GAC on Terrorism

Emerging Global Security Threats in Asia, the Middle East and Africa
GAC-Terrorism

According to new data presented by GAC on Terrorism member Gary LaFree at the 2013 Abu Dhabi meetings, terrorist attacks reached a record high in frequency and fatalities in 2012. More than 8,500 terrorist attacks killed nearly 15,500 people last year as violence tore through Africa, Asia and the Middle East. That’s a dramatic increase in attacks and fatalities during the past decade according to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), which collected the data.¹ The previous record for attacks was set in 2011 with more than 5,000 incidents; for fatalities the previous high was 2007 with more than 12,800 deaths. This year is expected to outpace even 2012’s record high. There were 5,100 attacks in the first six months of 2013 and the wave of violence shows few signs of ebbing.

Total and Fatal Terrorist Attacks Worldwide, 1970 to 2012 (N =113, 266)

These patterns are relatively recent and represent a major shift in the regional distribution of worldwide terrorist attacks. In the 1970s, most attacks occurred in Western Europe. In the 1980s, Latin America saw the most terrorist acts. Beginning with the 1990s, South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East have seen steadily rising numbers of attacks, a trend that has accelerated in recent years. Although terrorism touched 85 countries last year, just three - Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan - suffered more than half of 2012’s attacks (55%) and fatalities

¹ While we cannot rule out the possibility that part of this rise is due to improvements in data collection, the size and the scope of the increase suggests that it is not just a measurement artifact.
(62%). The next five most frequently targeted countries were India, Nigeria, Thailand, Yemen and Somalia.

Groups responsible for attacks have also changed dramatically. In 2012 the six deadliest terrorist perpetrator groups in the world were all affiliated to some extent with al-Qa’ida. These include the Taliban (1,842 fatalities), Boko Haram (1,132 fatalities), al-Qa’ida in Iraq (892 fatalities), al-Shabaab (278 fatalities), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (282 fatalities) and Tehrik-e Taliban (510 fatalities). These developments were brought to international attention recently in the brutal attack on Westgate Mall in Kenya by al-Shabaab. Since it emerged from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2007, al-Shabaab has carried out nearly 550 terrorist attacks, killing more than 1,600 and wounding more than 2,100. The number of attacks attributed to al-Shabaab has increased rapidly from less than 10 in 2007 to more than 200 in 2012.

These developments represent important new global challenges. While terrorist attacks have in large part moved away from Western Europe and North America to Asia, the Middle East and Africa, at the same time worldwide terrorism is reaching new levels of destructiveness. Economic development in these areas may well be threatened by growing security challenges. The GAC on Terrorism suggests that we develop and recommend a broad, holistic set of counter terrorist policies that can bring some relief to the most vulnerable regions of the world.