

Why Fifth-Generation Terrorism Poses a Major Security Challenge: What We Must Do

Dr Mustafa Y Ali

Growing evidence confirms the emergence of a '*fifth-generation*'¹ of violent extremism and terrorism, presenting complex threats that conventional security operations alone can no longer contain. Countering the systemic proliferation and diffusion of these contemporary risks requires a comprehensive, whole-of-society strategy. Over a decade of empirical pilot programming in Kenya and the wider Horn of Africa indicates that integrating faith leaders, local communities, and civil society organizations is vitally important to prevent and resolve the *fifth-generation* extremism-driven conflicts, and to achieve shared security. Extrapolated globally, evidence from other programs reinforces this claim.

Contemporary global security is increasingly defined by the emergence of the fifth wave of terrorism: the religio-political wave. While historically preceded by the fourth—or purely religious—wave, which drew foundational inspiration from tectonic shifts like the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the emergence of Afghani Mujahideen, this current epoch represents a profound paradigm shift. The defining characteristic of the fifth wave is a symbiotic convergence of theology and statecraft. Within this framework, religious dogma and political pragmatism operate in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop, co-opting local grievances to legitimize extremist objectives and sustain protracted campaigns of violence.

This institutional symbiosis fundamentally complicates conventional counter-terrorism, conflict resolution, and preventative frameworks. By merging metaphysical imperatives with material political structures, *fifth-generation* violent non-state actors have transcended the archetype of the amorphous, shadowy network chasing ethereal rewards. Instead, they have evolved into highly sophisticated, bureaucratized entities intensely focused on territorial sovereignty, quasi-state administration, civil governance, and institutional survival. Combined with the use of fifth-generation communication capabilities, *fifth-generation* terrorism and extremism have become even more brutally efficient in their recruitment.

The structural and operational divergence between fourth- and fifth-generation militant groups highlights a significant evolutionary trajectory. Whereas fourth-generation groups (such as the nascent core of Al-Qaeda or Hezbollah in the 1980s) relied heavily on the witting or unwitting structural and financial scaffolding of state sponsors, fifth-generation apparatuses are essentially self-perpetuating. They do not depend on external state patronage; rather, they have monopolized local economies to achieve financial autarky, with some effectively operating as de facto states or quasi-states within ungoverned or contested spaces.

Secondly, geopolitically, this transition was accelerated by the fourth generation's deliberate deployment of franchising strategies. This structural decentralization birthed a network or networks of highly localized franchises that emerged in the 1990s and crested circa 2015 to 2025. Prominent examples include various regional affiliates of *Al-Qaeda Central*—most notably Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), and *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Al Shabaab)—alongside entities like *Jamati Ahlis Sunna Liddawati wal Jihād* (Boko Haram) and DAESH.

¹ Fifth Generation Terrorism and Militancy is entirely my conceptualization as a scholar of violent extremism and terrorism studies. It builds on David Rappoport's 'four wave theory of terrorism', which, in my earlier analysis, found inadequate in the understanding of contemporary terrorist and militant groups that recently emerged and merged, especially in the global south.

Thirdly, structurally tethered to a broader transnational network, these fifth-generation franchises have pivotally shifted their operational focus. They have augmented global ideological mobilization with targeted political mobilization. By embedding themselves within hyper-local socio-economic grievances, these groups prioritize domestic political legitimacy over abstract global relevance, rendering them far more resilient, adaptable, and deeply entrenched within their respective operational theatres.

It is for these reasons that I call for systematic efforts and approaches to integrate faith leaders, local communities, and civil society organizations to address the highly destructive threats posed by the fifth generation of terrorist organizations and violent extremist networks.