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Politically Motivated Violence Is Rare in the United States

By Alex Nowrasteh



Charlie Kirk, the co-founder of Turning Point USA, was assassinated while speaking at an event in Utah on September 10. The police have not arrested a suspect, but the assassin was likely motivated by political disagreements with Kirk. Politically motivated murder is unacceptable and inherently bad, like all murder, and doubly so because of how socially corrosive it is. The harm is personal: Kirk is gone, and he leaves behind a

wife and two children, relatives, and friends. The harm is public because so many people admired him. Politicians and pundits across the political spectrum have condemned Kirk's killing, with some **variation** in quality and a small chorus of social media accounts praising the crime. Politically motivated murder is very uncommon in the United States.

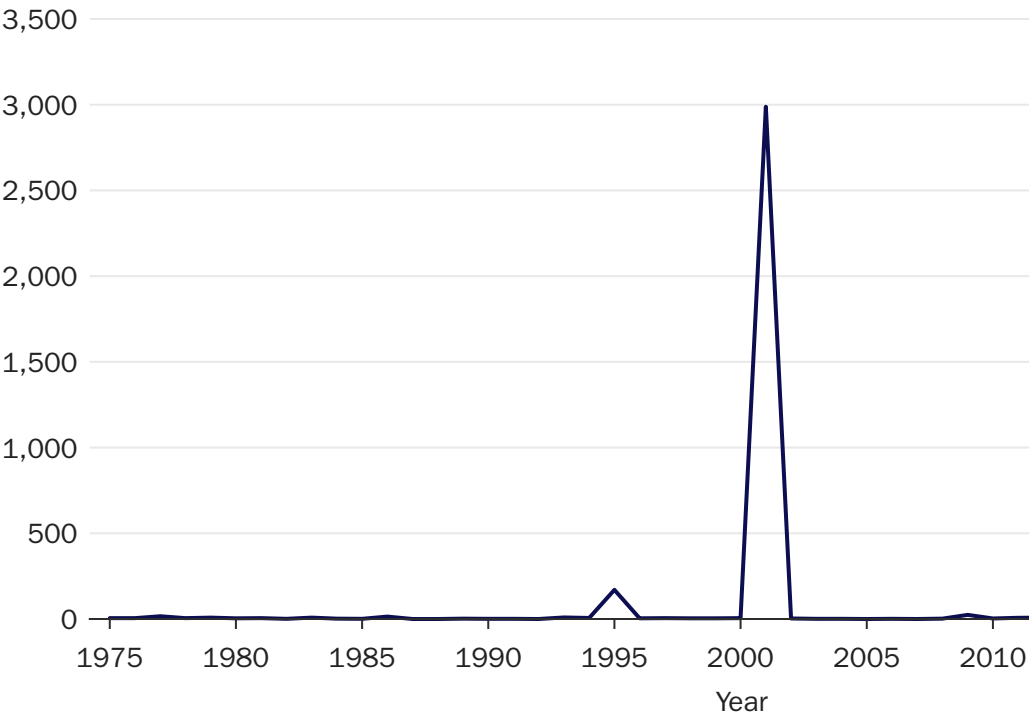
A total of 3,599 people have been murdered in politically motivated terrorist attacks in the United States from January 1, 1975, through September 10, 2025. Murders committed in terrorist attacks account for about 0.35 percent of all murders since 1975. Only 81 happened since 2020, accounting for 0.07 percent of all murders during that time, or 7 out of 10,000. **Terrorism** is the broadest reasonable definition of a politically motivated murder because it is the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a nonstate actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through coercion, fear, or intimidation. That excludes individual **hate crimes**, which are frequently difficult to distinguish from terrorism but are often more personal and spontaneous.

Eighty-three percent of those murdered since 1975 were killed by the 9/11 terrorists (Figure 1). The Oklahoma City Bombing accounts for about another 5 percent. Those murdered since 2020 account for just 2 percent. Terrorists inspired by Islamist ideology are responsible for 87 percent of those murdered in attacks on US soil since 1975 (Table 1). Right-wingers are the second most common motivating ideology, accounting for 391 murders and 11 percent of the total. The definition here of right-wing terrorists includes those motivated by white supremacy, anti-abortion beliefs, involuntary celibacy (incels), and other right-wing ideologies.

Left-wing terrorists murdered 65 people, or about 2 percent of the total. Left-wing terrorists include those motivated by black nationalism, anti-police sentiment, communism, socialism, animal rights, environmentalism, anti-white ideologies, and other left-wing ideologies. Those murders that are politically motivated by unknown or other ideologies are a vanishingly small percentage, which is unsurprising because terrorists typically want attention for their causes.

Figure 1

Murders in Politically Motivated Terrorist Attacks



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Sources: See Methodologies and Sources Sections from Nowrasteh 2025 and Nowrasteh 2017

Table 1

Murders in Politically Motivated Terrorism, Including 9/11

All Ideologies	Deaths	Share of Deaths
Foreign Nationalism	8	0%
Islamism	3122	87%
Left	65	2%
Right	391	11%
Separatism	4	0%
Unknown/Other	9	0%
Total	3599	

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Sources: See Methodologies and Sources Sections from Nowrasteh 2025 and Nowrasteh 2017

Because the 9/11 attacks dominate the data, it may make sense to exclude them because they obscure other trends, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks are also plausibly distinct (Table 2). Keeping all other Islamist attacks and excluding 9/11 reduces the number of murders to 620 from 3,599 and cuts the Islamist share of murder from 87 percent to 23 percent. It similarly raises the right-wing share of murders in terrorist attacks from 11 percent to 63 percent, the left-wing share from about 2 percent to 10 percent, and the unknown/other share to 1 percent.

Table 2

Murders in Politically Motivated Terrorism, Excluding 9/11

All Ideologies	Deaths	Share of Deaths
Foreign Nationalism	8	1%
Islamism	143	23%
Left	65	10%
Right	391	63%
Separatism	4	1%
Unknown/Other	9	1%
Total	620	

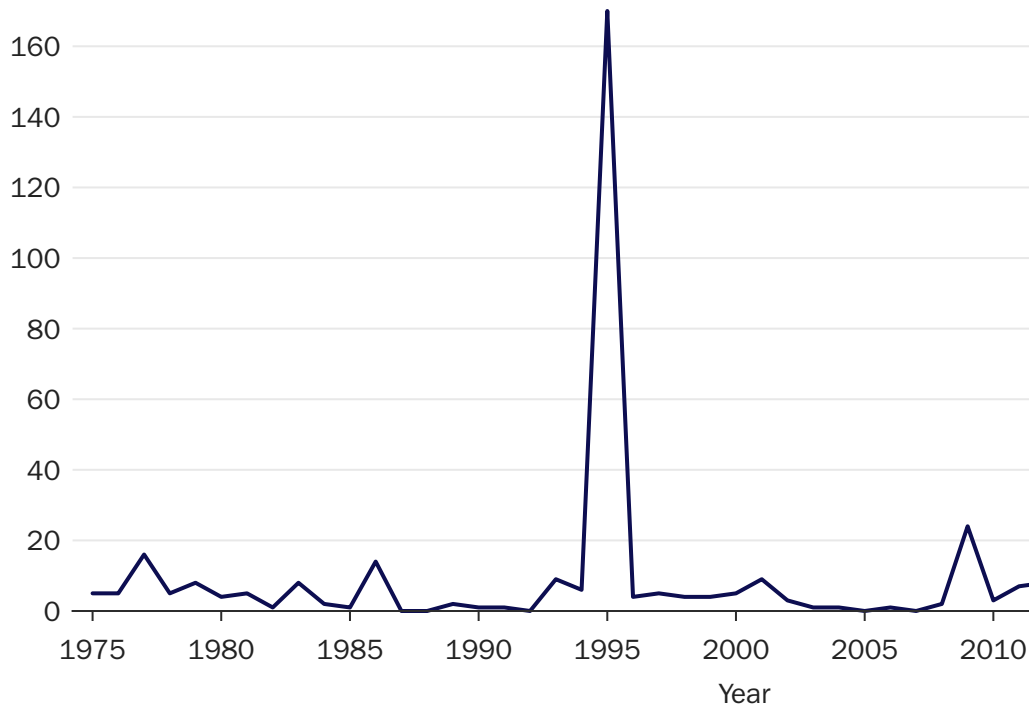
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Sources: See Methodologies and Sources Sections from Nowrasteh 2025 and Nowrasteh 2017

There isn't an obvious recent spike in politically motivated terrorism when the outlier deadliness of the 9/11 attacks is excluded from the analysis (Figure 2). The spikes in 1995 and 2016 are from the Oklahoma City Bombing and the Pulse Nightclub Shooting, respectively. Twenty-four people have been murdered so far in 2025, including Kirk.

Figure 2

Murders in Politically Motivated Terrorist Attacks, Excluding 9/11



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Terrorism since 2020 paints a slightly different picture. Since January 1, 2020, terrorists have murdered 81 people in attacks on US soil that account for about 0.07 percent of all homicides during that time (estimated for 2025 so far). Right-wing terrorists account for over half of those murders, Islamists for 21 percent, left-wingers for 22 percent, and 1 percent had unknown or other motivations. There are not many politically motivated terrorist killings in the United States.

The motivated reader can slice and dice these numbers in different ways, count marginal hate crimes as politically motivated terrorist attacks, assign different ideological motivations to the individual attacker, and must still conclude that the threat to human life from these types of attacks is relatively small.

That's no consolation to those harmed, and it shouldn't be, but it's just a fact. Regardless, the victims of the violence deserve justice.

My methodology and sources are available [here](#). Injuries and property damage are excluded, terrorists who died in their attacks are not counted as victims, and innocent people killed by the police response to an attack are counted as being killed by the terrorist. Some marginal cases, like that of [Aiden/Audrey Hale](#), are included even though the local police disagree. In that case, Hale was counted as being motivated by a left-wing ideology.

The number of deaths in politically motivated terrorist attacks is so tiny that any statistical analysis is extremely fragile. However, there is one consistent finding from analyses of politically motivated terrorism: there aren't many deaths. Thus, their small numbers mean it's important to intensely analyze individual politically motivated terrorist offenses because

the inclusion or exclusion of just a few killers or misclassification makes a big difference in the final tally.

The numbers are so small that the demand for political violence exceeds the supply. When **Shane Tamura** committed a mass shooting in Manhattan on July 28, 2025, to target the NFL, which wasn't a terrorist attack, he murdered a BlackRock executive named Wesley LaPatner and four others. Some online commentators celebrated her murder even though she wasn't the target. Those people are depraved, but the motivation of the attacker matters more than the opinions of depraved online observers in deciding whether to classify the attack as politically motivated terrorism. The public demands more politically motivated violence than murderers are willing to supply, at least in that case.

The analysis above ignores injuries and property damage, which may skew the results. Some politically motivated attacks only target **property**, others don't result in **injuries**, and still others don't hurt anyone or anything. Most of the harm done by terrorist attacks comes from death. Injuries and property damage matter, but both are highly variable and generally impose a much smaller cost on the victims. Injuries from attacks range from scratches and burst eardrums to brain damage and amputation, so all injuries aren't identical, but treating them the same in data tends to blur the range of harm. Property damage also ranges from roughly zero, as in the Kirk assassination, to over \$170 billion during 9/11. Likewise, terror plots or threats range from the laughably unserious to barely averted catastrophe, so lumping them under one metric isn't useful. As a result, the number of deaths is the most important metric.

The big fear from politically motivated terrorism is that the pursuit of justice will overreach, result in new laws and policies that overreact to the small threat, and end up killing far more people while diminishing all our freedoms. This is the major lesson from the government's overreaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The government can and should vigorously pursue justice for Kirk and all the others murdered by politically motivated terrorists, but it can and should do so without new political witch hunts, expanded government powers, and a revived war on terrorism. Furthermore, we should all at least realize how uncommon politically motivated terrorism is.

Criminal Justice, Free Speech and Civil Liberties, Immigration



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