

Conceptualizing Fifth-Generation Terrorism: The Advent of the Religio-Political Wave

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Contemporary global security is increasingly defined by the emergence of the fifth wave of terrorism: the religio-political wave. While the fourth—or purely religious—wave preceded it and drew foundational inspiration from tectonic shifts such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Afghan Mujahideen, this epoch marks a profound paradigm shift. The defining characteristic of fifth-generation terrorism is the 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.

Fifth-generation terrorism marks the contemporary religio-political wave, characterized primarily by a symbiotic convergence of theology and ideology, institutional autarky, and the predominance of violent non-state actors. This institutional symbiosis fundamentally complicates conventional counterterrorism, conflict resolution, and preventive frameworks. By merging metaphysical imperatives with material political structures, fifth-generation violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have moved beyond the archetype of the amorphous, shadowy network pursuing ethereal rewards. Instead, they have evolved into highly sophisticated, bureaucratized entities. The structural and operational divergence of fifth-generation terrorism (and therefore the fifth wave of terrorism)¹ highlights a significant evolutionary trajectory.

State Dependence versus Autarky

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 provided by state sponsors, fifth-generation apparatuses are essentially self-perpetuating. They no longer depend on external state patronage; instead, they have monopolized local economies to achieve financial autarky, and some effectively operate as *de facto* states or quasi-states within ungoverned or contested spaces.

The Strategic Logic of Glocalization

Geopolitically, this transition accelerated as the fourth generation deliberately deployed franchising strategies. This structural decentralization gave rise to a network of highly localized franchises that emerged in the 1990s and peaked around 2015. Prominent examples include 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*—alongside entities such as Boko Haram and DAESH.

Ideological Realignment

While structurally tethered to a broader transnational network, these fifth-generation franchises have pivoted their operational focus. They have augmented global ideological mobilization with targeted political mobilization. By embedding themselves in hyper-local socioeconomic grievances, these groups prioritize domestic political legitimacy over abstract global relevance,

¹ David Rapoport's four wave theory of terrorism features four waves. In my conceptualization, I add a dimension of the contemporary wave, that I define as the fifth-generation terrorism

making them far more resilient, adaptable, and deeply entrenched in their respective operational theaters.

While the fifth wave was inspired by the milestones of the fourth wave (such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution), a stark evolutionary contrast exists between their respective militant groups. These are;

Feature	Fourth-Generation Groups (Religious Wave)	Fifth-Generation Groups (Religio-Political Wave)
Origin Era	Conceived or emerged primarily in the 1980s .	Emerged mostly in/around the 1990s and later , cresting circa 2015-2025 .
State Reliance	Developed with external state actors wittingly or unwittingly contributing to their emergence and survival. States instrumentalized religion to create or enhance the fourth wave VNSAs.	Completely self-perpetuating ; they do not require external state support and often function as states or quasi-states themselves.
Organizational Structure	Centralized or early-stage networks that eventually deployed franchising strategy to expand to achieve reach.	Highly decentralized, localized franchises that grew out of, or inspired by the fourth wave terrorism and its expansion strategy.
Mobilization Focus	Heavily focused on religious inspiration and global ideological mobilization, accentuated and instrumentalized by the state	Expanded to political mobilization , actively feeding on local grievances to secure local legitimacy over global relevance. More organic in its development

The emergence of the fifth wave of terrorism is accelerated by fourth-generation groups' deliberate adoption of a franchising model, driven primarily by strategic utility and political legitimacy. Strategically, global insurgent networks recognized that localized franchises achieve targeted objectives more effectively. In terms of legitimacy, anchoring operations in local grievances allows fifth-generation entities to integrate seamlessly into their political environments, substantially enhancing their operational resilience.

Fifth-generation technology amplifies the effects of fifth-generation terrorism. The specter then shifts away from traditional military battlefields and physical bombings toward a non-kinetic, decentralized war of information, narratives, and digital subversion. Because this form of terrorism focuses on destroying cognitive trust rather than physical buildings, it feeds into an ideological spectrum that is difficult to prevent or recover from once infiltrated. The spectrum is multifaceted and includes cyber-terrorism and digital infrastructure; information and psychological warfare; bio-terrorism and advanced technology; and lone-wolf and virtual networks.

Fifth-generation terrorism's reach and disruptive capacity are amplified by fifth-generation (5G) technologies. The resulting threat environment has therefore partly shifted from conventional kinetic battlefields and physical bombings toward a predominantly non-kinetic, decentralized contest over information, narratives, and digital subversion. Because this modality of terrorism seeks to erode cognitive trust and social cohesion rather than destroy physical infrastructure, it

exploits a perceptual and ideological domain that is exceptionally difficult to detect, interdict, or restore once compromised.

The threat spectrum is multidimensional and includes cyber operations targeting digital infrastructure, information and psychological warfare, the convergence of bioterrorism with dual-use advanced technologies, and lone actors or virtualized networks operating across digital platforms.

As networks such as Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah evolve, new groups emerge, merge, and franchise. Further evolution of 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-Mujabideen*, alongside Boko Haram, DAESH, and many others, continues to inspire the emergence of new groups of fifth-generation terrorists, thereby constituting the fifth wave of religio-political terrorism.

NOTES

1. This working paper No. 2 on fifth-generation terrorism is the second in the working paper series that will lead to a special paper on fifth-generation terrorism published by the Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies.
2. The first working paper was merely advisory for counterterrorism policy efforts, inspired by my recent speaking and engagements in Dublin, Ireland, at the Conference organized by The Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities and An Garda Síochána