

PolicyBRIEF

FIFTH-GENERATION TERRORISM: WHY TODAY'S MILITANT GROUPS OUTLAST THE ARMIES SENT TO DEFEAT THEM

Contemporary violent non-state actors are becoming political, economic, and administrative competitors to the state — and counterterrorism built for the last generation of threats will not defeat this one.

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THE ISSUE

Terrorism scholarship and policy still default to David Rapoport's four-wave model, which begins in the 1870s and treats religiously-motivated transnational terrorism — al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the 1979 Iranian Revolution — as the most recent phase of the problem. Scholars at the Horn Institute argue that this framework is now out of date. A new configuration has emerged over roughly the past 25 years in which religion, politics, local grievance, self-financing, territorial control, and digital influence no longer sit alongside one another but actively reinforce one another — fifth-generation terrorism — and it demands a different theory of the threat and a different counterterrorism response.

Key judgment — the decisive task for policymakers is no longer simply defeating terrorist organizations militarily. It is preventing violent actors from acquiring the political, economic, social, and cognitive footholds that let them become alternative centers of authority in the first place.

FIVE GENERATIONS, ONE CONTINUUM

I	II	III	IV	V
Antiquity — localized violence <i>Sicarii, Azariqa</i>	Medieval — institutionalized asymmetry <i>Hashashins</i>	Imperial — colonial & anti-colonial terror	Modern — religious, transnational wave <i>al-Qaeda, Hezbollah</i>	Religio-political, networked, autonomous <i>ISIS, al-Shabaab, JNIM</i>

Generations overlap rather than replace one another — assassination, guerrilla warfare, religious mobilization, and state sponsorship all persist into the present; what changes is how they combine.

WHAT MAKES THE FIFTH GENERATION DIFFERENT

- 1. The religio-political feedback loop** — Theology and political strategy reinforce each other: political exclusion gets framed in religious terms; that framing intensifies mobilization; mobilization yields territory; territory yields revenue; revenue funds more of the same.
- 2. Organizational autonomy** — Groups increasingly self-finance through taxation, extortion, smuggling, and control of trade routes, reducing dependence on state patrons and denying counterterrorism the leverage cutting off a sponsor once provided.
- 3. Glocalization** — Transnational ideology is franchised through local affiliates that speak to two audiences at once — the global movement and the local population exploiting real grievances: exclusion, corruption, and weak governance.
- 4. The cognitive battlefield** — Digital platforms, encrypted communication, and information operations let groups manufacture fear, polarization, and doubt in state legitimacy — often without controlling territory or claiming a body count at all.

CASE IN POINT: AL-SHABAAB

Al-Shabaab fields an estimated 3,000–7,000 fighters against a coalition of Somali, Somaliland, AUSSOM, and Ethiopian forces exceeding 60,000 troops, backed by the US, Turkey, Qatar, the EU, and multilateral financing. A conventional force-ratio analysis cannot explain its survival. The five-generation framework can: the group has converted itself from a fighting force into a rival system of authority.

\$150–200M

estimated annual revenue (2023) from taxation, checkpoints, and a 2.5% zakat levy

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Somali regions where Al-Shabaab taxes residents and businesses, including areas it does not physically hold

60,000+

opposing troops across national, regional, and international forces that have not translated into defeat

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- ❑ **Stop treating the ideological spectrum as one problem.** Radicalism, extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism require different tools; collapsing them into a single security response misreads the threat and misallocates resources.
- ❑ **Target the financing model, not just the fighters.** Where groups are financially self-sustaining, degrading troop strength alone leaves the taxation and shadow-governance systems that fund the next generation of recruits intact.
- ❑ **Contest governance, not only territory.** If communities find a militant group's dispute resolution and service provision more predictable than the state's, military recapture of ground will not durably dislodge it.
- ❑ **Build a cognitive-domain response.** Counter-messaging, platform cooperation, and information integrity need to be treated as core counterterrorism infrastructure, not an add-on to kinetic operations.
- ❑ **Address local grievance as a security variable.** Political exclusion, corruption, and unresolved land or resource disputes are recruitment infrastructure; governance reform is a counterterrorism instrument, not a separate development agenda.

“The tools that defeated fourth-generation terrorism will not defeat fifth-generation terrorism.” Old playbooks against new threats should be updated into new strategies. Countermeasures need to be purpose-built for adversaries that function simultaneously as ideological movements, economic enterprises, and proto-governments.

Source: Ali, M. Y. — The Five Generations of Terrorism: From the *Sicarii* and the *Assassins* to ISIS and the Religio-Political Present. Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies, Nairobi. September 16 2026