

ISIS Successful in Raising US Public Fears about Terrorism

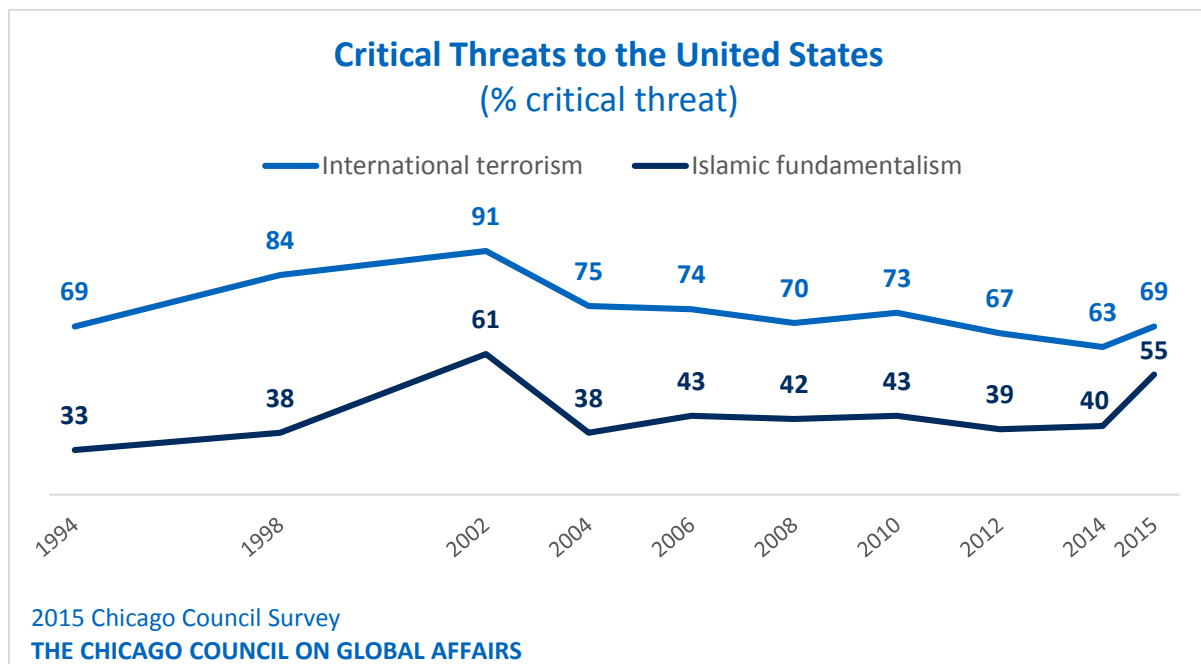
Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

September 2015

Increased Anxiety about Terrorist Attacks over the past Year

Coinciding with the rise of the Islamic State and continued threat from related groups in the Middle East, public concern about Islamic fundamentalism has increased 15 percentage points since 2014 (to 55% viewing it as a critical threat now), the highest level since 2002 survey results (the first Chicago Council Survey fielded after the September 11, 2001 attacks)(Figure below).

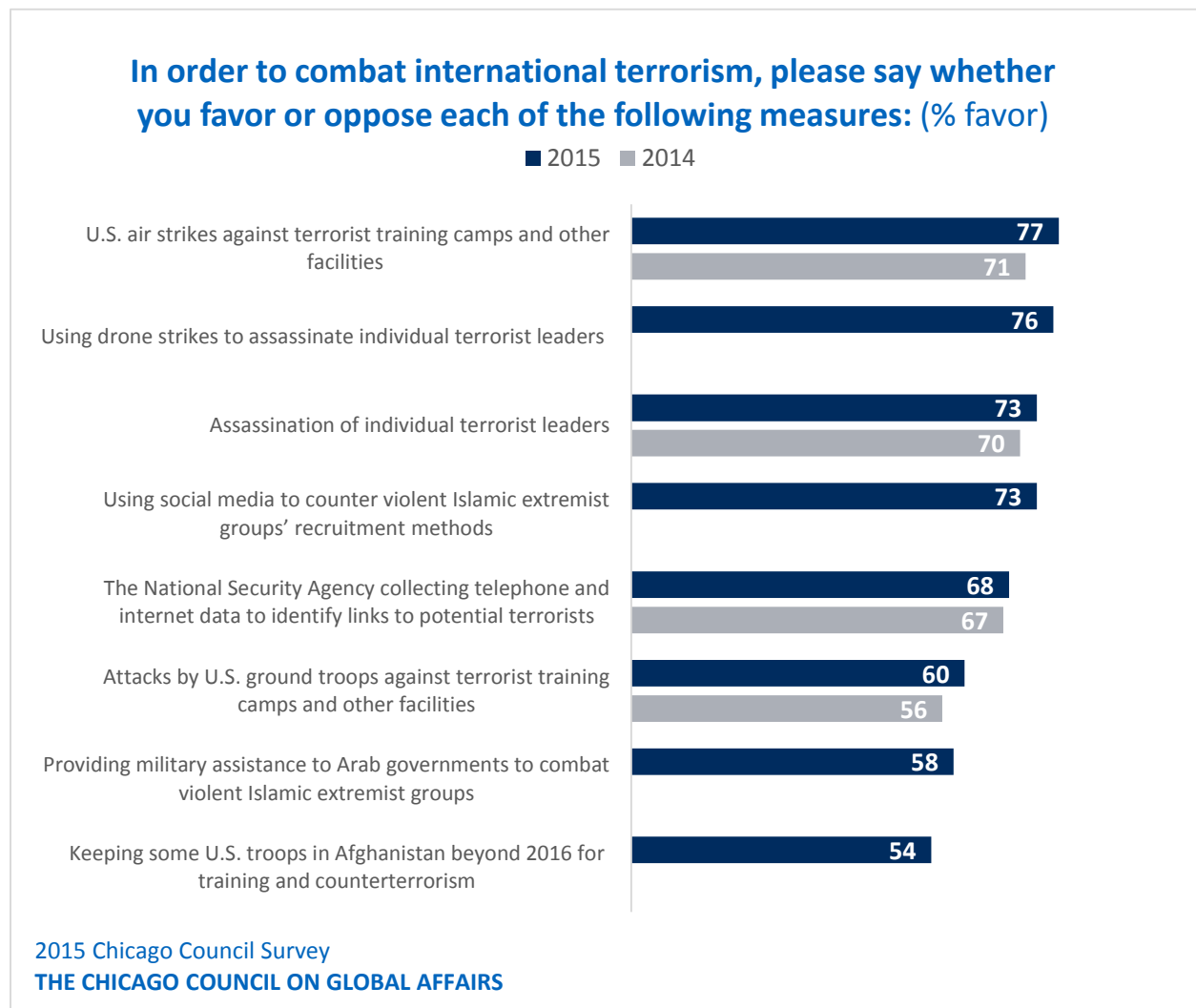
At the same time, while American concern about terrorism has increased since the 2014 Chicago Council Survey, it remains lower than levels recorded in 2010 and prior. Americans rate the top threats facing the United States as the possibility of violent Islamic extremists groups carrying out a major terrorist attack in the United States (72% a critical threat) and international terrorism (69%), along with the rise of violent Islamic extremist groups like ISIS in Iraq and Syria (64%). By comparison, Americans regard only the threat of cyberattacks against US computer systems (69%) as comparable to that posed by terrorism. Concerns about nuclear proliferation (59%) and Iran's nuclear program (57%) remain high, but no greater than they were in 2014.



Stable or Increased Support for Military Actions

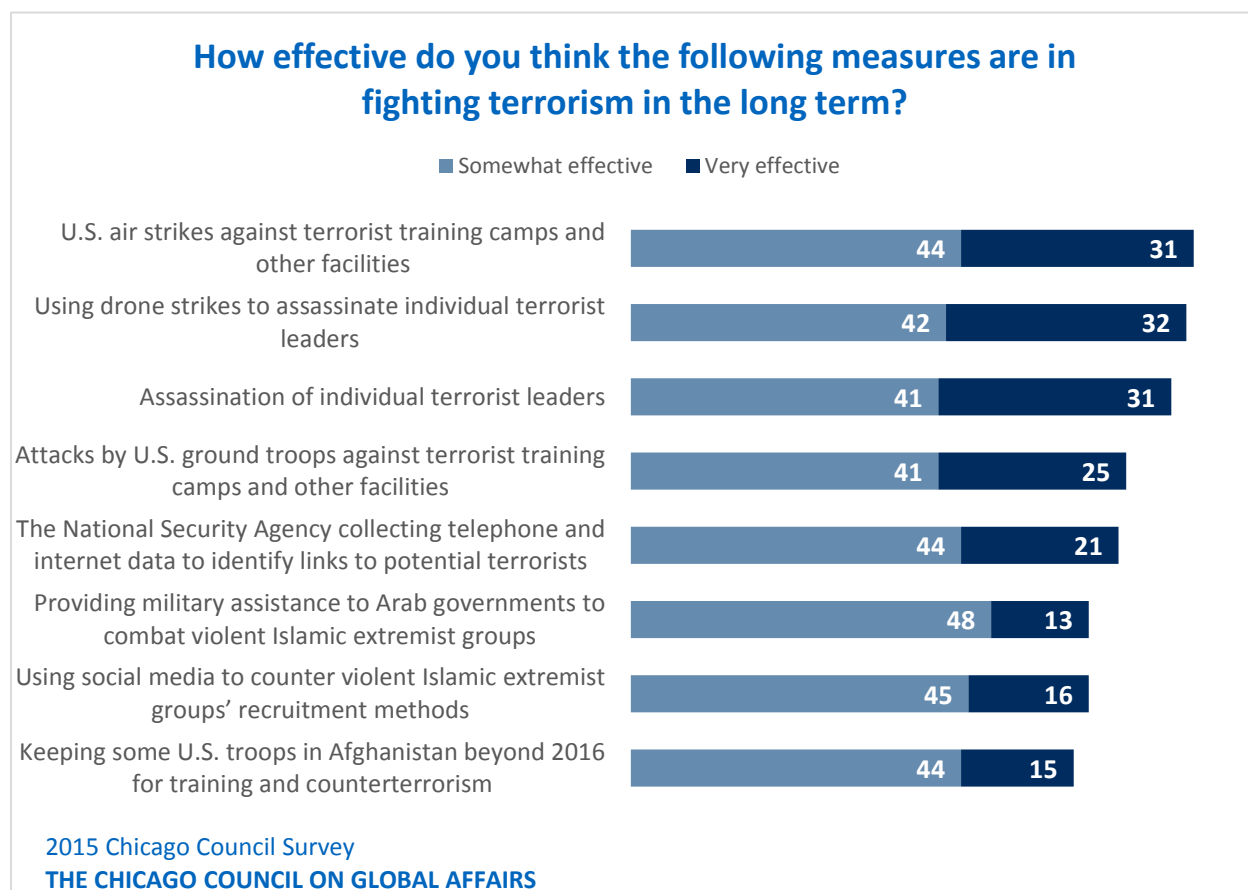
Americans continue to support military action to combat terrorism, with either increasing or stable backing since May 2014 (before the Islamic State emerged in headlines after their first series of videotaped beheadings). Three quarters or more now support US air strikes against terrorist training camps and other facilities (77%, up from 71% in 2014), using drone strikes to assassinate individual terrorist leaders (76%), and assassinations of individual terrorist leaders (73%, up slightly from 70% in 2014). A smaller majority supports attacks by US ground troops against terrorist training camps and other facilities (60%, up from 56% in 2014). While six in ten also endorse providing military assistance to Arab governments to combat violent Islamic extremist groups (58%), somewhat fewer favor keeping some US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016 for training and counterterrorism (54%) (Figure, next page).

Americans seem braced to withstand anti-terrorist operations in the Middle East lasting a few years: 73 percent of the public expect the military action against ISIS to last longer than three years (19% say 1-3 years, and only 4% say it will take less than a year).



Support for Non-Military Methods, but Hard Power Approaches Seen as Most Effective

In addition to forceful approaches, majorities also support using social media to counter violent Islamic extremist groups' recruitment methods (73%) and the NSA collecting telephone and Internet data to identify links to potential terrorists (68%). Although majorities judge all approaches as being at least somewhat effective, military tactics are seen as most effective, especially airstrikes (31% very effective), drones strikes (32% very effective) and targeted assassinations (31% very effective).

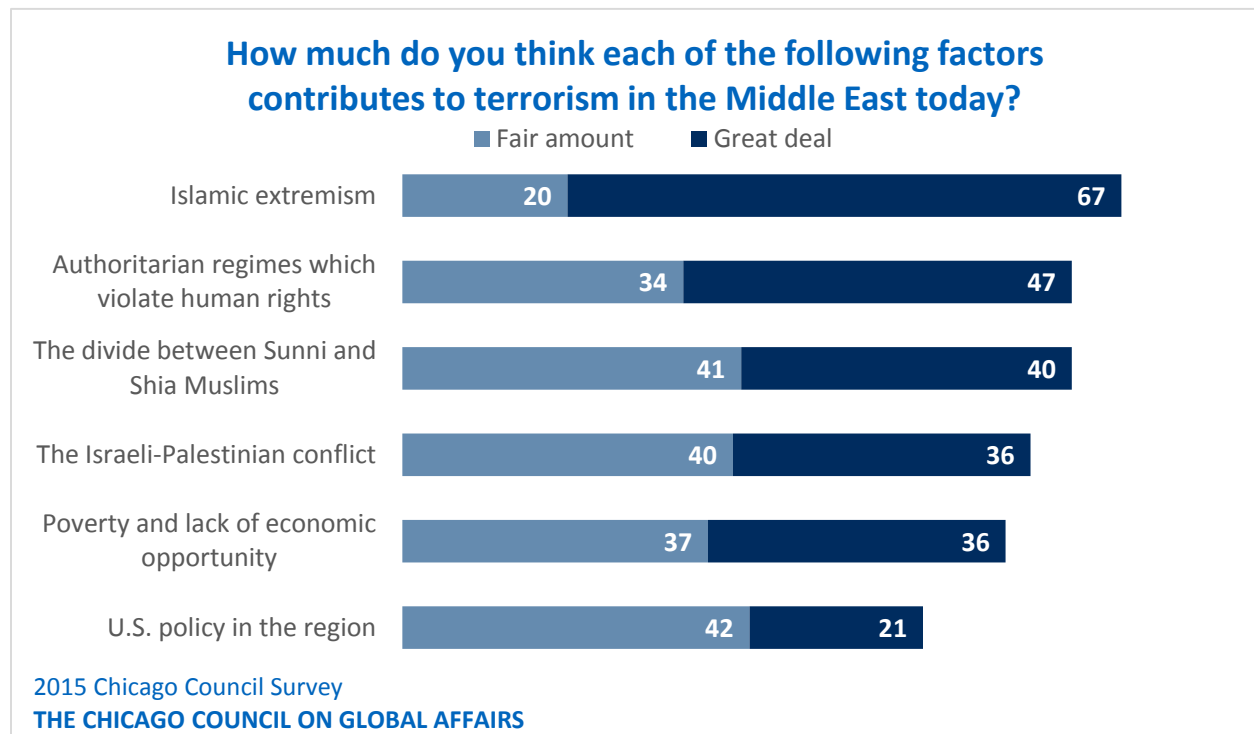


More Confidence in US Ability to Deal with Terrorist Attacks than to Deal with Root Cause

For the most part, Americans tend to believe that the US government is “very” or “somewhat” prepared for terrorist threats (in every case, more say somewhat than very). Solid majorities believe the US is at least somewhat prepared to deal with international terrorism (64%) and a major terrorist attack in the US (63%). But narrower majorities say that the US is prepared to deal with the continuing conflict in Syria (53%), Islamic fundamentalism (52%), and the rise of Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria (52%).

When asked separately about the extent to which several factors contribute to the rise of terrorism in the Middle East, two in three Americans think that Islamic extremism contributes “a great deal” (67%). Nearly half say that “authoritarian regimes which violate human rights” contribute a great deal. Fewer believe that the Sunni-Shia divide (40%), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (36%), poverty and lack of economic opportunity (36%), and US policy in the region (21%) contribute a great deal.

While there are clearly differences in the weight of each of these items, it is worth noting that majorities consider each one to contribute at least a fair amount to terrorism in the region, including US policy.



Slight Uptick in Perceived Threat from Continuing Conflict in Syria

Public concerns about the continuing conflict in Syria remain low with just 35 percent of Americans describing it as a critical threat, though this represents an 11 percentage point increase from 2014. Asked which outcome in Syria would be most threatening to US interests, a majority see “a victory by Islamic extremist groups” (58%) as the most dangerous outcome, followed by “a continuing civil war” (27%) and “a victory by the regime of Bashar al-Assad” (7%).

About the Chicago Council Survey

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2015 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy. The 2015 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using the KnowledgePanel, a nationwide online research panel recruited through an address-based sampling frame. The survey was fielded between May 25 to June 17, 2015 among a national sample of 2,034 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error ranges from ± 2.2 to ± 3.1 percentage points depending on the specific question, with higher margins of error for partisan subgroups.

The 2015 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, the United States-Japan Foundation, and the personal support of Lester Crown and the Crown family.