# PVT Regional Radar

Quarter 1, 2018

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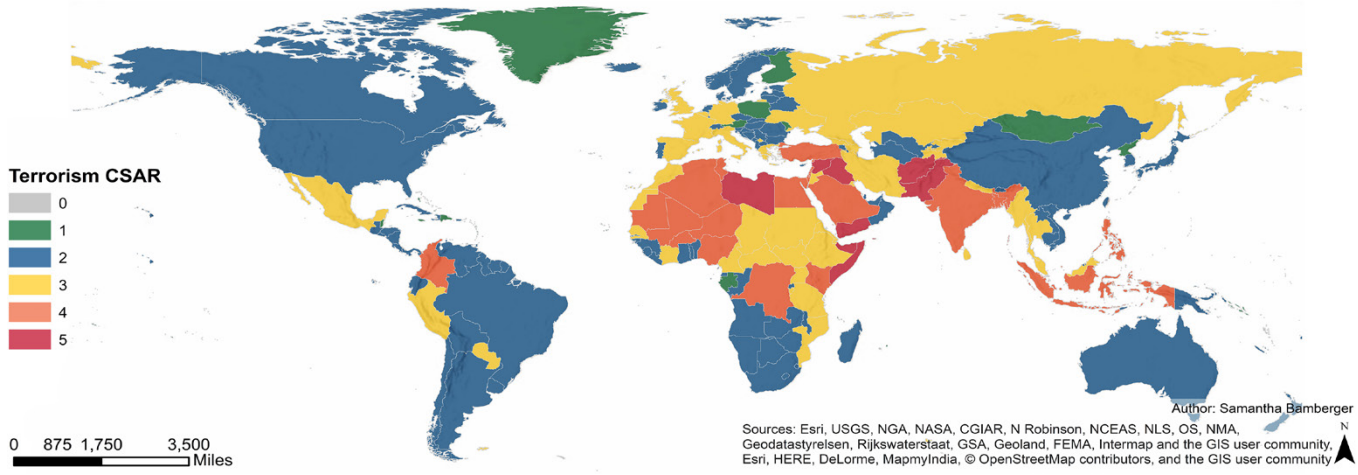
## Overview of global PVT Dynamics - Q1 2018

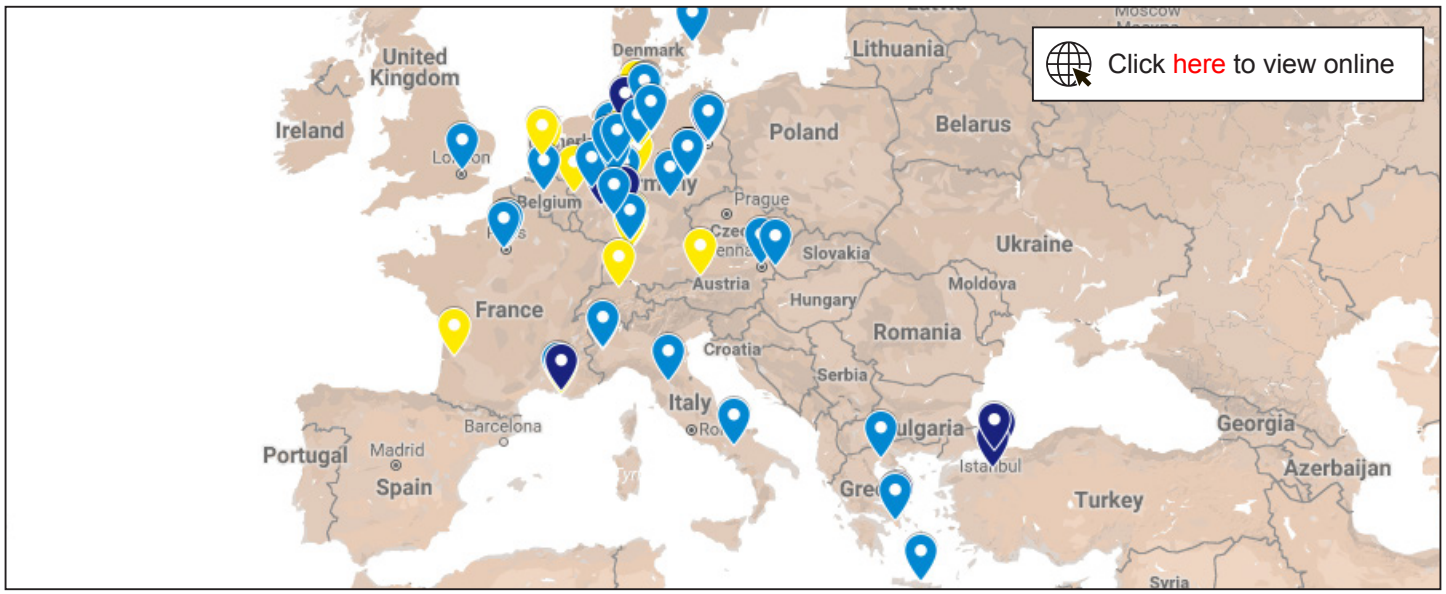



Writing objectively about "terrorism" is challenging. Central to the challenge is the term itself. In an academic sense, the term is simply a description of tactics. However, the term has become heavily politicized in recent years, particularly following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. A key part of the problem is that there is no universally applied definition of terrorism. Every government has its legal definition. There seems to be a level of agreement among the masses that politically or ideologically motivated violence targeting civilians constitutes "terrorism;" however, the consensus seems to end there.

Increasingly, governments, particularly authoritarian regimes, attempt to manipulate the word "terrorism" to shape a narrative or silence dissent. When viewing the world through a purely "Western" lens, this can be a challenging concept to grasp, but authoritarian regimes often designate armed resistance movements - organizations that are actively opposing the state - as "terrorist groups." Without question, these types of movements do resort to violence; however, their aggression is aimed at a regime, its security forces, and its proxies, not necessarily civilians.

Designating an adversary as a "terrorist" group, because they have taken a stance against a regime, is a politically convenient way of swaying public opinion and advancing an agenda. But it can be a shortsighted, and arguably dangerous, approach – one that is antithetical to reasoned and consistent policymaking. Legitimately designated terrorist groups are in operation; however, when looking beyond higher-profile groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda (AQ), and their affiliates, the designation becomes nuanced.

## EUROPE - European Anarchist-linked Violence




The first quarter of 2018 saw a noticeable uptick in activity linked to European left-leaning anarchist groups and revolutionaries. The "Fight4Afrin" (F4A) campaign is one of the more high-profile movements connected to the recent surge in anarchist-linked activity in Europe and is a prime example of how the effects of regional military campaigns transcend regional boundaries.

The F4A campaign was launched in January in response to the Turkish-led military offensive in Afrin Canton, a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. European F4A sympathizers are attempting to show solidarity with Kurdish fighters battling the Turkish military in Afrin. However, many of the fighters supported by the F4A campaign are linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization by the EU and NATO, raising questions as to where F4A sympathizers fall on the spectrum of criminality and terrorism.

F4A, however, is not a homogeneous entity and there is no apparent central leadership structure. Rather it appears to be a loosely organized collective of European revolutionary groups operating under a single banner. Initially, many "actions" linked to F4A in Europe were non-violent; however, there was a noticeable shift towards more aggressive tactics in the second half of the first quarter. Tactics included simple vandalism, cyber-attacks, and arson. Initially, F4A sympathizers seemed to focus on targeting Turkish diplomatic missions, as well as religious and political organizations with ties to Ankara's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), though their targets have since expanded.

In February, F4A sympathizers began targeting private business interests, including Turkish-linked retailers, cafes, restaurants, and social clubs. Sympathizers have also targeted military defense contractors, military recruiting stations, and financial institutions with ties to the Turkish government, including Allianz-Versicherung properties. Deliberate attacks targeting civilians have so far been rare, but sympathizers have targeted police personnel on multiple occasions. The frequency, scale, and sophistication of the movement's "attacks," targeting property and business interests, will continue to trend upward, increasing the risk of collateral damage.

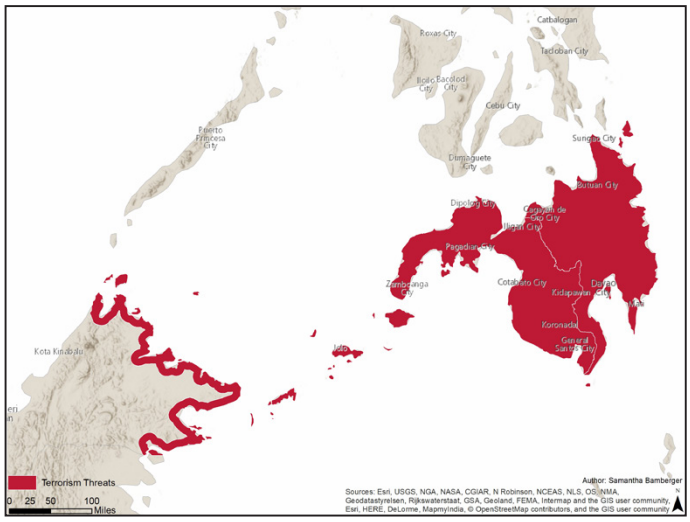
## ASIA - Prospects of Escalating Violence in the Southern Philippines

The first quarter of 2018 also saw a reinvigorated effort by President Rodrigo Duterte's administration to pass the long-awaited Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) by May 2018. The BBL is intended to create a semi-autonomous, Moro Muslim-majority region in the southern Philippines extending from Mindanao through the Sulu Archipelago. Duterte has been negotiating with separatist leaders from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to pass the measure, but the law has yet to be ratified by the national legislature.

The hope is that a measure of self-governance will help stabilize the southern islands, which have been beset by a decades-long Moro-led insurgency. The MNLF and the MILF both signed peace accords with Manila in 1996 and 2014 respectively, but splinter groups like the AQ-connected Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and Wilayat Lanao, Maute, and elements of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which fall under IS's de facto "East Asia" affiliate, continue to operate to varying degrees in the southern Philippines. In late 2017, IS-

linked fighters in Mindanao suffered significant losses at the hands of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) during the months-long siege of Marawi, but the battle was not an absolute victory, and was likely only the beginning of a larger IS offensive in the region.

IS sympathizers almost certainly retain support networks, not only in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, but also across the Celebes Sea into Malaysia's Sabah Province and Indonesia's North Kalimantan Province. MILF officials have also claimed that IS affiliates in the southern Philippines are plotting attacks in the cities of Iligan and Cotabato, though AFP leadership reportedly refuted the claim. MILF leadership may be exaggerating the threat posed by IS-linked fighters in Mindanao in an effort to gain support for the upcoming BBL vote, but MILF's assessment should not be dismissed based solely on the government's rebuttal.




In the months prior to the Marawi battle, the Duterte administration greatly underestimated the threat posed by the country's IS sympathizers in the southern islands. The administration's current assessment of the Islamist militant threat in the southern Philippines is certainly better informed now, with the AFP aggressively pursuing active cells from Mindanao to Basilan and beyond. A unilateral AFP effort, however, is unlikely to prevent an IS-linked resurgence in the region. To compensate, Manila may have to rely on MNLF and MILF-linked proxies in the south, but intra-Moro conflict will undoubtedly divide the south's Muslims even further, creating more rifts that may be exploited by insurgent leaders in the region.

## MENA - Ballistic Missile Threat in Saudi Arabia

The first quarter of 2018 saw the first fatality in Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, resulting from an alleged intercept of multiple Tactical Ballistic Missiles (TBMs) reportedly fired by Al-Houthi rebels in northern Yemen on March 25. Royal Saudi Air Defense Forces (RSADF) claimed to have intercepted three incoming TBMs with Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC) missiles over northeast Riyadh. The victim, who was reportedly killed by falling missile debris, was an Egyptian national living in Umm Al Hamam, in southwest Riyadh.

Yemeni rebels claim cross-border, indirect-fire attacks inside Saudi Arabia near-daily. Most are short-range mortar and rocket strikes ranging less than 30-40 km (18-25 miles) in isolated pockets near border villages in Saudi Arabia's southwestern Jizan, Asir, and Najran provinces. Most go unnoticed in the mainstream media and have very little impact elsewhere in the country. However, the Houthi-led coalition has also demonstrated an intent to target sites much deeper inside Saudi territory, including Riyadh and Jeddah, with their longer-range Burkan-2H. The Burkan-2H is rumored to be modeled off Iran's Qiam-1 system and is supposedly capable of launching a 500 kg warhead between 800-1400 km (500-870 miles); however, aside from what has been

reported in pro-Al-Houthi propaganda, little is known about the platform and its exact capabilities have not been conclusively proven by an impartial source. There is some evidence to support the claims made by the Al-Houthi's regarding the Burkan-2H's range, but there is zero evidence to support the claimed payload capacity.

The RSADF has largely mitigated the threat posed by the Yemeni rebels' longer-range ballistic missile platforms, but the Saudi missile defense network is not infallible. As seen in the March 25 attack, the RSADF claimed three intercepts over the capital's northeastern districts. However, two of the PAC missiles appear to have been launched over northwest Riyadh, at least one of which failed, abruptly changing trajectory and impacting an open area adjacent to Al-Malqa District. No casualties were reported as a result of the failed interceptor, but the incident has raised questions as to the capabilities and limitations of the RSADF and the PAC system.

The shortage of objective sources covering the conflict between the Saudi-led coalition and Yemeni rebels make it nearly impossible for independent observers to verify claims from either side. Neither side provides much, if any, irrefutable evidence to support their respective claims and both sides rely heavily on propaganda and misdirection in the media in an effort to dominate the discourse. The Al-Houthi rebels may be exaggerating their kinetic capabilities, while at the same time, the Saudis may be exaggerating the threat posed by the Yemeni rebels in an effort to shape the narrative and advance some of their more controversial policy objectives in the region.

## AMERICAS - Austin Bombings: Myth vs. Reality

The first quarter of 2018 also saw a serial-bomber "terrorize" Austin, Texas over the course of nearly three weeks in March. Between March 2-20, four homemade improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were emplaced and detonated in residential areas of eastern and southern Austin. A fifth detonated prematurely at a shipping/receiving facility in Schertz, approximately 105 km (65 miles) south of the capital; a sixth device was disarmed at a separate shipping/receiving facility in southern Austin. Two people were killed, and six others were injured in the string of attacks. The perpetrator committed suicide by detonating yet another explosive device inside his vehicle as police were preparing to apprehend him, near Round Rock, north of Austin.

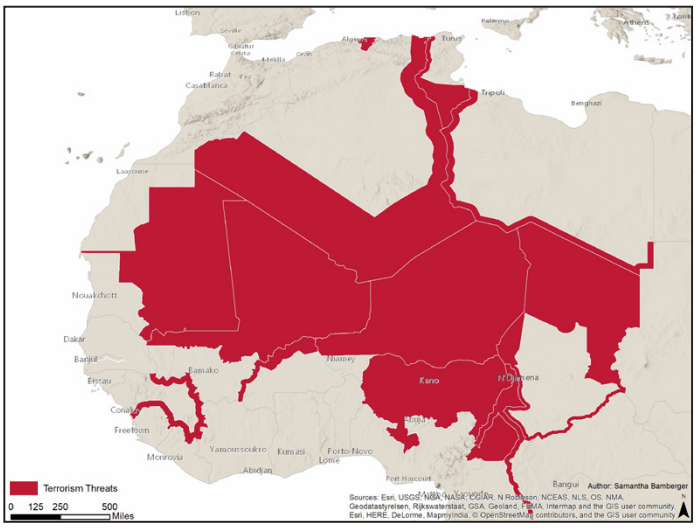
The incident dominated the US media cycle for much of the month, but the reporting was sensationalized in many ways. The IEDs used in the Austin bombings were almost certainly very simple in their design, essentially little more than modified pyrotechnics. Devices of this nature are relatively easy to construct and are preferred by amateur, decentralized, and/or independent threat actors for this very reason. Those these types of IEDs can result in fatalities, they have a very limited blast radius. These devices are often favored more for the psychological damage they can inflict, particularly in a relatively low-risk area, and the standoff they afford the attacker, not necessarily their power or precision. These devices can certainly create chaos, particularly in enclosed or crowded spaces, but they are not particularly effective tools for targeted assassinations or mass-casualty events, particularly when employed by perpetrators with only limited experience in handling explosives.

In regions like Austin, Texas, where there is no active armed conflict, it is unlikely that perpetrators would have access to significant amounts of military-grade explosives. As such, most threat actors who would employ this sort of tactic in relatively secure areas would be forced to rely on "homemade explosives" (HMEs). The difference between military-grade explosives and most HMEs is not necessarily the force generated by the explosion, as large quantities of HMEs can certainly mimic the effects of military-grade material. Rather, the difference lies in the versatility, reliability, and transportability of these materials. Most HMEs are extremely unstable; amateur threat actors trying to maintain a low profile would be reluctant to amass large amounts of HMEs in a given location. Therefore, IEDs made with HMEs and employed in non-conflict or low-intensity conflict areas usually only contain a small amount of explosive material. Because HMEs are so unstable, the risk of an unintentional detonation increases exponentially not only as the quantity of explosives increases, but also with increased handling; this was exemplified by the device that detonated prematurely at the shipping facility in Schertz.

## AFRICA - G5 Sahel Joint Force: A Paper Tiger?

In the first quarter of 2018, after months of planning and negotiations, foreign donors and G5 Sahel alliance member-states agreed on a $525 million budget framework to implement the Force Conjointe des Etats du G5 Sahel (Sahel Group of Five - Joint Military Force, FC-G5S). The FC-G5S, which follows several similar efforts, is a multinational security force aimed at combatting the threat posed by a rapidly spreading Islamist-linked insurgency in West African countries bordering Mali. The G5 Sahel five-nation coalition - comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger - formed in 2014 as a political mechanism to coordinate security efforts across the restive Sahel sub-region, but did not include a unified military command. The alliance devised

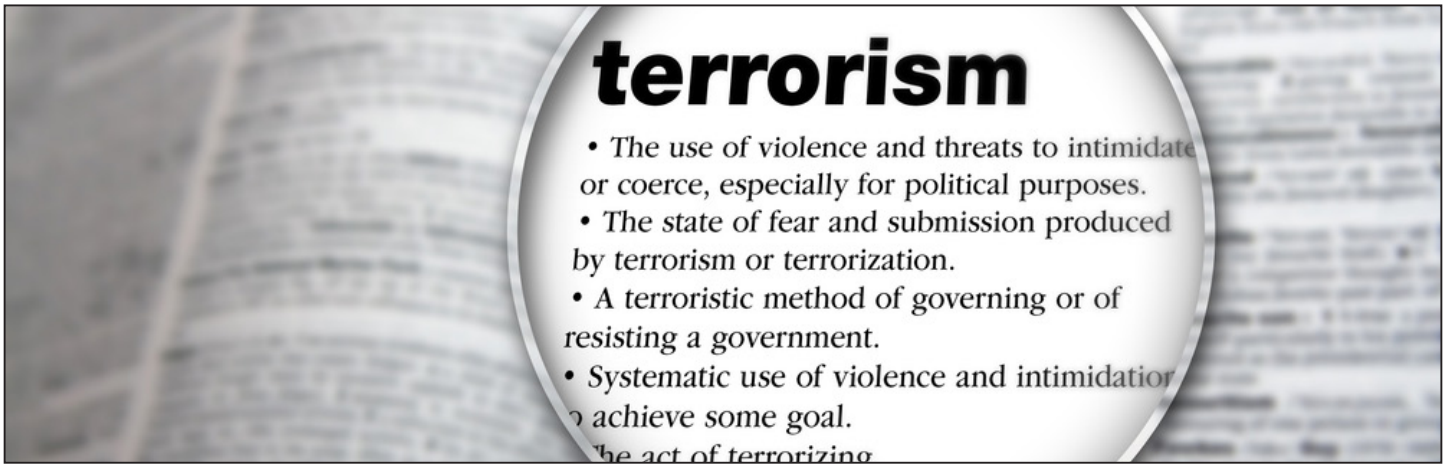
the FC-G5S in early 2017 to conduct joint military operations and will face operational, political, and tactical challenges as it attempts to establish itself as a viable counterinsurgency force in the region.




Without a clear operational command and control node, FC-G5S tactical commanders will constantly struggle to coordinate and execute complex cross-border security operations. The FC-G5S is mandated to operate in three distinct battlespaces spanning Mali's restive border areas with eastern and southern Mauritania, northern Burkina Faso, and northern and western Niger. In theory, the taskforce will operate in concert with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the French-led Operation Barkhane. However, the coalition has only conducted two major combat operations, in November 2017 and January 2018, and both appear to have been little more than a series of large-scale presence patrols. The command structure, at least at the operational levels of the FC-G5S, lacks definition or delineation. Furthermore, FC-G5S will probably also have to compete for resources with the Nigerien and Chadian elements of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), currently battling Boko Haram in the Lake Chad sub-region.

Budget constraints will not be the only impediment facing the FC-G5S; the domestic politics of G5 member states will likely also inhibit their commitment to military operations. The budget proposed in the first quarter of 2018 may give the FC-G5S somewhat of a boost in the coming months, though the $525 million pledged will be insufficient for the coalition's mission set. Combined financial contributions from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger account for only 10 percent of the FC-G5S's 2018 budget; these contributions do not exude confidence in the mission. If their monetary investment in the force is any indicator, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the G5 members' support regarding ground troops and support personnel will be lacking as well, not just in terms of quantity, but quality. Not wanting to commit their most capable and most loyal units to what is essentially an experimental taskforce, G5 member states are likely to reserve their military elites to secure domestic political stability. Many of the tactical elements that deploy in support of the FC-G5S will probably be poorly trained, ill-equipped, and led by inexperienced, and perhaps even incompetent officers. High-profile and sustained heavy military losses that raise public ire or mobilization of large-scale domestic political dissent could also prompt a rapid retraction of deployments.

In addition to all these potential impediments to success, the lackluster FC-G5S will face a dynamic, multidimensional, agile, and increasingly aggressive militant threat. Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wa al-Moumin (Group for the Victory of Islam and the Faithful, JNIM), an alliance of four legacy AQ-linked factions, is the most active formation in the region, operating primarily in central, eastern, and northern Mali, with regular excursions into Burkina Faso. Though a local IS affiliate offers IS a potential inroad in the Sahel, the group lacks the operational capabilities of IS affiliates in central and southern Libya or even northeast Nigeria. Nonetheless, unlike regions where IS affiliates engage in open warfare with AQ-linked militants, there seems to be, at least temporarily, a degree of deconfliction between the two groups in the Sahel. The fanfare surrounding the FC-G5S's recent funding achievement belies operational, political, and tactical challenges that will likely render the force ineffective in combating persistent and growing regional militant threats.



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