

U.S. report finds Iran threat remains

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Iran’s support for international terrorist groups remained undiminished last year and even expanded in some respects, the Obama administration said Friday, less than two weeks before the deadline for completing a nuclear deal that could provide Tehran with billions of dollars in relief from economic sanctions.

The assessment offered a worrying sign of even worse terror-related violence to come after a year in which extremists in the Middle East, Africa and Asia committed 35 percent more terrorist acts, killed nearly twice as many people and almost tripled the number of kidnappings worldwide. Statistics released by the State Department on Friday also pointed to a tenfold surge in the most lethal kinds of attacks.

Yet even as the Islamic State and the Taliban were blamed for most of the death and destruction in 2014, the department’s annual terrorism report underscored the ongoing threat posed by Iran and its proxies across the Islamic world and beyond.

Tehran increased its assistance to Shiite militias fighting in Iraq and continued its long-standing military, intelligence and financial aid to Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Syrian President Bashar Assad’s embattled government and Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad. While the 388-page study said Iran has lived up to interim nuclear deals with world powers thus far, it gave no prediction about how an Iran flush with cash from a final agreement would behave.

World powers and Iran are trying to conclude an accord by the end of the month, setting 15 years of restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for significant relief from the international sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

The negotiations don’t involve Iran’s support for militant groups beyond its border. But Israel and the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf, Iran’s regional rivals, fear a fresh wave of terrorism as a result

of any pact. President Barack Obama, hoping to ease their fears, has said most of the money would go to Iran’s economic development.

America’s “grave concern about Iran’s support for terrorism remains unabated,” White House spokesman Eric Shultz said. “That is all the more reason that we need to make sure they don’t obtain a nuclear weapon.”

In total last year, nearly 33,000 people were killed in almost 13,500 terrorist attacks around the world, according to the figures that were compiled for the State Department by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland. That’s up from just over 18,000 deaths in nearly 10,000 attacks in 2013.

Twenty-four Americans were killed by extremists in 2014, the report said. And abductions soared to 9,428 in the calendar year from 3,137 in 2013.

The report attributes the rise in attacks to increased terror activity in Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria and the sharp spike in deaths to a growth in exceptionally lethal attacks in those countries and elsewhere.

There were 20 attacks that killed more than 100 people each in 2014, compared to just two a year earlier, the report said. Among those were December’s attack by the Pakistani Taliban on a school in Peshawar that killed at least 150 people and the June attack by Islamic State militants on a prison in Mosul, Iraq, in which 670 Shiite prisoners died.

At the end of 2014, the prison attack was the deadliest terrorist operation in the world since Sept. 11, 2001, according to the report.

Despite all indications pointing toward increased violence, the State Department’s counterterrorism coordinator said the numbers didn’t reflect improvements by the U.S. and its partners in stamping out terrorism financing, improving information sharing, impeding foreign fighters and forming a coalition to fight the Islamic State. “We have made progress,” Ambassador Tina Kaidanow said.

That’s a mighty fine dog

LOS ANGELES (AP) — For the first time, a Los Angeles shelter’s Hero Dog award has gone to a cat.

In May 2014, Tara the cat fought off a dog that attacked her 6-year-old owner as he rode his bicycle in the driveway of the family’s Bakersfield home.

Tara body-slammed Scrappy, a chow-mix that lived next door, when the dog got out of his yard, ran for Jeremy Triantafilo, grabbed his leg and started shaking from side-to-side. Tara chased the dog toward its home. It was later euthanized.

Jeremy, who is autistic and had to have eight stitches, calls Scrappy a “bad dog,” said his dad, Roger Triantafilo. About Tara, Jeremy said, “She is my hero.”

“We were so impressed by Tara’s bravery and fast action that the selection committee decided that a cat this spectacular should be the National Hero Dog,” said Madeline Bernstein, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Los Angeles. The shelter’s 33rd annual award was presented to the family in downtown Los Angeles on Friday.

You will usually find Tara close to Jeremy, his father said.



AP Photo/Richard Vogel
Tara, a 7-year-old adopted cat poses for a photo with her award Friday in Los Angeles.

“The neighbor kids come over and play with her. Dogs walk by all the time. She gets along fine with our dog, Maya. But if Jeremy falls off his bike, she comes running. If he starts crying, she comes running,” Triantafilo said.

He believes Tara would help Jeremy’s twin brothers, Carson and Conner, if they needed it. She’s grown up with all of them. But there is no question she is partial to Jeremy, he said. Jeremy and Tara spend a lot of time walking around and talking with one another.

Gun rights still trumping gun controls in politics

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — They offered prayers and moments of silence. They sought to comfort. Some flashed with anger and frustration that, once again, America was forced to confront another mass shooting.

Yet less than 48 hours after nine people were shot to death in a South Carolina church, the nation’s political leaders, from President Barack Obama to those Republicans who seek to replace him, as well as those in Congress, either did not call for a closer look at gun violence in America or said they didn’t see one coming soon.

There was little doubt that the gun lobby’s dominance would continue in U.S. politics no matter the calamity. Even the most passionate advocates of stronger gun controls expected no different.

“I’d like to say these shootings in Charleston will be a turning point, enough for Congress to fight back against the gun lobby and take some serious action about gun laws,” said Chelsea Parsons, who oversees gun policy for the liberal Center for American Progress. “But I don’t want to be naive.”

Courting evangelical voters in Washington, a succession of Republican presidential hopefuls stood to express their horror at Wednesday’s attack, yet none suggested gun control be addressed.

“Laws can’t change” such attacks, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie told the Faith and Freedom Coalition conference. “Only the good will and love of the American people can let those folks know that that act is unacceptable, disgraceful.”

Conservative favorite Ben Carson, the only African-American candidate in the field, addressed racial tensions, not gun laws: “If we don’t pay close attention to the hatred and division that’s going on in our nation, this is just a harbinger of what we can expect.”

And another GOP rival,



AP Photo/David Goldman
A bagpipe honor guard walks down the aisle Friday as a memorial service begins for the nine people killed in a shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C.

Victims’ families forgive suspect in court

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — They forgave him. They advised him to repent for his sins, and asked for God’s mercy on his soul. One even told Dylann Storm Roof to repent and confess, and “you’ll be OK.”

Relatives of the nine people shot down during a Bible study session inside their historic black church confronted the 21-year-old suspect Friday during his initial hearing. They described their pain and anger, but also spoke of love.

“I forgive you, my family forgives you,” said Anthony Thompson, whose relative Myra Thompson was killed. “We would like you to take this opportunity to repent. ... Do that and you’ll be better off than you are right now.”

Carly Fiorina said: “We ought not to start immediately rushing to policy prescriptions or engaging in the blame game.”

The response from across the political spectrum illustrates the profound lack of attention gun control has garnered so far in a 2016 campaign that offers sharp differences between the political parties. It also highlights the dominant position the National Rifle Association continues to hold in national politics.

NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said the organization would not make a statement about the South Carolina shooting “until all the facts are known.” He declined to talk about the politics of the gun debate but has previously said that political leaders have learned that “it’s bad politics to be on the wrong side of the gun issue.”

Police arrested 21-year-old Dylann Storm Roof in the Wednesday shooting deaths of nine people at the Emanuel

African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Officials consider the murders a racially motivated hate crime. The victims were black; the suspect, white.

On Thursday, Democratic front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton said “hard truths” must be faced about guns and race. Despite her words, many Democrats see gun control as a losing issue and don’t want to touch it.

Obama pointed to lax gun controls in his response but glumly acknowledged there was no way he could prod Congress to take action on gun violence.

“The politics in this town foreclose a lot of those avenues right now,” he said flatly.

But former Texas Gov. Rick Perry said it was inappropriate for Obama to use a tragedy to promote gun control. “This is the m.o. of this administration anytime there is an accident like this,” the GOP presidential candidate said.

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