

The Five Generations of Terrorism: From the Sicarii, Assassins to ISIS

Dr Mustafa Y. Ali

Introduction

The history of terrorism is not a linear history of violence. It is an evolving interaction between ideology, political authority, technology, social grievances, organizational structures, and the changing character of the state. Terrorism has repeatedly adapted to transformations in political order, communications, warfare, and society.

Drawing on scholarship and practice in understanding and addressing extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism, this article proposes that contemporary terrorism may be understood as having entered a fifth generation: a distinct religio-political phase in which religious narratives and political strategies increasingly operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

The argument advanced here is not that terrorism has followed five universally accepted historical stages. Rather, the five-generation framework proposed in this article is an analytical model for understanding key transformations in terrorism's organization, motivation, political purpose, and operational environment.

The proposed fifth generation differs from earlier forms due to the convergence of several developments: the politicization of religious identity; the localization of transnational ideologies; the emergence of autonomous violent non-state actors (VNSAs); the exploitation of contested and ungoverned spaces; the ability to generate resources locally; the franchising and networking of militant organizations; and the growing importance of digital communication, information operations, and psychological influence.

This evolution presents a profound challenge to conventional counterterrorism. Contemporary violent movements cannot always be understood as externally controlled proxies, nor simply as clandestine organizations seeking spectacular attacks. Some have developed political, economic, judicial, administrative, and coercive capacities that allow them to exercise forms of de facto authority over populations.

At the same time, the terminology used to describe terrorism remains deeply contested. Terrorism, an act of terror, radicalism, extremism, and violent extremism are frequently used interchangeably. Such conflation can obscure rather than clarify the problem.

A more precise conceptual vocabulary is therefore essential.

Defining Terrorism, Terror, Extremism and Radicalism

Terrorism has no universally accepted definition. The concept remains politically and legally contested, particularly concerning whether states can be described as perpetrators of terrorism and how terrorism should be distinguished from armed conflict, insurgency and legitimate resistance.

For the purposes of this article, **terrorism** is understood as the systematic or programmatic use, or threatened use, of premeditated violence against civilians, non-combatants, public institutions,

or other symbolic targets by state or non-state actors for political, ideological, or, in some circumstances, economic purposes, with the intended effect extending beyond the immediate victims to influence a wider audience. This definition emphasizes four elements: intent, violence or threat, political or ideological purpose, and the communication of fear to an audience beyond the immediate target.

An **act of terror**, by contrast, need not constitute terrorism. A violent act may create terror without being part of a sustained political or ideological campaign. Criminal violence, mass violence arising from personal motives, or violence associated with severe psychological disturbance may produce terror without meeting the analytical criteria for terrorism. While terrorism has an ideological tinge, an act of terror does not.

Extremism more specifically refers to rigid or exclusionary belief systems that reject pluralism, delegitimize alternative viewpoints, and may place particular ideological, political, or religious objectives above established social and democratic norms. **Violent extremism** marks the critical transition in which extremist ideas become associated with the legitimization, preparation, facilitation, or use of violence that constitutes an assault on the mainstream.

Radicalism is simply standing at a distance from the mainstream. Radical ideas seek fundamental change and may be either peaceful or violent (in which case they become violent extremism). Radicalism, therefore, should not automatically be treated as synonymous with terrorism or extremism.

The distinction matters because radical thought is not necessarily extremist; extremism is not necessarily violent; and violent extremism is not necessarily an act of terror; and an act of terror is not necessarily terrorism. Effective prevention and counterterrorism require interventions targeted at the specific phenomenon rather than treating the entire ideological spectrum as a single security problem.

A Five-Generation Framework

The framework proposed here identifies five broad historical configurations:

1. **First Generation – Antiquity and Localized Ideological Violence**
2. **Second Generation – Medieval Religious-Political Violence and Institutionalized Asymmetry**
3. **Third Generation – Imperial, Colonial and Anti-Colonial Terror**
4. **Fourth Generation – The Modern Religious Wave and Transnational Mobilization**
5. **Fifth Generation – The Religio-Political, Networked and Autonomous Era**

These generations should not be understood as rigid chronological compartments. Earlier forms of terrorism do not disappear when a new generation emerges. Rather, subsequent generations incorporate, adapt, and transform older methods, narratives, and organizational structures.

First Generation: Antiquity and Localized Ideological Violence

Some of the earliest recognizable forms of ideologically motivated political violence emerged in antiquity.

The *Sicarii*, associated with first-century Judea, provide one of the clearest historical examples. Operating in the context of Roman rule and intense political and religious contestation, they used concealed weapons and targeted individuals associated with Roman authority and those regarded as collaborators.

Their importance lies not simply in the violence they employed, but in the psychological and political purpose of that violence. The assassination of selected individuals could communicate defiance, intimidate wider populations, and demonstrate the vulnerability of the occupying authority.

The *Sicarii* therefore illustrate an early form of asymmetric political violence in which a relatively weak actor sought political effects disproportionate to its material capacity. Their actions were generally acts of terror and were motivated by religious reasons.

The *Kharijites* provide another important historical example of ideologically legitimized political violence in the early Islamic period. Their emergence reflected intense disputes over political authority, legitimacy, and religious interpretation following the first Muslim civil war. Certain Kharijite factions developed highly exclusionary doctrines and employed violence against political opponents whom they considered illegitimate or apostate.

It is important, however, not to collapse the diverse *Kharijite* movements into a single organization or to project modern concepts of terrorism directly onto seventh-century political history. Their significance for this framework lies principally in the early relationship between religious legitimation, political contestation and violence.

The first generation was characterized by localized operations, limited technological capacity, close-range weapons, and a strong link between political violence and immediate territorial or communal struggles. Some were clearly acts of terror; others were terrorism.

Second Generation: Medieval Religious-Political Violence and Institutionalized Asymmetry

The medieval period witnessed a significant development in the organization and sophistication of politically motivated violence.

The Nizari Ismailis, or the *Hashashins*, popularly known in Western historical literature as the *Assassins*, represent an important example. From their strongholds in Persia and Syria, they developed a disciplined organizational structure and employed targeted killings against selected political and military figures.

Their importance was not simply that they assassinated prominent individuals. Target selection itself became a strategic instrument. Rather than attempting to defeat militarily superior adversaries through conventional warfare, the *Hashashins* could impose political costs through highly selective attacks against individuals whose removal could generate fear, uncertainty, and political disruption. This represented a significant development in asymmetric political violence.

The medieval period also saw religious institutions and political authorities employ coercion on a much larger scale. Religious wars, persecution, executions, and campaigns against perceived heresy demonstrate how political authority, religious legitimacy, and organized violence could become deeply intertwined.

The second generation therefore represents an evolution from localized acts of violence toward more organized, ideologically legitimized, and strategically selective forms of political violence.

Third Generation: Imperial, Colonial and Anti-Colonial Terror

The expansion of European imperialism fundamentally transformed the scale and character of political violence.

Colonial systems frequently relied upon military coercion, collective punishment, forced displacement, economic exploitation and other forms of systematic violence to establish and maintain political control. The state—or imperial authority—possessed overwhelming material power and could therefore employ violence on a scale unavailable to most non-state actors. This created an enduring relationship between what may analytically be described as ‘terror from above’ and ‘terror from below’.

Anti-colonial movements responded through guerrilla warfare, sabotage, assassinations and other forms of irregular violence. Some movements deliberately targeted civilians or employed violence against populations perceived to support colonial rule. Others focused primarily on military and governmental targets.

It is therefore important not to equate all anti-colonial resistance with terrorism. National liberation movements have historically used different combinations of conventional warfare, guerrilla warfare, political mobilization, and, in some cases, acts of terror. The legitimacy of a political cause does not, by itself, determine whether a particular method of violence constitutes terrorism.

The third generation is significant because it established a recurring dynamic in modern political violence: the interaction between powerful states and weaker non-state actors operating through asymmetric strategies. Industrialization, mass communication, nationalism, and imperial competition further expanded the political environment in which terrorism could operate.

Fourth Generation: The Modern Religious Wave

The fourth generation broadly aligns with what terrorism scholars have identified as the religious wave of terrorism, particularly from the late twentieth century onward. In this generation, state actors controlled and instrumentalized religion for terrorist purposes.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Soviet-Afghan war, the mobilization of Islamist fighters, the Lebanese civil war, and subsequent geopolitical conflicts contributed to an environment in which religious narratives increasingly became central to militant mobilization.

Groups such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah demonstrated different dimensions of this transformation. Religious narratives were no longer merely peripheral justifications for political violence. For many organizations, religious identity and theological interpretation became central sources of legitimacy, recruitment, and mobilization.

However, this generation should not be reduced to Islamism. Religious terrorism has also included violent movements motivated by Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious narratives.

The major transformation was the increasingly transnational character of ideological mobilization.

Terrorist organizations became capable of recruiting across borders, communicating with audiences far beyond their immediate areas of operation and presenting local conflicts as part of wider ideological struggles.

The fourth generation therefore brought together religious legitimation, transnational mobilization, sophisticated propaganda, and expanding networks of non-state violence.

Fifth Generation: The Religio-Political, Networked and Autonomous Era

The fifth generation proposed in this article emerges from the accumulated transformations of the preceding generations. Its defining feature is not simply religion. Religion was already central to much fourth-generation terrorism.

The distinctive characteristic is the symbiotic convergence of theology, political strategy, local grievances, organizational autonomy, and networked mobilization.

In fifth-generation terrorism, theological narratives and political calculations increasingly reinforce one another. Religious ideology can legitimize political objectives, while political grievances provide concrete environments in which ideological narratives can be embedded. This produces what may be termed a religio-political feedback loop.

A movement may frame political exclusion in theological terms; theological narratives may then intensify political mobilization; political mobilization can produce territorial influence; territorial influence can provide economic resources; and those resources can sustain further ideological and political activity. The result is an organization that cannot be understood merely as a clandestine terrorist cell.

Organizational Autonomy

One important characteristic of this generation is increasing organizational autonomy. Some earlier militant organizations depended heavily on external state sponsors, sympathetic governments, or international patrons. Contemporary violent non-state actors can sometimes generate substantial resources from the environments in which they operate.

These resources may derive from taxation, extortion, smuggling, illicit economies, control of trade routes, natural resources, kidnapping, local businesses, or other coercive economic arrangements.

This does not mean that fifth-generation terrorist organizations never receive external assistance. Rather, their increasing capacity for financial self-sustainability reduces their dependence upon external patrons. In certain contexts, this produces organizations capable of performing functions normally associated with states: taxation, dispute resolution, policing, coercion, provision of limited services and territorial administration.

The boundary between terrorist organization, insurgency, criminal enterprise and proto-government can consequently become blurred.

From Global Ideology to Localized Mobilization

Another defining characteristic of the fifth generation is the relationship between the global and the local. Organizations associated with transnational movements increasingly operate through localized affiliates, franchises or networks. Groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIS affiliates demonstrate different variations of this phenomenon.

Their local resilience cannot be explained solely by the appeal of a global ideology. Local grievances—including political exclusion, corruption, state abuses, communal insecurity, unemployment, weak governance, competition over land and resources, and unresolved conflicts—can create openings that transnational ideological movements exploit.

This is the paradox of contemporary terrorism: The ideology may be global, but the recruitment opportunity is frequently local. The fifth generation therefore represents a process of glocalization: global ideological narratives are adapted to local political, social and economic realities.

The terrorist organization becomes more resilient precisely because it can speak simultaneously to two audiences—the local population and the wider transnational ideological community.

Technology and the Transformation of Terrorism

The technological environment has introduced another major transformation. Digital communication enables violent organizations and extremist movements to communicate, recruit, radicalize, intimidate, fundraise, and disseminate propaganda at unprecedented speed and scale.

The fifth-generation terrorism therefore extends beyond the physical battlefield.

It includes: online propaganda and recruitment; encrypted communications; digital radicalization; psychological and information operations; cyber-enabled disruption; remote mobilization; lone-actor violence; decentralized virtual networks; drones and commercially available technologies; and increasingly sophisticated use of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

5G technology should not be confused with fifth-generation terrorism. In this article, the term “fifth generation” refers to an evolutionary phase of terrorism, not fifth-generation telecommunications technology. Digital connectivity is an enabling environment within which this generation operates.

The most consequential technological transformation may therefore not be the ability to destroy physical infrastructure, but the ability to shape perceptions, manipulate information and erode social trust.

Contemporary extremist actors can seek to create fear without physically controlling territory. They can amplify existing divisions, exploit grievances, and create perceptions of insecurity far beyond the geographical location where violence occurs. In this sense, the target of terrorism may increasingly include the cognitive and social environment.

From Physical Destruction to Cognitive Influence

Traditional terrorism often sought spectacular physical destruction: the bombing of buildings, attacks on transportation systems, assassinations or hostage-taking. Contemporary terrorism can

still employ all of these methods. But the strategic objective increasingly extends beyond physical casualties.

The terrorist seeks an audience. The desired effect may be fear, polarization, political overreaction, loss of confidence in government, communal retaliation or the perception that the state is incapable of protecting its citizens. This makes the information environment an increasingly important battlespace.

A relatively small act of violence can be amplified through social media and global news networks, producing consequences far greater than the immediate physical damage.

The fifth generation therefore combines kinetic and non-kinetic methods. Its power lies not necessarily in the number of fighters it possesses, but in its capacity to generate disproportionate psychological, political and social effects.

The Evolutionary Continuum

The five generations proposed here can therefore be understood as a continuum rather than a sequence in which one generation completely replaces another.

Generation	Principal Characteristic	Organizational Form	Strategic Environment
First	Localized ideological violence	Small/local groups	Ancient political and religious struggles
Second	Institutionalized asymmetric violence	Disciplined networks	Medieval political-religious competition
Third	Imperial and anti-colonial violence	States and liberation movements	Colonialism and national liberation
Fourth	Transnational religious mobilization	Centralized organizations and networks deployed by states	Late Cold War/post-Cold War order
Fifth	Religio-political convergence and autonomous networks	Decentralized, networked and sometimes quasi-state actors	Globalized, fragmented and digitally connected environment

The generations overlap.

Assassination survives into modern terrorism. Guerrilla warfare remains relevant. Religious mobilization persists. State sponsorship has not disappeared. Central command structures continue to exist alongside decentralized cells.

What changes is the **combination** of these characteristics and the strategic environment in which they operate.

Conclusion: From Terrorism to the Terrorism of the Future

The evolution of terrorism demonstrates that terrorism is not a static phenomenon.

From the localized violence of the *Sicarii* and other ancient movements, through medieval political-religious violence, imperial and anti-colonial struggles, the transnational religious wave and the emergence of contemporary networked organizations, terrorist actors have repeatedly adapted to changes in political authority, technology, ideology and society.

The fifth-generation framework proposed here seeks to capture the latest transformation.

Its central proposition is that contemporary terrorism increasingly operates at the intersection of religion, politics, local grievance, transnational ideology, organizational autonomy, illicit economies, territorial influence and digital communication.

The critical distinction is therefore not simply between religious and secular terrorism, or between centralized and decentralized organizations.

The deeper transformation is the emergence of violent non-state actors capable of functioning simultaneously as ideological movements, political actors, security providers, economic enterprises, social organizations, and quasi-governments, while remaining connected to transnational networks.

This creates a new strategic challenge.

The terrorist organization of the future may not always seek to destroy the state from outside. It may seek to penetrate, compete with, replace, or transform political authority from within contested social spaces.

Likewise, future terrorism may not always depend upon spectacular attacks. It may increasingly seek to manipulate perceptions, polarize communities, undermine institutional legitimacy, and create persistent insecurity. The evolution of terrorism is therefore also an evolution in the meaning of power.

The decisive question for policymakers is no longer simply: How do we defeat terrorist organizations? It is increasingly: How do we prevent violent actors from acquiring the political, economic, social, and cognitive conditions that allow them to become alternative centers of authority?

Understanding that evolution is essential if counterterrorism is to move from reacting to terrorist violence toward preventing the conditions in which the next generation of terrorism can emerge.

NOTES

1. The fifth generation of terrorism is not simply another religious wave. It is a transformation into a polycrisis in which religious ideology, political strategy, local grievance, organizational autonomy, territorial and economic control, and digital influence mutually reinforce one another.
2. The evolution of terrorism across five distinct generations offers an analytical framework for deepening understanding of what has become the greatest security challenge the world has faced in the last four decades. The idea is not to present the five generations as an established consensus in terrorism studies. Instead, it is a proposal to clarify the distinct epochal moments and continuums of terrorism and to differentiate terrorism from radicalism, extremism, and the actions that constitute terror.

3. One of the most influential historical approaches is David C. Rapoport's four-wave model, which identifies four major waves of modern terrorism: the anarchist wave, the anti-colonial wave, the New Left wave, and the religious wave. Rapoport's model remains highly influential because it shows that terrorism evolves in relation to broader political and ideological contexts rather than appearing randomly. The present article accepts the utility of the wave approach but proposes a complementary approach: the generation approach, starting from the 1st century AD, to address the earlier periods that Rapoport's wave theory misses.
4. The article does not argue that earlier waves have disappeared. Nor does it claim that every contemporary terrorist organization belongs to a new generation. Rather, it proposes that certain contemporary organizations exhibit a combination of characteristics that the fourth-wave model alone cannot fully explain.