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Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Corruption; Afghanistan; Europe; Israel; Middle East; Southeast Asia

THE STATE OF PLAY IN PAKISTAN

2018 was a bloody year for Pakistan, where the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan continues to grapple with local militancy and the side-effects of the country's longstanding support for Islamic radicalism in neighboring Afghanistan. In all, 262 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan in 2018, claiming nearly 600 lives and leaving more than a thousand citizens injured. Of those, the overwhelming majority - an estimated 171 - were carried out by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and affiliates like Jamaatul Ahrar, notes a new assessment by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS).

The grisly figure, the study notes, nonetheless represents a comparative improvement in the country's historically fraught security situation. The number of attacks noted in 2018 represented "a 29 percent decrease from the previous year," according to PIPS. (Karachi *Express Tribune*, January 5, 2019)

A TRUCE WITH THE TALIBAN?

Representatives of the U.S. and the Afghan Taliban have drafted a framework for peace negotiations, which, if it results in a full deal, may lead to a full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan within 18 months. The agreement calls for a Taliban ceasefire and direct negotiations between the insurgents and the Afghan government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, though the Taliban have not yet agreed to these terms. While U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad expressed optimism about the new framework, President Ghani is reportedly concerned that the U.S. may sideline the Afghan government in an attempt to withdraw troops, and potentially advocate for shared powers with the Taliban in a transitional government. However, Khalilzad stated that the role of the insurgents in a transitional government was not discussed during the talks in Doha. (London *Guardian*, January 28, 2019)

FRANCE BRACES FOR INFLUX OF ISIS RETURNEES

Approximately 130 men detained in Syria for suspected ties to ISIS are now set to be repatriated to France. Upon their return, the detainees "will be judged in court," which will likely result in their incarceration, according to French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner. There is currently no consensus on how the detainees should be dealt with, however, as some human rights groups and members of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS Coalition are unsure of whether or not they should even be transferred or released in the first place. (Jerusalem *Post*, January 29, 2019)

IS ISIS POISED FOR A COMEBACK ALREADY?

The Islamic State's decline in Iraq and Syria is reversible in nature, and the terrorist group could regain strength and territory in just a matter of months, according to a new Pentagon study. The soon-to-be released Department of Defense Inspector General Quarterly Report concerning Operation Inherent Resolve states that the Islamic State remains capable of reclaiming lost territory in Syria within as little as six to 12 months in the absence of continued military pressure from the United States. The assessment comes on the heels of - and complicates - President Trump's December announcement of an impending U.S. withdrawal from Syria, which is currently set to be completed by mid-spring. So, too, does the U.S. intelligence community's most recent Worldwide Threat Assessment, which lays out that ISIS is likely to "exploit Sunni grievances, societal instability, and stretched security forces to regain territory in Iraq and Syria" and that the Syrian government is unlikely to combat the insurgents. (NBC News, January 31, 2019)

THE BDS-TERRORIST CONNECTION

The controversial BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, which seeks to apply economic pressure to the Israeli government, has been deeply infiltrated by terrorist groups and their supporters, a new study from Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy has detailed. The BDS campaign, which has evolved globally over the past several years, "involves a network of non-governmental organizations, a number of which have close ties to designated terrorist organizations, most prominently Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)," the report - entitled "Terrorists in Suits" - notes. "Terrorist organizations see the 'civilian' struggle against Israel - demonstrations, marches, fundraising, political lobbying and the so-called 'peace' flotillas - as a complementary effort of their armed attacks against the State of Israel."

This dynamic, the study details, has led to a key innovation in terrorist tactics. Terrorist organizations active against Israel "have realized that armed conflict is not achieving its objective and is perceived as illegitimate by the majority of Western society. As a result, Hamas and PFLP operatives have infiltrated and adopted seemingly benign NGOs in the Palestinian Authority, Europe, North America and South Africa, for the purpose of advancing their ideological goal: the elimination of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people." All told, the report found that "42 leading NGOs out of the nearly 300 organizations internationally" work to "promote the delegitimization of, and the BDS campaign against, the State of Israel." (Israel Ministry of Strategic Affairs, February 2019)