



TERRORISM

# Shifting Landscape of Threats, More Focus on the Homefront

By Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, and John Halpin

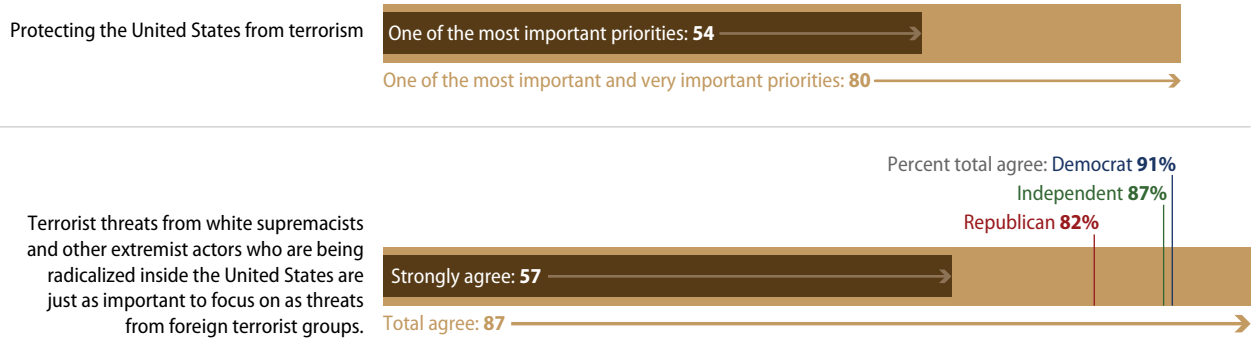
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The increased threat from white nationalist terrorism has captured the attention of Americans at a time when global terrorist threats persist.<sup>1</sup> The 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks arrives at an uncertain time in the struggle against terrorist networks with a global reach. America's military remains deployed in dozens of countries around the world under the legal authorities created after the 9/11 attacks, and the terrorist threat has mutated and spread globally. The Islamic State group (ISIS) has been driven underground in Iraq and Syria, but remnants of the movement remain active there and continue to pose a threat in places such as Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya.<sup>2</sup>

## Views of American voters

### Americans want protection from all forms of terrorism

Share of respondents, by political affiliation



Source: Center for American Progress and GBAO, "Foreign Policy Research – Phase III" (Washington: 2019), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/07/29142002/FP-condensed.pdf>.

- **Enduring concerns about terrorism.** “Protecting the U.S. homeland from enemy attacks and terrorism” ranks as a top priority among 63 percent of American voters; no other issue receives such priority, and terrorism outpaces the runner-up (“protecting our democracy from foreign interference”) by 17 percentage points. This focus on terrorism transcends partisan lines: It is the top foreign policy goal for Republicans and independents, at 79 percent and 57 percent, respectively, while it places second for Democrats, 51 percent, behind working with allies on climate change, disease, and poverty (52 percent).
- **Strong concerns about homegrown terrorism and extremism.** Nine in 10 Americans, or 87 percent, agree that terrorist threats from white nationalists and other extremist actors who are being radicalized inside the United States are just as important to address as threats from foreign terrorist groups.
- **Terrorism a top factor for voters in deciding on a candidate for president.** Protecting the United States from terrorism (80 percent) ranks alongside reducing health care costs (82 percent) and ensuring American workers have good jobs with high wages (80 percent) as one of the most important issues or a very important issue deciding their vote for president in 2020.
- **Strong support for working with allies to deal with challenges such as terrorism.** Virtually all voters (93 percent) agree that the country is safer and stronger when it works with allies to address shared challenges including international terrorism. However, Democrats and independents are more likely to strongly agree with this statement, at 69 percent and 56 percent, respectively, than Republicans (46 percent).
- **Broad backing for using leverage on countries such as Saudi Arabia and on social media companies to get certain countries to take constructive action on terrorism.** At 93 percent, voters also almost unanimously agree with counterterrorism policies that crack down on countries such as Saudi Arabia that have a track record of providing support to terrorists. They also largely agree, at 89 percent, that social media companies should better monitor their platforms to prevent extremists from using their technology to promote terrorism.
- **Stronger support for nonmilitary measures to address terrorism among Democratic voters compared with Republican voters and independents.** Two-thirds of voters agree that the United States should address the economic “root causes” of terrorism with a large aid program. Three-quarters, or 77 percent, of Democrats agree, compared with slightly more than half of independents and Republicans, at 56 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Similarly, two-thirds, or 64 percent, of voters say that international terrorism is best treated as a law enforcement and intelligence problem rather than a military one.

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## Key points

- Threats from terrorism and extremism have mutated, with more Americans dying at the hands of terrorist attacks from domestic than foreign terrorists.
- This shifting threat landscape requires a balanced approach: the U.S. government needs to be safe at home and vigilant from threats that come from overseas.
- America has overused military operations as the primary tool to deal with foreign terrorist threats. The country needs to end wars but keep a sharp eye on threats overseas.

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## The progressive policy alternative

1. **Work to end conflicts where terrorist networks thrive.** Diplomatic resolutions to conflicts in places such as Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and Libya will deprive terrorists of conditions where they thrive. This will require America to use its leverage with key countries and governments to create incentives for peace.
2. **Prioritize removing hate and extremist language from private social media platforms.** Government authorities should work with private companies to create a safer online space.
3. **Invest in societal resilience.** Terrorism and extremism will never be fully eradicated. Countries such as Britain and Israel have done more to prepare their societies for continued threats from terrorist groups.

Voters hold complex and nuanced views of the terrorist threats facing the United States. They see threats from terrorists at home as well as abroad and rank concerns about terrorism as a top foreign policy priority.

*Brian Katulis is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. Peter Juul is a senior policy analyst for National Security and International Policy at the Center. John Halpin is a senior fellow at the Center.*

*This information is based on a national poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019, by the Center for American Progress and GBAO. It is also informed by a series of focus groups, qualitative interviews, and a national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 25 to March 3, 2019. Polling results are on file with the authors.*

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## Endnotes

- 1 For further reading on this topic, see Simon Clark, "Confronting the Domestic Right-Wing Terrorist Threat" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/03/07/467022/confronting-domestic-right-wing-terrorist-threat/>.
- 2 David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Reaps Gains of U.S. Pullout From Syria," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/middleeast/isis-syria-us.html>; Kareem Fahim and Missy Ryan, "Saudi Arabia announces capture of an ISIS leader in Yemen in U.S.-backed raid," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2019, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-arabia-announces-capture-of-islamic-state-leader-in-yemen-in-us-backed-raid-backed/2019/06/25/79734ca2-976a-11e9-9a16-dc551ea5a43b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-arabia-announces-capture-of-islamic-state-leader-in-yemen-in-us-backed-raid-backed/2019/06/25/79734ca2-976a-11e9-9a16-dc551ea5a43b_story.html); Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military Again Strikes ISIS in Southern Libya," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/africa/strikes-isis-libya.html>; Shawn Snow, "ISIS in Afghanistan is still able to field thousands of fighters despite hellacious fight to destroy it," *Military Times*, October 4, 2019, available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/10/04/isis-in-afghanistan-is-still-able-to-field-thousands-of-fighters-despite-hellacious-fight-to-destroy-it/>.