failure is by states remaining in the emergency and degradation phases forever and never entering the stabilization and termination phases.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The article follows a qualitative secondary-data design that involves using descriptive statistics and structured focused comparison. It is not a new simple event-level regression. In its place, it develops a comparative analytic argument based on publicly available data and high-quality sources. The design is suitable since the research question is related to mechanisms, sequence, and effectiveness of a policy and not the estimation of a causal coefficient only once.

The cases have been chosen as they represent the various blends of military and diplomatic answers. The case of Iraq-Syria represents the most complex military operation against a territorialized terrorist group in the region. The Gaza-Israel case, exemplifies the differences in high-intensity military services as opposed to ceasefire or hostages-prisoner exchange mechanisms through negotiations. The Yemen-Red Sea situation embodies the coercive maritime reaction as well as the indirect connection of diplomatic relations to Gaza. The UN counterterrorism regime plays host to multilateral diplomatic instruments like sanctions, counter-financing, foreign terrorist fighter controls and capacity building.

The numerical measures are based on the GTI 2025 and GTI 2026, the Middle East updates of the ACLED data, and the historical data of terrorist groups terminations of RAND. The qualitative data is based on peer-reviewed literature on terrorism and on UN reports and institutional publicly available reports. The secondary data set limits the use to two issues. First, the data on terrorist events can miss cases in sparsely accessible conflict areas and may have varying definitions of violence across datasets. Second, descriptive trends alone cannot be used to demonstrate that one policy resulted in a decline. The analysis consequently treats only the descriptive data as an evidence of patterns and causal interpretation relies on processes tracking and triangulation.

Table 1 summarizes the operationalization of the two broad approaches and the criteria used to evaluate them.

| <b>Approach</b> | <b>Main instruments</b>  | <b>Expected mechanism</b>  | <b>Best-fit conditions</b>                                       | <b>Main risks</b>                                 |
|-----------------|--|--|--|---|
| Military        | Airstrikes, raids, partner-force assistance, border security, targeted | Destroy capacity, deny territory, disrupt plots, raise operational costs | Groups hold territory, expose forces, threaten mass violence, or | Civilian harm, backlash, displacement, governance |

|            |  |   |  |   |
|------------|--|---|--|---|
|            | killing, maritime interdiction   |   | depend on fixed infrastructure   | vacuum, endless escalation  |
| Diplomatic | Mediation, ceasefire, sanctions coordination, counter-financing agreements, intelligence cooperation, political accommodation, PVE and governance assistance | Change incentives, reduce escalation, build cooperation, lower recruitment appeal, create exit pathways | Groups have negotiable objectives, political constituencies, external patrons, or conflict linkages that can be influenced | Spoiler violence, moral hazard, weak enforcement, legitimizing violent actors |
| Hybrid     | Sequenced use of force, law enforcement, mediation, reconstruction, human-rights safeguards, monitored political settlement                                  | Protect civilians and convert tactical gains into durable security                                      | Fragmented conflict systems where terrorism is linked to civil war and regional rivalry                                    | Coordination failure, contradictory partner interests, short-termism          |

*Table 1. Operational definition of military, diplomatic, and hybrid foreign-policy responses.*

## RESULTS AND EVIDENCE

### **Regional trends: the Middle East improved, but not because terrorism disappeared**

According to the regional data, terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa has decreased significantly since the mid-2010s, particularly as compared to the times of IS expansion. GTI 2026 reports that incidents in the region fell from 646 in 2024 to 286 in 2025, while deaths fell from 1,064 to 205. This is coherent with a prudent conclusion: military and security campaigns, particularly in Iraq and Syria, have contributed to the movement of terrorist mass murder curbed in the territory. Ignorantly, the same figures reveal that terrorism has not disappeared. It has been further consolidated, further rooted in conflict areas, and further reliant on local instability.

Figure 2 shows the acute regional decrease of 2024 to 2025. The tendency is associated with the thesis that successful counterterrorism activities in Iraq and Syria diluted the influence of the region-wise impact of IS. But it also demonstrates the interpretation difficulty. A fall in regional figures may reflect actual change, or they may reflect a shift to alternative regions, a change in the classification of data, or a shift to other forms of organized violence.

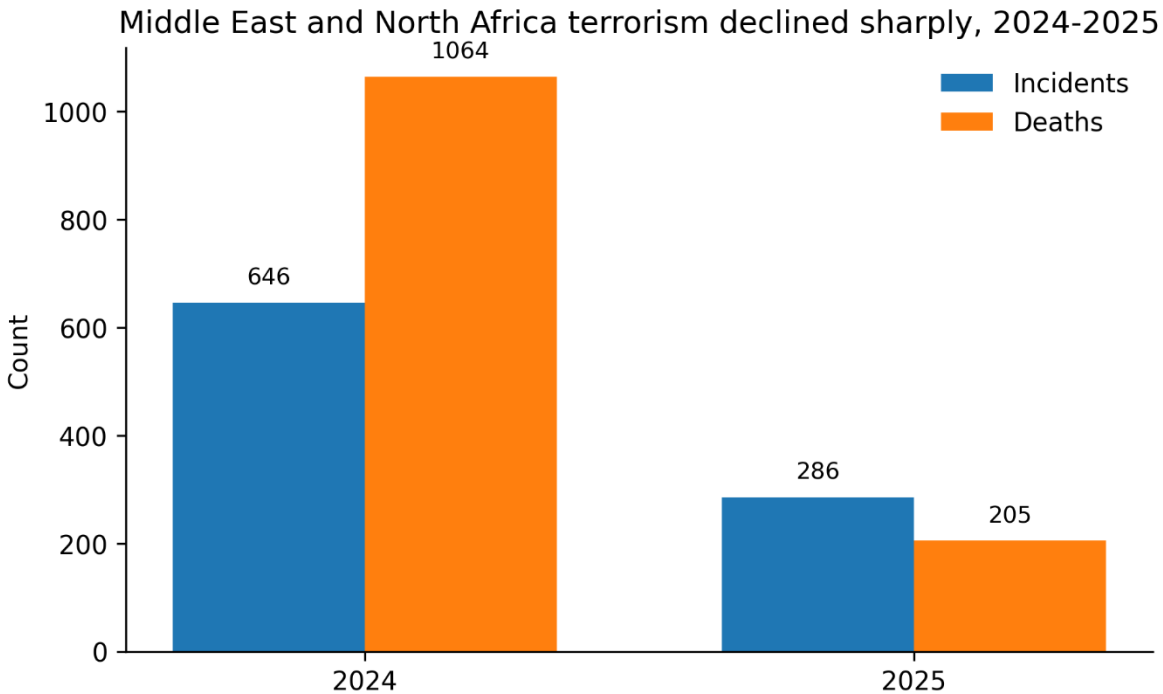


Figure 2. Middle East and North Africa terrorism indicators, 2024-2025. Data source: GTI 2026, Institute for Economics & Peace.

### Military approach: the Iraq-Syria case

The case of Iraq-Syria gives the best explanation of the effectiveness of the use of military force. IS was a secret terrorist organization. It was also in charge of major cities, controlled oil and trade routes and was taxing the people and had its own courts at its prime. Diplomacy would not have been able to take IS out of Mosul, Raqqa, Sinjar, or Deir ez-Zor. The Kurdish forces, Iraqi troops, Syrian Democratic Forces, allies in the region, and the Global Coalition led by the US were instrumental in crushing the territorial project of the group.

This is reflected in terrorism data. GTI 2026 reports that Syria's terrorism deaths fell from 744 in 2024 to 156 in 2025 and incidents fell from 430 to 243. This report points to a significant portion of the decline due to a decrease in IS activity, pointing out that the group put in fewer attacks and resulted in significantly less killing compared to 2024. This Syria-specific drop can be seen in Figure 3.

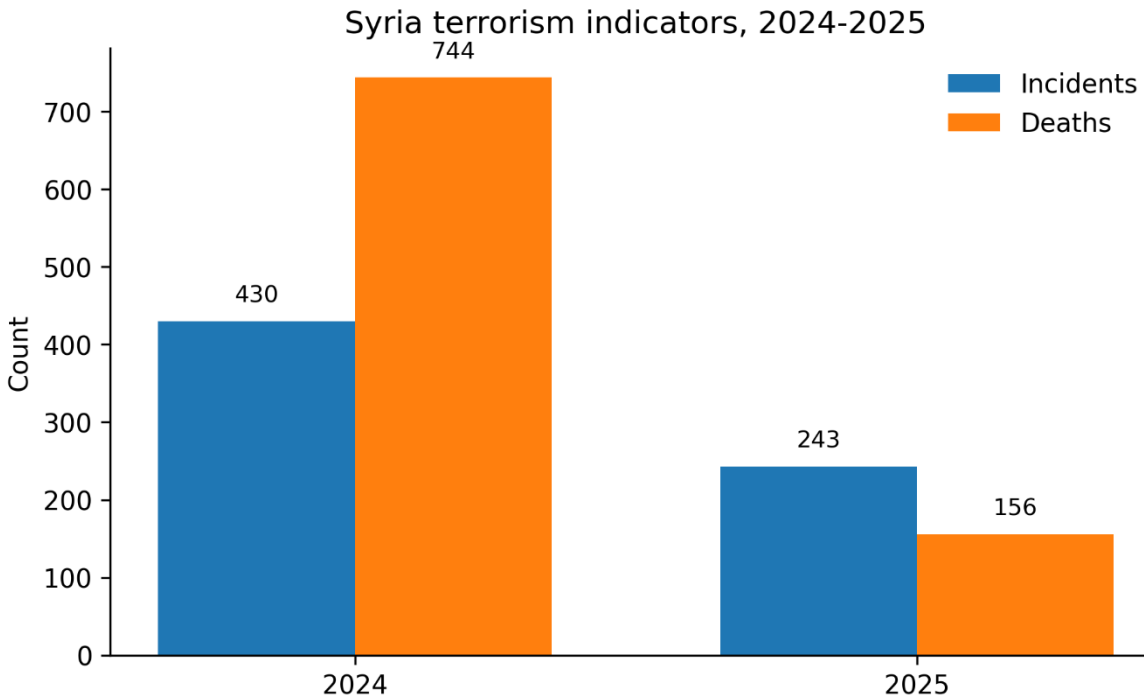


Figure 3. Syria terrorism indicators, 2024-2025. Data source: GTI 2026, Institute for Economics & Peace.

Meanwhile, the example of Iraq-Syria indicates the boundaries of a military win. IS ceased to exist as an organization but not its territorial caliphate. GTI 2026 lists IS and its affiliates as the deadliest terrorist group in the world in 2025 and documents that in 2025 the most active in MENA were IS which had 246 incidents. Of those incidents Syrian was 238 and Iraq seven. In Figure 4, the unbelievable concentration of IS activity is displayed in Syria in the form of the MENA category.

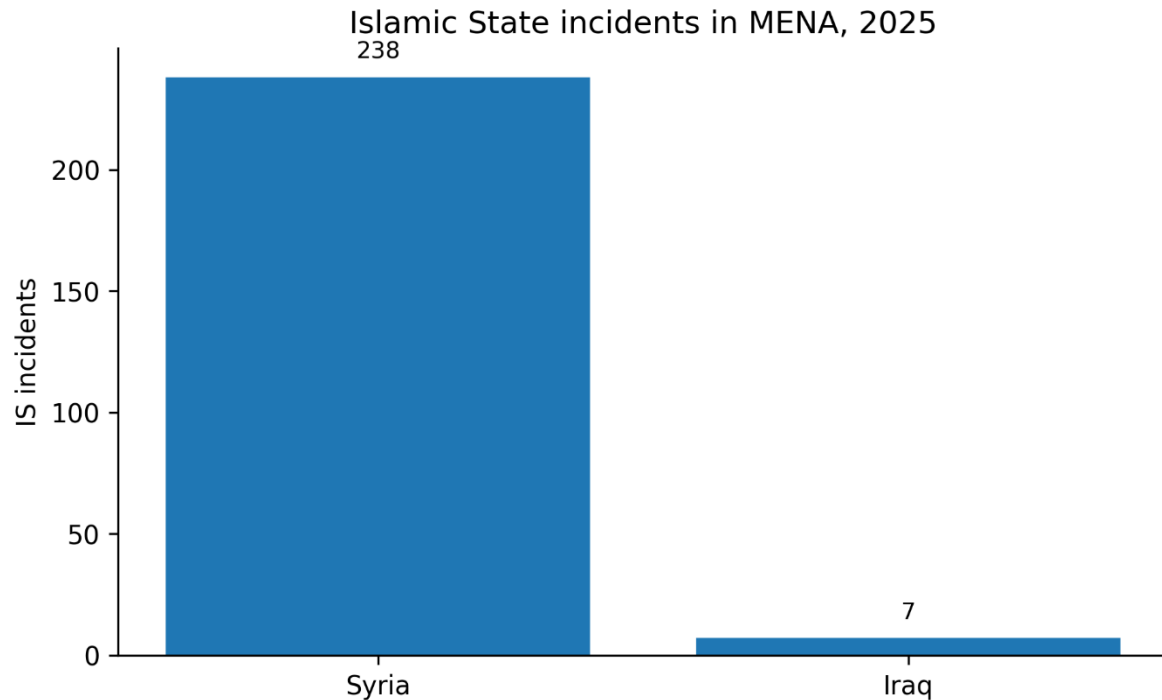


Figure 4. Islamic State incidents in MENA, 2025. Data source: GTI 2026, Institute for Economics & Peace.

This trend is much in line with the theoretical anticipation that force may overcome the presence of a terrorist proto-state but leave behind a residual insurgency. Military success is sustainable based on border control, prison security, reconstruction, local policing, community intelligence, reintegration, and legitimate governance. Without these elements, prison, camps, rural landscape, sectarian grievances and instability between armed actors can be used by their leftovers. This means that the military action was needed to destroy territorial defeat but not to terminate strategically.

The moral of the policy is conditional. Military power is efficient when the threat is structured in the form of an army or a quasi-state. It does not concur well in situations where the threat is diffuse, clandestine and grievance based, accompanied by being tied to unresolved political conflict. This difference is fundamental to prevent category error: not all battlefield targets are terrorists, and not all political security is battles.

#### **Diplomatic Approach: Ceasefires, De-Escalation, and Cooperative Regimes**

The diplomatic methods yield various types of evidence. Their impacts can be manifested in the form of lowered escalation, enhanced collaboration, or altered incentives instead of ruined foe property. A good example can be provided by the February 2025 Middle Eastern update of ACLED. Following the 42-day ceasefire and hostage-prisoner swap deal between Israel and Hamas that came into effect on 19 January 2025, ACLED noted that the number of IDF assaults in Gaza dropped by more than 27 violent incidents a day in January prior to the ceasefire down to less than three a day after the ceasefire. Another estimate proposed by ACLED counted 1,450 Palestinian deaths in IDF campaigns prior to the ceasefire versus at least 16 Palestinian deaths in the rest of January following the agreement.

This change is visualized in figure 5. It is not to say that diplomacy resolved the Israel-Palestine conflict or Hamas is no longer a violent party. It does demonstrate that violence can be diminished rather quickly in

case the parties are willing to abide by rules, exchanges, and sequencing that are monitored. This same ACLED update reports that the Houthis halted hostilities against vessels in the Red Sea and Israel just midway through January along with the Gaza ceasefire and political move in Washington. This indicates terrorist or militant violence in the Middle East is highly likely to get cross-linked between theaters; where diplomacy in one sector can alleviate violence in another.

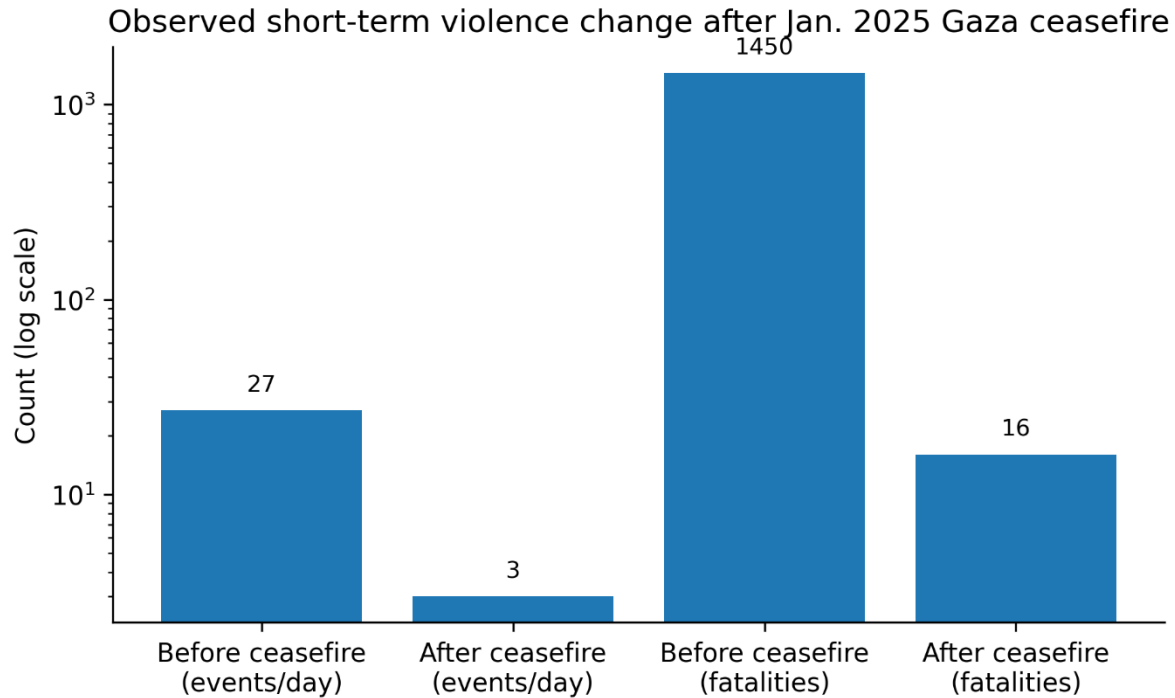
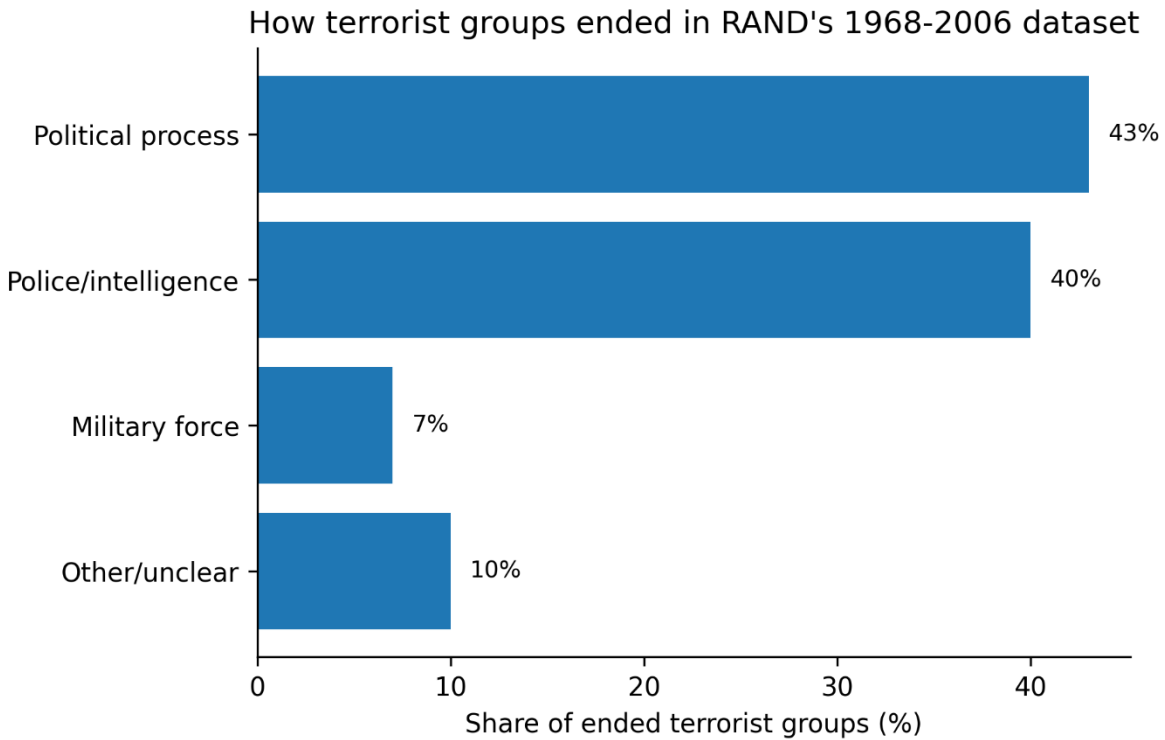


Figure 5. Short-term violence changed after the January 2025 Gaza ceasefire. Values are shown on a log scale because fatalities before the ceasefire were much higher than post-ceasefire incidents. Data source: ACLED Middle East Overview, February 2025.

The diplomatic record is not all positive. Ceasefires are not lasting, spoilers may come in to kill the negotiations, and they may fail because parties think that further fighting gives them a better bargaining point. Diplomacy is also at a disadvantage against organizations that have maximalist, apocalyptic or ones that are unattached to a territorial base. The history however, indicates that political procedures and law-enforcing collaboration are very essential in ending terrorist campaigns. In their review of 648 terrorist organizations, RAND revealed that of the 268 organizations that dissolved, 43 percent transitioned to the political system and 40 percent were disbanded by law enforcement and intelligence operations, with only 7 percent being disbanded by military means (Jones & Libicki, 2008). The sum of those findings is shown by figure 6.



*Figure 6. How terrorist groups ended in RAND's 1968-2006 dataset. Data source: Jones and Libicki (2008), RAND Corporation. The residual category represents rounded remainder and other pathways not represented in the three main categories.*

### Comparative effectiveness matrix

In Table 2, the author uses the six criteria of effectiveness on the main cases of the article. The evaluation is subjective and founded on secondary evidence and not an original scoring data. It is developed to recognize the situations when the different responses are most effective.

| Case                 | Dominant response            | Immediate disruption                                    | Operational degradation  | Durability  | Legitimacy and humanitarian effects                                 | Overall assessment   |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| IS in Iraq and Syria | Military-led hybrid campaign | High: territorial and command structures were disrupted | High: caliphate project collapsed and leadership networks were damaged | Medium: residual cells persisted, especially in Syria | Mixed: civilian harm and detention issues remain politically costly | Military force was necessary but required stabilization and diplomacy to consolidate gains |

|                                  |   |  |  |  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| Gaza-Israel, Jan. 2025 ceasefire | Diplomatic ceasefire under coercive background conditions | High short-term reduction in violence after agreement      | Low to medium: ceasefire did not eliminate armed capacity                      | Low to uncertain: dependent on further stages and political will           | Potentially positive if humanitarian access and prisoner or hostage exchanges are implemented | Diplomacy reduced violence quickly but did not settle underlying conflict            |
| Yemen-Red Sea/Houthi attacks     | Mixed coercion, designation, indirect diplomacy           | Medium: strikes and maritime defense can intercept threats | Low to medium: attacks can resume if Gaza linkage remains active               | Uncertain: depends on regional settlement and shipping-security guarantees | Mixed: strikes risk escalation and humanitarian pressure in Yemen                             | Diplomacy linked to regional de-escalation is essential                              |
| UN counterterrorism regime       | Multilateral diplomacy and legal coordination             | Low direct disruption                                      | Medium: financing, travel, sanctions, and capacity building constrain networks | Medium to high when implemented consistently                               | Positive if rights-based, negative if abused by states  | Diplomacy is strongest as enabling infrastructure for law enforcement and prevention |

*Table 2. Comparative effectiveness of selected military and diplomatic responses.*

## DISCUSSION

### Why military force works in some conditions

The testimony is in favor of a conditional defence of military force. Where terror groups acquire geographical ground, conventionalize, and become administratively observable, they offer targets susceptible to nothing less than a disciplined military effort to overcome. The experience of the Middle East with the IS indicates that the inability to employ force in the given circumstances may permit mass atrocities, the entrenchment of territories, and additional international recruitment. The use of military tools is thus the most justifiable in the context of protection of citizens, liberation of territories and interference of the target assaults.

Military force is however less effective when they are supposed to resolve political conflict. The very airstrike that will kill a commander can also kill home, kill civilians or propaganda of the group. The identical partner-force approach that enhances operational effectiveness in the battlefield can enable local actors who are abusive. It is possible that the detention system, which helps to relieve fighters in the battlefield, turns into a center of recruitment when law is weak. Military intervention in these situations is likely to entail minimizing the problem that is already apparent and aggravating the problem that lurks beneath.

This is how it is that the name military vs diplomatic can be deceptive. It is the question whether military action should take second place to a political strategy. When force is associated with stabilization, reconstruction, justice and local legitimacy, then it can be used to create security. By replacing such activities, it can be a continuation of violence.

### **Why diplomacy works in some conditions**

Diplomacy is effective at the time when terrorism is entrenched in bargaining relations, political complaint, cross-theater favored, or cross-theater intensification. The example of the Gaza ceasefire demonstrates that even a short-term diplomatic consensus is able to decrease violence within a short period. The fact that the Houthi are taking a moratorium after a Gaza ceasefire shows that connections between theaters can count. UN counterterrorism diplomacy demonstrates that sanctions, travel restrictions, counter-finance actions, and legal cooperation establish the framework within which police and intelligence services are working.

The ineffectiveness of diplomacy is most apparent when violent groups have no credible commitment capacity, when, politically, their ambitions are maximalist, or when outside sponsors gain advantages in the state of perpetual disorder. It too is susceptible to spoiler violence. A truce may help to minimize violence, but a single strike can destroy confidence. By conducting a prisoner exchange, there might be benefits in terms of humanitarianism, yet others could claim that it promotes hostage-taking. An armed group can be pushed in the political process to be transformed to civilian politics and at the same time, legitimize violence in case the victims are not included. Diplomacy thus should be enforced, verified, sequenced, and justice considered.

Counterterrorism diplomatic reactions are not mere negotiations. They consist of intelligence-sharing, financial sanctions, cooperation at the border, humanitarian access, community trust-building, and right compliance. The empirical evidence on rights and terrorism indicates that repression that is abusive might impede the flow of information and the risk of radicalization (Walsh and Piazza, 2010; Piazza, 2017). It follows that diplomacy and rights-based governance are operationally, rather than normatively, relevant.

### **Why hybrid strategies outperform single-instrument strategies**

The core conclusion is that a combination of military and diplomatic strategies is best accomplished in sequence. Diplomacy alone can not work where an organization actively engages in mass killings and cannot be put on restraints. An all-military strategy might not work where the society is a symptom of a broader political structure. The Middle East is thus in need of a policy architecture that traverses four related tasks namely protect, degrade, stabilize and settle.

The internet needs to be secured by quick intelligence, defensive security, and in instances where it is needed, minimal force to avoid mass-casualty attacks. Disruption of leadership, funding, weapons distribution, and territory control needs to be specifically targeted towards degradation. Stabilization involves reconstruction, policing, local governance, prison management, repatriation or prosecution of detainees as well as services which diminish recruitment prospects. Attack heritage necessitates diplomacy with states, communities, and in certain circumstances armed actors, whereby violence ceases to seem a strategically prudent choice.

It is not a mere compromise when it comes to this hybrid model. It is an acknowledgement of the way in which terrorism functions. Terrorist groups employ violence as a means of communication, terror overreaction, acquisition of recruits, disintegration of societies and eliciting concessions. A good response should hence minimize violent potential and not grant the organization the political impacts it desires. It is impossible to do that using force.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST**

To commence with, political goals ought to limit military operations. It should not be an open-ended war against an ideology but rather selective disruption of capacity or a change in the law enforcement and governance. This would be in the form of maintaining collaboration with intelligence to combat IS cells, maintain security in prisons, improve local legitimacy and reintegration or prosecution avenues in Iraq and Syria.

Second, civilian protection is a metric of counterterrorism that should be regarded as core. Civilian casualties are a humanitarian concern but also impact intelligence cooperation, legitimacy, recruiting local forces, and the ability of local populations to deny violent groups. Tracking, compensation, and non-secrecy of civilian casualties should be at the heart of military assistance to foreign-policy actors.

Third, ceasefire diplomacy is to be institutionalized as opposed to being a pause between one campaign and the other. The example of Gaza demonstrates that even a weak ceasefire can alleviate violence within no time. Ceasefires must be monitored, have humanitarian access, be sequenced, be guaranteed by reputable actors, and be followed through politically to be durable. In their absence, temporary de-escalation is a tactical time-out.

Fourth, counterterrorism diplomacy ought to concentrate on networks, rather than solely groups. The flow of financing, arms, foreign fighters, propaganda and safe havens usually cross borders. Legal legal infrastructure in counter-financing and foreign terrorist fighter actions can be found in the UN Security Council resolutions 1373 and 2178; however, execution is limited by the ability of states and political desires.

Fifth, a partner strategy with short-term gains of battlefields at the cost of long-term governance should be avoided by outside forces. The presence of local forces can work, but it must be pegged on adherence to rights, accountability, and inclusion. Otherwise, other terrorist collaborators can generate additional grievances which rogue groups can take advantage of.

Sixth, prevention should be incorporated in diplomacy. This encompasses governance and aid to civil societies, employment of the youth, education, local dispute resolutions, and plausible grievance systems. These policies are not to be marketed as counterterrorist options overnight. They are long-lasting, and they decrease the social and political arena where violent entrepreneurs find their recruits.

| <b>Policy area</b>            | <b>Recommended balance</b>   | <b>Rationale</b>   |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Territorial terrorist control | Military-led, with diplomatic coalition management and stabilization planning from day one | Territorialized groups can require force, but battlefield gains decay without governance |
| Clandestine cells             | Intelligence and law enforcement-led, with limited military support                        | Police and intelligence are better suited to networks that hide among populations        |
| Hostage crises and ceasefires | Diplomacy-led, backed by credible pressure and verification                                | Agreements can reduce violence rapidly but need monitoring and enforcement               |

|                                |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Foreign fighters and financing | Multilateral diplomacy and legal cooperation                   | Cross-border networks require shared rules, sanctions, and intelligence exchange   |
| Radicalization and recruitment | Governance, rights protection, community trust, and prevention | Legitimacy reduces recruitment opportunities and improves intelligence cooperation |

*Table 3. Policy scorecard for matching instruments to terrorist threat conditions.*

## CONCLUSION

The answer to the question of whether diplomatic or military interventions are more effective anywhere cannot be used to measure the effectiveness of the foreign-policy responses to terrorism in the Middle East. Opposed to each part of the problem is each tool. Military action will work well in situations where the terrorist groups are either territorial, they have a visible command structure or they present a threat of causing sudden mass-kills. Diplomacy works well where violence is a part and parcel of political struggle, outside patronage, bargaining, and financing networks, or where there is no legitimacy.

The truths are both documented in the Middle East record. The war on IS shows that war could be a requirement and be effective in eliminating territorial control. The continuity of IS cells shows that force is not necessarily the response to end terrorism. The Gaza ceasefire and Houthi suspension demonstrate that diplomatic dealings can quickly lessen the violence, yet their sustainability relies on their reinforcement and political adherence. The lessons of the past of RAND support the general rule: the terrorist groups are more likely to be eradicated as a result of the political process, the police and intelligence service, or the change in the structure than the military force in itself.

A hybrid and sequenced foreign-policy response is the most appropriate. The use of force should safeguard civilians, and separation of ongoing violent potential. Diplomacy ought to transform preferences, organize nations, facilitate enforcement of the law, defend rights and develop feasible political options. A counterterrorist approach whereby the war on terror is executed in a more militarized manner without diplomacy poses the danger of never-ending suppression. An approach that seeks the use of diplomacy without the ability to uphold security runs the risk of making nonenforceable deals. The most likely to curtail terrorism without aiding in the creation of an environment where it continues to thrive is a policy that incorporates a combination of the two strategies.

## DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval: Not applicable. The article uses publicly available secondary data and does not involve human subjects research.

Data availability: The data points used for figures are reproduced in Appendix Table A1. All sources are publicly available.

Funding: No external funding was received.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contribution: Single-author manuscript.

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## APPENDIX

**Appendix Table A1. Data points used in figures**

| Figure   | Indicator                    | Value | Source        |
|----------|------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Figure 2 | MENA incidents, 2024         | 646   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 2 | MENA incidents, 2025         | 286   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 2 | MENA terrorism deaths, 2024  | 1,064 | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 2 | MENA terrorism deaths, 2025  | 205   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 3 | Syria incidents, 2024        | 430   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 3 | Syria incidents, 2025        | 243   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 3 | Syria terrorism deaths, 2024 | 744   | IEP, GTI 2026 |
| Figure 3 | Syria terrorism deaths, 2025 | 156   | IEP, GTI 2026 |

|          |   |                    |                       |
|----------|---|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Figure 4 | IS incidents in Syria, 2025                                       | 238                | IEP, GTI 2026         |
| Figure 4 | IS incidents in Iraq, 2025  | 7                  | IEP, GTI 2026         |
| Figure 5 | IDF violent events per day in Gaza before Jan. 19, 2025 ceasefire | 27                 | ACLED, February 2025  |
| Figure 5 | IDF violent events per day in Gaza after ceasefire                | <3, displayed as 3 | ACLED, February 2025  |
| Figure 5 | Estimated fatalities before ceasefire in January                  | 1,450              | ACLED, February 2025  |
| Figure 5 | Estimated fatalities after ceasefire in remainder of January      | 16                 | ACLED, February 2025  |
| Figure 6 | Groups ending through political process                           | 43%                | Jones & Libicki, 2008 |
| Figure 6 | Groups ending through police/intelligence                         | 40%                | Jones & Libicki, 2008 |
| Figure 6 | Groups ending through military force                              | 7%                 | Jones & Libicki, 2008 |