

A Review of the Five Generations of Terrorism Framework

By Jeremy Oronje

The Five Generations of Terrorism framework, as advanced in the paper by its author Dr Mustafa Yusuf Ali, proposes a five-generation framework for the periodization of terrorism, tracing its evolution from the Sicarii of first-century Judea to what the paper identifies as a fifth-generation terrorism (5GT) characterized by religio-political ideology, networked structures, organizational autonomy, and the use of digital technologies. The framework explicitly positions itself as a proposal. It complements David Rapoport's four-wave model. In particular, it builds on Rapoport's concept of waves by extending the historical scope of terrorism beyond the modern period and by proposing that contemporary terrorism exhibits characteristics that may warrant recognition as a distinct generation. Whereas Rapoport explains the evolution of modern terrorism through successive ideological waves—anarchism, anti-colonialism, the New Left, and religious terrorism—the five-generation framework seeks to capture the longer historical trajectory of politically and ideologically motivated violence, while highlighting the changing organizational, technological, political, and economic characteristics of contemporary terrorist actors.

First, one of the paper's greatest strengths is its treatment of contemporary terrorism as more than simply religiously motivated violence. This is particularly useful because it avoids reducing the understanding of, and responses to, contemporary terrorism to purely religious terms. The proposed five generations of terrorism framework distinguishes itself from Rapoport's four waves. It names the fifth generation—of religio-political networked and autonomous character, by clearly highlighting the interaction between religion, politics, local grievances, organizational autonomy, illicit economies, territorial influence, and digital communication. This is potentially the paper's most significant theoretical contribution. Rather than asserting that contemporary terrorism is simply religious, the paper argues that contemporary violent organizations can simultaneously function as ideological movements, political actors, economic enterprises, social organizations and, in some circumstances, quasi-governments. By contrast, Rapoport's religious wave (the fourth wave, and the one commonly used to analyze contemporary terrorism) does not sufficiently capture the character and complexity of some contemporary groups, such as Al-

Shabaab. The religio-political lens of the 5-G framework, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced way of understanding how factors such as local grievances and digital communication intersect to sustain contemporary armed groups.

Second, the five generations of terrorism framework provides a useful lens for understanding the evolving dynamics of terrorism in Africa. In recent years, the continent has experienced the growing impact of localized terrorist insurgencies, including those of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). These groups exhibit several characteristics that can be accommodated within the framework. The continued significance of terrorism in the African security landscape is further demonstrated by the 2026 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which assesses the impact of terrorism across 163 countries. The index places six African states among the ten countries most affected by terrorism globally: Burkina Faso ranks 2nd, Niger 3rd, Nigeria 4th, Mali 5th, Somalia 7th, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) 8th. Other African countries also feature prominently, including Cameroon (12th), Mozambique (15th), Benin (19th), Kenya (21st), Chad (26th), and Togo (30th). This concentration of highly affected states in Africa, particularly across the Sahel and parts of Central and East Africa, underscores the importance of developing analytical frameworks capable of accounting for the changing character of terrorism.

Turning to its gaps, the proposed framework falls short of providing a systematic empirical test of the fifth-generation proposition. The argument is persuasive at the conceptual level, but it would be stronger if the framework compared several contemporary organizations against a common set of indicators—for example, organizational autonomy, territorial governance, local resource extraction, digital mobilization, transnational networking, religio-political ideology, and cognitive/information operations. While the paper highlights Al-Shabaab as a case study, a comparative analysis encompassing other violent groups across the generations proposed by the author could demonstrate whether these characteristics genuinely constitute a new generation rather than simply an evolution within Rapoport's fourth wave.

Additionally, the concepts of technology and digital terrorism also deserve greater differentiation. Digital communication is certainly an important feature of contemporary terrorism, but the paper

could distinguish between social-media propaganda, online recruitment, encrypted communications, cyber operations, autonomous mobilization, AI-enabled influence, and actual cyberterrorism. These are related but analytically distinct phenomena, and treating them collectively as digital terrorism risks obscuring important differences.