

From the Sicarii to the Islamic State

A Five-Generation Framework for the Evolution of Terrorism

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I	II	III	IV	V
Localized ideological violence Sicarii · Azariqa Kharijites	Medieval religious-political violence Hashashin (Assassins)	Rule by fear: imperial and colonial terror Terror from above, resistance from below	Transnational religious mobilization Hezbollah · al-Qaeda	Religio-political, networked, autonomous Islamic State · al-Shabaab

ABSTRACT

Terrorism has passed through five *generations*, and the fifth is already upon us.

For more than two millennia, from the daggers of the Sicarii to the online caliphate of the Islamic State, ideologically legitimized violence has repeatedly reinvented its motives, organization, political purpose, and operational environment. This monograph traces that evolution across five *generations*. The first, localized ideological violence, is exemplified by the Sicarii of first-century Judea and the Azariqa faction of the early Kharijites; the second, medieval religious-political violence and institutionalized asymmetry, by the Hashashin, or Assassins, of Persia and Syria. The third, rule by fear, pitted imperial and colonial terror from above against resistance from below; the fourth, transnational in reach, culminated in the religious mobilization of Hezbollah and al-Qaeda in the late twentieth century.

The fifth, and the monograph's principal contribution, is fifth-generation terrorism (5GT): religio-political, networked, and increasingly autonomous. Its hallmark is not religion as such (religion already shaped much *fourth-generation* terrorism) but a feedback loop in which theology, political strategy, local grievance, self-financing, territorial influence, and digital communication reinforce one another. The result is a violent non-state actor that functions at once as an ideological movement, a political competitor, an economic enterprise, and a proto-government, as the Islamic State and al-Shabaab demonstrate. Counterterrorism that merely dismantles cells and decapitates leaderships misses precisely what makes this generation so resilient and dangerous.

TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

that *attack* authority

EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

that *compete* for it

For counterterrorism and counter-extremism confronting this fifth generation, the decisive distinction is therefore neither between religious and secular terrorism nor between far-right and far-left extremism, but between terrorist organizations that attack authority and extremist movements that compete for it. The framework departs deliberately from prevailing accounts of terrorism's evolution, and its five-generation periodization matters now for four reasons. First, it extends the analytical horizon to antiquity, showing that the defining features of modern terrorism have ancient antecedents. Second, it classifies by organizational form and operational environment rather than by a single dominant ideological energy, and thereby captures the hybrid actor that governs, taxes, and broadcasts. Third, it brings back in state terrorism, which wave theory largely sets aside. Fourth, it traces four persistent strains of terrorism (socialist, nationalist, religious, and exclusionist) back to antiquity. Where earlier theories explain why terrorist ideologies recur, the generational approach explains why terrorism, each time it recurs, assumes a new form.

KEYWORDS

fifth-generation terrorism (5GT)

five generations of terrorism

violent non-state actors

religio-political violence

Sicarii

Azariqa Kharijites

Hashashin

colonial terror

religious wave

Islamic State

al-Shabaab

glocalization

terrorist waves

ideological strains

counterterrorism

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Terrorism has five generations, and the fifth is *already upon us*.

INTRODUCTION

From *From the Sicarii to the Islamic State*, by Mustafa Y. Ali.

Why do terrorist organizations so often outlast the armies sent to defeat them?

The question is neither rhetorical nor new, yet it has acquired a fresh urgency. Terrorist movements repeatedly declared defeated or significantly degraded have regrouped, rebranded, and returned, frequently better financed, more deeply embedded in the communities they claim to serve, and more adept at governing them. Their resilience cannot be written off as a failure of execution by those who fight them. It is the symptom of a deeper transformation in the nature of terrorism itself, and one that the field's prevailing frameworks were never designed to see.

This monograph names that transformation the **fifth generation of terrorism**, or simply **5GT**. The fifth generation is not merely another religious wave, nor is it the "fifth-generation warfare" associated with armed conflict between state and non-state actors: insurgency, guerrilla warfare, and insurrection. It is a condition of interlocking pressures in which religious ideology, political strategy, local grievance, organizational autonomy, territorial and economic control, rapidly expanding and deepening extremism, and digital influence feed upon and reinforce one another.

The most consequential products of fifth-generation terrorism are violent extremist non-state actors that operate simultaneously as ideological movements, custodians of cultural and identity continuity, political rivals, providers of security, economic enterprises, and nascent governments. They build these enduring structures while remaining bound to transnational networks or, as is increasingly apparent, to state sponsors. Such organizations are no longer satisfied with attacking the enemy state from outside. Where the state is weak, they seek to supplant it; where it seems sympathetic to their cause, they cultivate and strengthen movements that keep their patrons in power; and in some cases, they conspire to seize the state outright.

The stakes are practical before they are academic. If terrorism has changed in kind, the decisive question for policymakers is no longer merely how to defeat terrorist organizations. It is how to deny violent extremists the political, economic, social, and cognitive footholds that would allow them to become rival centers of authority in the first place. No less pressing is how to stop extremist movements that already have the ear of a regime, often at its very summit, from eventually inheriting it.

Herein lies the difference between counterterrorism that merely responds to violence and counterterrorism, joined to counter-extremism, that forecloses the conditions in which the next generation takes root.

One lesson eclipses all others: the instruments that contained fourth-generation terrorism will not defeat the fifth.

To turn an old playbook against new threats, some of them already lodged within the state itself, is to choose a strategy for losing. Only countermeasures designed expressly for fifth-generation threats can roll back, and ultimately defeat, the organizations now completing that transformation.

To make this case, this monograph proposes a five-generation framework of terrorism with two aims. The first is to deepen our understanding of terrorism and its kindred "isms": extremism, violent extremism, and radicalism. The second is to trace the historical evolution and changing character of terrorism, so that we may develop the tools to anticipate the form its next generation will take and thereby prevent or contain it. The five-generation framework is an original analytical extension that builds upon, yet moves beyond, the established "waves" and "strains" approaches to the study of terrorism. Its premise is that terrorism has no linear history. Rather, it has evolved through the interplay of ideology, extremism, political authority, technology, social grievance, organizational form, and the shifting character of the state.

Frameworks that treat terrorism either as a late-modern aberration or as a single organizational type recurring across the centuries therefore misread both the historical record and the contemporary threat. The field's dominant model, Rapoport's (2004, 2022) four-wave theory, starts the analytical clock in the late nineteenth century. In truncating terrorism's genealogy, it obscures the lineage of contemporary forms, makes those forms harder to situate, and weakens the conceptual foundations on which counterterrorism policy rests.

The generations proposed here begin instead in antiquity, with the Sicarii of first-century Judea and the Azariqa Kharijites of seventh-century Persia, and follow ideologically legitimized violence through the medieval Assassins, the structurally paired violence from above and below of the colonial era, and the transnational religious mobilization of the late twentieth century, to the religio-political present. Through this entire sequence runs an ideological axis of four persistent strains identified by Parker and Sitter (2016):

Socialist	Nationalist	Religious	Exclusionist
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None of these, the monograph argues, is a modern invention. The monograph traces each strain through every generation, in embryonic or developed form, from antiquity to the religio-political present. What changes from one generation to the next is the extent to which a strain dominates, how the strains hybridize, and the organizational and technological vehicle that carries them.

Drawing on scholarship and field practice in the study and countering of terrorism and extremism, the monograph argues that contemporary terrorism has entered a fifth generation: a religio-political phase in which religious narrative and political strategy are mutually reinforcing.

The claim is modest in one respect and ambitious in another. It is modest because the framework is an analytical model rather than an assertion that terrorism has passed through five universally recognized stages; it is offered not as an established consensus but as a proposal, advanced in the spirit of Rapoport's own project, to clarify distinct epochal moments and continuities, and its cases are chosen for their illustrative and comparative value, not to furnish an exhaustive survey. It is ambitious because it holds that the present can be captured neither by extending the late-twentieth-century religious wave nor by a chronology that begins with dynamite and the anarchist cell of the late nineteenth century (Rapoport, 2004).

What sets the fifth generation apart from its predecessors is the convergence of several developments: the politicization of religious identity; the localization of transnational ideologies; the rise of increasingly autonomous violent non-state actors; the exploitation of contested and ungoverned space; the capacity to generate resources locally; the franchising and networking of militant organizations; and the growing strategic weight of digital communication, information operations, and psychological influence. Contemporary violent movements are not always externally controlled proxies, nor are they merely clandestine cells in pursuit of the spectacular attack. Some have acquired the political, economic, judicial, administrative, and coercive capacity to exercise de facto authority over populations.

Religion as such is not what is new; it already structured much of the fourth generation. What is new is the feedback loop that binds it to strategy, grievance, revenue, territory, and digital reach. Newer still, and largely missed by counterterrorism, is this:

The decisive distinction in fifth-generation terrorism lies not in the dichotomy between religious and secular terrorism, nor between far-right and far-left extremism, but between terrorist organizations that attack authority and extremist movements, some of them supported from within established states, that compete for it.

An argument of this kind depends on precise language. Terrorism, the act of terror, violent extremism, extremism, and radicalism are still used interchangeably in scholarship and policy, at considerable analytical and practical cost, and counterterrorism falters whenever it treats this spectrum as a single security and social problem to be met with a single instrument or approach. After a note on method, the monograph therefore defines these terms before the generational model is introduced. It then reviews the literature on the evolution of terrorism and positions the model in relation to David C. Rapoport's four-wave thesis, the most influential periodization of modern terrorism, which this monograph treats as a complement rather than as a rival to be displaced.

It also engages two adjacent debates: Parker and Sitter's (2016) "strains" critique of wave theory, which it adopts as the ideological axis of the generational model, and Kaplan's (2010) unrelated use of the term "fifth wave." The five generations are then reconstructed in turn, each with an account of the socialist, nationalist, religious, and exclusionist strains active within it, drawn together as a continuum rather than a sequence of replacements, and bounded by a statement of scope and limitations. The conclusion returns to the question with which this introduction began and draws out its strategic implication: the terrorist organization of the future may seek not only to destroy the state from without, but to penetrate, compete with, supplant, or transform political authority from within contested social space.

The seeds of that future are already being sown.