

**IntechOpen**

IntechOpen Series  
Social Sciences, Volume 14

# **Terrorism in Transition**

The Shifting Face of Global Threats

*Edited by James P. Welch*





---

# Terrorism in Transition - The Shifting Face of Global Threats

*Edited by James P. Welch*

Published in London, United Kingdom

---

Terrorism in Transition – The Shifting Face of Global Threats

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1008129>

Edited by James P. Welch

#### Contributors

Andrew Enaifoghe, Brigid K. Gesami, Emad Al-Hammadin, Fadil Curri, Francis E. Lomami, Irina M. Tsibizova, Jacob Nunoo, James P. Welch, Johnny B. Davis, Joshua Sebu, Jostein Mattingsdal, Shalom Kolawole, Stephen Moore, Udom E. Akankpo, Yuri Yuryevich Cherny

#### © The Editor(s) and the Author(s) 2026

The rights of the editor(s) and the author(s) have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights to the book as a whole are reserved by INTECHOPEN LIMITED. The book as a whole (compilation) cannot be reproduced, distributed or used for commercial or non-commercial purposes without INTECHOPEN LIMITED's written permission. Enquiries concerning the use of the book should be directed to INTECHOPEN LIMITED rights and permissions department ([permissions@intechopen.com](mailto:permissions@intechopen.com)).

Violations are liable to prosecution under the governing Copyright Law.



Individual chapters of this publication are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License which permits commercial use, distribution and reproduction of the individual chapters, provided the original author(s) and source publication are appropriately acknowledged. If so indicated, certain images may not be included under the Creative Commons license. In such cases users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. More details and guidelines concerning content reuse and adaptation can be found at <http://www.intechopen.com/copyright-policy.html>.

#### Notice

Statements and opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the editors or publisher. No responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of information contained in the published chapters. The publisher assumes no responsibility for any damage or injury to persons or property arising out of the use of any materials, instructions, methods or ideas contained in the book.

First published in London, United Kingdom, 2026 by IntechOpen

IntechOpen is the global imprint of INTECHOPEN LIMITED, registered in England and Wales, registration number: 11086078, 167-169 Great Portland Street, London, W1W 5PF, United Kingdom

For EU product safety concerns: IN TECH d.o.o., Prolaz Marije Krucifikse Kozulić 3, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia, [info@intechopen.com](mailto:info@intechopen.com) or visit our website at [intechopen.com](http://intechopen.com).

#### British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Terrorism in Transition – The Shifting Face of Global Threats

Edited by James P. Welch

p. cm.

This title is part of the Social Sciences Book Series, Volume 14

Series Editor: Sandro Serpa

Print ISBN 978-1-83635-367-6

Online ISBN 978-1-83635-366-9

eBook (PDF) ISBN 978-1-83635-368-3

ISSN 2977-6473

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper responsibly.

---

# IntechOpen

[intechopen.com](https://intechopen.com)

Built by scientists, for scientists



[Explore all IntechOpen books](#)

---



# IntechOpen Book Series

# Social Sciences

## Volume 14

### Aims and Scope of the Series

The social sciences, as a form of scientific knowledge anchored on epistemological foundations, theories, and specific methodologies, both in their fundamental and applied dimensions, are paramount for understanding and, consequently, developing instruments that contribute to improving social and environmental living conditions. This Social Sciences book series, based on the concept of the social sciences as key elements in the promotion of scientific knowledge and its inherent consequences, has as its primary goal to be a space for the dissemination of relevant information on various objects of study, aimed at specialists, students, policymakers, and others interested in the challenges facing humanity. Thus, the aim is to promote scientific progress through the sound and rigorous dissemination of studies that, from the perspective of the social sciences, either through a specialised disciplinary approach or through interdisciplinary perspectives, foster a deeper understanding of the objects under analysis, clarifying the issues addressed and their implications.



# Meet the Series Editor



Sandro Nuno Ferreira de Serpa (PhD, FRSA, FRSS, FRGS, FR-SPH, FRAI, FISDS, GLO Fellow), is an Associate Professor with tenure in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Azores and a Senior Integrated Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences (CICS.NOVA.UAc). With over 25 years of experience in higher education, in 2025 Dr. Serpa is ranked by ScholarGPS as the 8th scholar worldwide in Sociology (Prior 5-Year category) and 1st in Portugal. His career is distinguished by encompassing over 400 scientific publications published in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America with a high research impact, as evidenced by a Google Scholar h-index of 29 and a Scopus h-index of 14 (with 79 documents indexed). His international prestige is underscored by his status as a Fellow of five distinguished British Royal Societies: the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), the Royal Statistical Society (FRSS), the Royal Geographical Society (FRGS), the Royal Society for Public Health (FRSPH), and the Royal Anthropological Institute (FRAI), alongside being a Fellow of the International Society for Development and Sustainability (FISDS) and Fellow of the Global Labor Organization (GLO). Registered Vetted Expert for the European Commission and the United Nations. Dr. Serpa's research focuses on the sociotechnological co-evolution of Society 5.0, Artificial Intelligence in Education, and Algocratic Governance. An expert in strategic editorial leadership, he currently serves as the Series Editor for Social Sciences Series at IntechOpen, Editor for SAGE Open, and is a member of the Editorial Board for International Studies in Sociology of Education (Taylor & Francis) and Societies (MDPI). His extensive administrative background includes roles as Department Head, Degree Director, and Deputy Director of CICS.UAc, reflecting a profile that harmonizes scientific excellence with high-level academic management.



# Meet the Volume Editor



Prof. Dr. James P. Welch is a Full Professor of Criminal Law at Alliance University School of Law, India. He earned his Ph.D. in Law from Leiden University, where his research examined the legal, ethical, and strategic dimensions of counterterrorism and transnational armed conflict. With over two decades of experience spanning academia, intelligence support, and law enforcement advisory roles, he has worked with NATO training institutions, defense organizations, and security agencies across Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. His scholarship focuses on terrorism studies, intelligence reform, asymmetric conflict, and security governance. He combines academic research with operational expertise in counterterrorism, forensic investigation, and institutional risk management.



# Contents

|                                                                                                                                                                                                 |             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Preface</b>                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>XIII</b> |
| <b>Section 1</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |             |
| Introduction                                                                                                                                                                                    | 1           |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>3</b>    |
| Introductory Chapter: From Labels to Structures<br><i>by James P. Welch</i>                                                                                                                     |             |
| <b>Section 2</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |             |
| State Power, Strategy, and Institutional Transformation                                                                                                                                         | 7           |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>9</b>    |
| The Medusa Doctrine: State-Sponsored and State-Supported Terrorism (S <sup>3</sup> T)<br><i>by James P. Welch</i>                                                                               |             |
| <b>Chapter 3</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>35</b>   |
| Perspective Chapter: Intelligence Reform – A Strategic Overhaul of the<br>Intelligence Community<br><i>by Johnny B. Davis</i>                                                                   |             |
| <b>Chapter 4</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>45</b>   |
| Perspective Chapter: The Evolution of Terrorism in the Twenty-First<br>Century – Challenges and Countermeasures<br><i>by Fadil Curri</i>                                                        |             |
| <b>Chapter 5</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>59</b>   |
| Perspective Chapter: Beyond Firepower – Building Trust and Partnerships<br>in the Fight against Terrorism<br><i>by Jostein Mattingsdal</i>                                                      |             |
| <b>Section 3</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |             |
| Ideology, Political Narratives, and Regional Transformations                                                                                                                                    | 71          |
| <b>Chapter 6</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>73</b>   |
| The Ideological and Political Transformation of Contemporary Islamic<br>Groups: Toward a New Model of Understanding HTS's Ideological and<br>Political Transition<br><i>by Emad Al-Hammadin</i> |             |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                        |            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Chapter 7</b>                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>95</b>  |
| Perspective Chapter: Global Islamist Terrorism in Non-Muslim Terrain – A Moral and Rational Analysis of ADF-ISCAP Violence Dynamics in the Great Lakes Region of Africa<br><i>by Francis E. Lomami</i> |            |
| <b>Chapter 8</b>                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>127</b> |
| Securitising Terrorism in Nigeria: A Thematic Analysis of Political Rhetoric and Counterterrorism Policies (2021–2025)<br><i>by Shalom Kolawole and Andrew Enaifoghe</i>                               |            |
| <b>Section 4</b>                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>157</b> |
| Ethics, Economics, and Human Dimensions of Contemporary Terrorism                                                                                                                                      |            |
| <b>Chapter 9</b>                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>159</b> |
| Just War Theory and Non-State Actors: Ethical Dilemmas in Countering Al-Shabaab and Maritime Piracy in Kenya<br><i>by Brigid K. Gesami, Jacob Nunoo, Stephen Moore and Joshua Sebu</i>                 |            |
| <b>Chapter 10</b>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>181</b> |
| Economic Crimes of Terrorism (ECT): Implications for Global Growth and Development<br><i>by Udom E. Akankpo</i>                                                                                        |            |
| <b>Chapter 11</b>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>193</b> |
| What Terrorism Hides: Understanding the Psychology of Terrorism as a Measure to Prevent It<br><i>by Yuri Yuryevich Cherny and Irina M. Tsibizova</i>                                                   |            |

# Preface

Terrorism remains a defining feature of contemporary global security, yet the structures through which it operates have changed dramatically. Patterns of organization, ideological framing, financial support, and state interaction have all evolved in response to geopolitical shifts, institutional reform, technological innovation, and sustained counterterrorism pressure. This edited volume examines these transitions from multiple disciplinary perspectives. It does not advance a singular explanatory thesis; rather, it assembles analytical contributions that collectively demonstrate how terrorism and counterterrorism have adapted within an increasingly complex and fragile international order.

The volume begins with the *Introductory Chapter: From Labels to Structures*, which outlines the structural parameters shaping the current threat landscape and provides the analytical framework for the chapters that follow.

Section 2, *State Power, Strategy, and Institutional Transformation*, addresses the evolving relationship between state authority and non-state violence. *The Medusa Doctrine: State-Sponsored and State-Supported Terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)* examines the strategic use of proxy actors and the implications of increasingly blurred distinctions between sponsorship, facilitation, and indirect engagement. *Perspective Chapter: Intelligence Reform – A Strategic Overhaul of the Intelligence Community* evaluates institutional restructuring within intelligence systems in response to contemporary threat environments. *Perspective Chapter: The Evolution of Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century – Challenges and Countermeasures* analyzes adaptive patterns in terrorist activity and the corresponding adjustments in counterterrorism strategy. *Perspective Chapter: Beyond Firepower – Building Trust and Partnerships in the Fight against Terrorism* emphasizes the operational importance of inter-agency coordination and community-based engagement.

Section 3, *Ideology, Political Narratives, and Regional Transformations*, adopts a strong pan-African lens to examine how ideological movements and political systems respond to evolving security dynamics. *The Ideological and Political Transformation of Contemporary Islamic Groups: Toward a New Model of Understanding HTS's Ideological and Political Transition* explores internal recalibration within armed movements. *Perspective Chapter: Global Islamist Terrorism in Non-Muslim Terrain – A Moral and Rational Analysis of ADF-ISCAP Violence Dynamics in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* assesses the interaction between transnational ideological frameworks and localized conflict environments. *Securitising Terrorism in Nigeria: A Thematic Analysis of Political Rhetoric and Counterterrorism Policies (2021–2025)* evaluates the role of political discourse in shaping national security policy and public perception.

Section 4, *Ethics, Economics, and Human Dimensions of Contemporary Terrorism*, expands the analysis to normative and structural consequences. *Just War Theory and Non-State Actors: Ethical Dilemmas in Countering Al-Shabaab and Maritime Piracy in Kenya*

addresses legal and ethical tensions in asymmetric conflict. *Economic Crimes of Terrorism (ECT): Implications for Global Growth and Development* examines financial mechanisms that sustain extremist activity and their broader economic implications. *What Terrorism Hides: Understanding the Psychology of Terrorism as a Measure to Prevent It* analyzes psychological factors relevant to radicalization and counter-radicalization prevention.

Collectively, the chapters demonstrate that contemporary terrorism must be assessed through multi-factorial institutional, ideological, economic, and psychological lenses. The phenomenon persists not because it remains unchanged, but because it adapts asymmetrically within shifting structural conditions. Effective policy responses require corresponding institutional adaptability and analytical precision.

I extend my appreciation to the contributing authors for their scholarship and professionalism throughout the editorial process. I also acknowledge the support of the publishing team in bringing this volume to completion, and in particular the unwavering support of Ms. Tea Jelaca, Publishing Process Manager and invaluable project partner.

I expect this volume to provide unique insights and support continued academic inquiry and policy discussion on the evolving character of terrorism and global security governance.

**Dr. James P. Welch**  
Professor,  
Alliance University School of Law (ASOL),  
Bengaluru, India

---

Section 1

# Introduction

---



## Chapter 1

# Introductory Chapter: From Labels to Structures

*James P. Welch*

## 1. Introduction

This introductory chapter does not provide an extensive literature review, given the already vast and expanding stream of literature and specialized publications on the topic, nor does it attempt to tackle the elusive search for a conclusive definition to terrorism. It should, by now, be readily apparent that such a quixotic quest is futile given the complex nature of what we refer to as “terrorism.” Perhaps the best definition provided can be found in the fundamental axiom, “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” The nebulous phrase appears frequently in academic literature on the subject and has been commonly attributed to Gerald Seymour’s 1975 novel *Harry’s Game* [1]. This aphorism appears to have entered political discourse as a rhetorical observation rather than as a formally coined doctrinal statement and succinctly sums up the definitional paradox: “How is it possible to address an issue without a working definition?”

The response is that defining terrorism is a “wicked problem,” one with no definitive solution given its inherent complexity [2]. Schmid cogently highlighted that the longstanding definitional debate has generated hundreds of competing formulations without any universal consensus [3]. The lack of a clear definition cannot be attributed to academic laziness or complacency, but to the erosion of the conditions under which older definitions made sense.

Earlier definitions assumed terrorist structures to be based upon well-defined hierarchical models, complete with clearly identifiable chains of command, territorially bounded bases of operations, and separate international and domestic areas of responsibility (AORs). Such assumptions found their genesis in the geopolitical and technological environments in which they had been incubated. As these same catalysts evolved as a result of digitization, global financial networks, decentralized communications, and a proliferation of non-state actors operating across multiple jurisdictions, the foundations of previous categorization crumbled. The erosion is not due to conceptual recklessness, but structural adaptation.

This chapter and those that follow do not attempt to assess the future and focus rather on analyzing the present. What this chapter does accomplish is to explain why the path traditionally followed ultimately leads nowhere and the old map no longer works. As Brands has importantly underscored in the context of grand strategy, frameworks that fail to align means with structural realities inevitably produce strategic drift [4]. The chapter also strives to clearly justify why the transition being written about is structural in nature, rather than rhetorical. The reader must, therefore, prepare for ambiguity.

## **2. Structural transformation of terrorism**

In line with this reasoning, we contend that terrorism has not disappeared; rather, its center of gravity has shifted in ways that demand structural re-evaluation. Adopting Clausewitz's strategic conception of a center of gravity as the focal point of power and cohesion [5], the argument advanced here is that the traditional categories of reference—transnational vs. domestic, terrorism vs. organized crime, political vs. religious, ideological vs. instrumental—no longer adequately describe how violence is fueled, funded, and operationalized. It is therefore paramount that we seek an alternative analytical lens if we are unable to resolve the definitional issues, one that transitions from labels to structures.

It is clear that terrorism in the twenty-first century no longer mirrors that of previous models. While terrorism remains an asymmetric and evolutionary process, impacted by social and political realities, it has undergone strategic and structural modification in its current form. Stronger, more resilient and coordinated international responses have impacted global terrorism and as a result current manifestations focus on strategic approaches and structures other than more traditional forms associated with spectacular displays of concerted violence.

Terrorism has been under increased and sustained enforcement pressures at many levels. Enhanced intelligence interoperability, financial surveillance and oversight, technologically advanced border control regimes, and dedicated military disruption have all placed pressure on mobility and large-scale coordination. Under such constraints, the phenomenon has been disrupted but has not vanished; it has adapted. This does not infer that global antiterrorism regimes have been completely successful or that spectacular violence will not reappear.

Adaptation has not occurred uniformly, nor has it followed a single trajectory. Rather, it reflects strategic recalibration under constraint. When cross-border mobility becomes riskier and centralized coordination more vulnerable, diffusion becomes rational if not existentially inevitable. Operational emphasis shifts toward decentralized cellular networks, ideologically inspired and motivated local actors, and flexibly adaptable forms of engagement that increase anonymity while preserving symbolic impact. The original model thus persists, but its structural configuration changes.

What we are witnessing is not a simple tactical adjustment, but a systemic restructuring of operational logic within a significantly altered global environment. Contemporary terrorism increasingly manifests not through cross-border mobility, but through localized activation shaped by external influence. The traditional center of gravity is no longer based upon territorial strongholds, transnational command structures, or state-like international entities (SIEs) alone, but distributed activation nodes embedded within local contexts [6]. In such contexts, the systems and structures matter more than the individual authors and offenses.

## **Author details**

James P. Welch

Alliance School of Law (ASOL), Alliance University, Anekal, Karnataka, India

\*Address all correspondence to: [james.welch@alliance.edu.in](mailto:james.welch@alliance.edu.in)

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Seymour G. Harry's Game. London: Hodder and Stoughton; 1975
- [2] Rittel HWJ, Webber MM. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*. 1973;**4**(2):155-169. DOI: 10.1007/BF01405730
- [3] Schmid AP. The definition of terrorism. In: Schmid AP, editor. *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London: Routledge; 2011. pp. 39-98
- [4] Brands H. *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 2014
- [5] von Clausewitz C. *On War*. Howard M, Paret P. (translators). Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976
- [6] Welch JP. *The Grotius sanction: Deus ex Machina. The legal, ethical, and strategic use of drones in transnational armed conflict and counterterrorism [dissertation on the internet]*. Leiden: Leiden University; 2019. Available from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/69816> [Accessed: February 15, 2026]

---

## Section 2

# State Power, Strategy, and Institutional Transformation

---



# The Medusa Doctrine: State-Sponsored and State-Supported Terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)

*James P. Welch*

## Abstract

This comprehensive analysis explores the evolving nature of state-sponsored and state-supported terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T) within the context of the twenty-first century global security challenges. While traditional terrorism models emphasized non-state actors operating outside formal power structures, contemporary dynamics reveal far more complex entanglements between sovereign states and extremist violence. Through systematic examination of legal frameworks, operational typologies, and geopolitical case studies, including Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Yemen, and North Korea, this study analyzes how state actors and state-like entities instrumentalize terrorism as a strategic tool for power projection, regional influence, and challenges to established international norms. The analysis introduces the Medusa Doctrine as a novel theoretical framework that bridges conventional terrorism studies with emerging modalities including cyber warfare, economic infiltration, artificial intelligence-enabled propaganda, and comprehensive nation-state influence operations (NSIOs). Drawing from a systematic literature review of over 240 academic sources and comparative regional analysis, this work establishes foundational understanding of the blurred, obscured, and oft-conflated boundaries between conventional warfare, operations other than war (OOTW), unconventional warfare (UW), gray zone operations, ideological manipulation, and state-aligned terrorism in an era of strategic transition. The doctrine illuminates the evolutionary trajectory from traditional terrorism through hybrid and asymmetric warfare to highly complex influence operations, revealing a strategic and operational continuum where perception management becomes the decisive terrain of interstate competition.

**Keywords:** state-sponsored terrorism, government-facilitated extremist violence, proxy groups, multi-domain strategic competition, terrorism financing, Middle East conflict, South Asian security, hybrid warfare, gray zone warfare, intelligence agencies, nation-state influence operations (NSIOs), perception management campaigns, sub-threshold conflict, humane justice, artificial virtues, deniable kinetic projection, narrative contagion, lawfare

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Medusa Doctrine: State-sponsored and state-supported terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)**

Terrorism has historically been understood as the preserve of radical non-state actors, comprising guerillas, irredentists, insurgents, anarchists, revolutionaries, separatists, ideological extremists, and similar fissiparous movements who challenge established authority from the margins of political legitimacy [1–4]. Yet, as twenty-first century security dynamics evolve, this distinction between state and non-state violence has grown increasingly amorphous. Governments now operate in an era of asymmetry and strategic ambiguity, where political violence may be cultivated, sponsored, or tolerated under the guise of vested national interest, plausible deniability, or geopolitical necessity.

Within this shifting terrain, *state-sponsored and state-supported terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)* represents a critical inflection point in international relations and legal scholarship. State sponsorship implies deliberate financial, logistical, or ideological support provided to violent non-state groups; state support, by contrast, refers to indirect facilitation or tacit approval that sustains such entities without formal alignment. Both categories blur the moral and legal boundaries of sovereignty, raising foundational questions about accountability, legitimacy, and the nature of power itself. These categories are not mutually exclusive and may also be adopted and implemented in tandem.

### **1.2 Condensed methodological foundation**

This chapter emerges from an extensive longitudinal and comparative study of terrorism, hybrid warfare, and state-aligned violence conducted over a multi-year research trajectory. The inquiry synthesized findings from experiential insights and primary and peer-reviewed scholarship across political science, international law, and security studies between 2010 and 2025. Through systematic thematic coding, three developmental phases were identified: (1) *traditional sponsorship models* focusing on material aid to insurgents; (2) *hybrid warfare integration*, where terrorism converged with cyber and informational tools; and (3) *gray zone maturation*, characterized by sophisticated influence operations and cognitive domain targeting. These phases informed the conceptual structure of the Medusa Doctrine, providing an evidence-based framework that reconciles classical political theory with emerging modalities of strategic subversion.

Rather than treating S<sup>3</sup>T as an anomaly within international order, the present analysis positions it as a structural feature of statecraft. The evolution of terrorism from ideological insurgency to integrated national policy reveals how violence and influence are co-opted into the architecture of modern governance. This synthesis draws on multidisciplinary insight, ranging from Grotius and Weber to Clausewitz and Nye, to highlight how power projection increasingly occurs below the threshold of formal warfare, within spaces where law, ethics, and perception intersect.

### **1.3 Definitional and legal context**

The U.S. State Department maintains a list of “State Sponsors of Terrorism” under § 620A of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) [5]. Under the Foreign Assistance Act (§ 620A) and Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA, 28 U.S.C. § 1605A),

the United States codified mechanisms to identify and penalize states complicit in terrorism [6, 7]. Despite these innovations, the international legal order has failed to produce a universal definition. Regarding disagreement among member states of the United Nations, over whether liberation movements, resistance forces, or hybrid entities qualify as “terrorist,” organizations have repeatedly stalled consensus. The resulting ambiguity creates a permissive environment in which state actors operationalize proxies, militias, or cyber instruments to pursue strategic objectives while retaining diplomatic insulation.

The 1988 Pan Am Flight 103 (Lockerbie) case against Libya illustrated both the potential and the limitations of existing frameworks: after years of litigation, Libya’s acknowledgment of responsibility and compensation to victims’ families demonstrated that accountability is indeed possible, but only through exceptional political convergence rather than systemic enforcement [8]. As state involvement in asymmetric violence becomes increasingly covert, clandestine, and technologically mediated, these precedents struggle to accommodate modern realities.

#### **1.4 Toward a conceptual reorientation**

The Medusa Doctrine seeks to reconceptualize S<sup>3</sup>T not as isolated misconduct, but as an embedded component of global competition for power. It advances the proposition that state-aligned terror, hybrid warfare, and discreet influence operations constitute phases of a single evolutionary continuum—one defined by escalating deniability, multidomain integration, and the erosion of traditional deterrence logic. Each “serpent” in the Medusa metaphor represents a distinct operational vector; kinetic, cyber, informational, economic, and ideological, and united by a single petrifying gaze: the paralysis of response through complexity, deception, and narrative control.

#### **1.5 The continuum principle: Core theoretical innovation**

The Medusa Doctrine introduces the continuum principle as its central theoretical contribution. This principle posits that S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIOs represent evolutionary phases of a single strategic phenomenon rather than discrete categories of state behavior; in other words, adopting a helicopter view or seeing the forest for the trees [9]. The continuum encompasses six distinct but interconnected stages:

*Traditional terrorism:* Non-state actors operating with minimal state connection.

*Government-facilitated extremism:* States providing selective support to aligned groups.

*Proxy warfare:* Systematic state control of non-state armed actors.

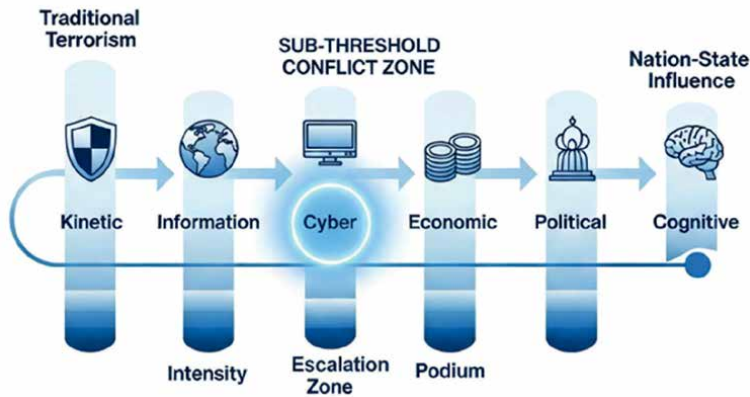
*Multi-domain operations:* Integration of kinetic violence with cyber and information campaigns.

*Sub-threshold campaigns:* Sophisticated gray-zone operations below armed attack thresholds.

*Comprehensive influence operations:* Full-spectrum perception management campaigns (**Figure 1**).

By reframing terrorism as an *instrumental logic of governance* rather than a peripheral irregularity, the doctrine challenges conventional theories of sovereignty, justice, and moral restraint. It also invites a reevaluation of how law, ethics, and perception must adapt to an international order increasingly defined by sub-threshold coercion and normalized illegality.

## Medusa Doctrine: Continuum Principle Visualization



**Figure 1.**  
*Medusa Doctrine Continuum Principle Visualization.*

## 2. Historical continuum of influence operations

### 2.1 From early interventions to imperial reach

Long before the vocabulary of “hybrid warfare” or “covert operations” entered strategic discourse, states engaged in various forms of influence that blurred the line between diplomacy and coercion. In 1805, U.S. forces landed at Derna, Libya, during the First Barbary War (the first recorded instance of American foreign intervention aimed at altering a regime’s political behavior) [10]. This early projection of power was not yet institutionalized statecraft, but it established the precedent that political violence could serve strategic objectives without a declaration of war. It set a precedent that would repeat itself countless times of the next two and a quarter centuries.

By the late nineteenth century, economic motives had become an overt driver of intervention. The 1898 annexations of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, alongside the occupation of Cuba and the subsequent “Banana Wars” in Central America, reflected a pattern in which private commercial interests and state power operated symbiotically [11, 12]. The U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Honduras was routinely justified as protecting order or investments, but it effectively constituted externally enforced political realignment. These actions foreshadowed the structural logic of state-supported terrorism, exerting control through proxies and deniable mechanisms under a moral pretext of stability or protection.

### 2.2 The cold war and the codification of influence

After 1945, influence operations became formalized instruments of state policy. The bipolar world order transformed covert intervention, from operational

subterfuge, into an institutionalized practice. The United States and the Soviet Union played strategic chess on a global gameboard where each pursued ideological expansion through proxy conflicts, regime destabilization, and narrative warfare.

Declassified archives reveal patterns of covert action designed to secure spheres of influence while avoiding overt confrontation. U.S. and Belgian involvement in the removal and killing of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 exemplified this dual structure of complicity [13, 14]. In Latin America, CIA-backed operations against governments in Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973) illustrated the recurring use of covert force to achieve political realignment while preserving the façade of legality [15, 16].

George F. Kennan's anonymous Long Telegram and his subsequent essay "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" articulated a doctrine of restrained containment grounded in political realism. Yet, as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. later argued in *War and the American Presidency*, the implementation of this doctrine often mutated into expansive interventionism. Schlesinger warned that executive concentration of power, justified through Cold War exigency, risked transforming containment into a form of permanent mobilization. His critique anticipated the modern pattern of unbounded executive action under the rhetoric of security necessity, a dynamic, the Medusa Doctrine, identifies as the intellectual precursor to contemporary NSIO practices [17].

The Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the writings of George F. Kennan and Henry Kissinger institutionalized this logic within containment strategy [18, 19]. As Kissinger insightfully noted, containment became not merely a defensive policy but a moral and ideological mandate, a binary chiaroscuro worldview that rendered intervention synonymous with preservation of order [20]. Yet this integration of moral rhetoric and strategic necessity also normalized the very practices international law was designed to restrain. Mounting domestic concern over such overreach prompted the issuance of Executive Order 12333 (1981), which prohibited assassination and established minimal oversight of intelligence activity [21]. In practice, however, the order's undefined terminology allowed continuity of deniable operations under a thin veneer of legality. The Cold War therefore codified the infrastructure of *Nation-State Influence Operations (NSIOs)*, including networks of covert finance, intelligence liaison, and narrative management that would later migrate into digital and informational domains.

### 2.3 Continuities and transformations

The ideological rivalry of the twentieth century produced a durable template: covert intervention justified by normative language. Whether framed as anti-communism, anti-capitalism, humanitarian protection, or counter-terrorism, states repeatedly employed indirect violence as a routine extension of diplomacy. This continuity affirms the core premise of the Medusa Doctrine, namely that S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIOs are not historical anomalies but evolutionary stages of a single strategic pattern.

By the end of the Cold War, overt colonial control had given way to more subtle mechanisms such as economic conditionality, informational dominance, and cyber intrusion. The tools evolved; the logic remained. The following section illustrates that these practices must be analyzed through the twin lenses of sovereignty theory and moral legitimacy, where classical philosophy intersects with contemporary strategic pragmatism.

### 3. Theoretical and legal foundations of sovereignty

#### 3.1 Foundations of sovereignty and the legitimate use of force

The modern state's monopoly on the use of force rests on centuries of philosophical evolution. Early thinkers such as Jean Bodin and Hugo Grotius treated sovereignty as absolute and indivisible, derived from divine or natural law [22]. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, shifted this notion toward social necessity: individuals surrender freedom to a sovereign power to escape the chaos of the state of nature, which he described life as “life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” [23]. John Locke tempered Hobbes's absolutism, arguing that sovereignty is conditional and exists only to protect life, liberty, and property [24]. Jean-Jacques Rousseau later reconceptualized sovereignty as an expression of the *general will*, locating legitimacy in collective consent rather than use of coercion [25].

The Enlightenment replaced theological authority with empirical-based rational order. Samuel Pufendorf emphasized moral duty within civil society, while Immanuel Kant tied sovereignty to republican self-legislation and universal law. Max Weber rounded out this school of thought by defining the state sociologically as the sole entity that can legitimately claim the monopoly on legitimate physical force within a territory. These perspectives together form the intellectual framework of the contemporary international system, wherein authority, legitimacy, and coercion are perceived as interrelated and interdependent rather than absolute [9, 22–27].

This philosophical lineage underpins the enduring tension between *power* and *legitimacy*. The sovereign possesses coercive capacity but must exercise it within moral and legal constraints. The breach between these two poles creates the conceptual space in which state-sponsored and state-supported terrorism emerge—moments when *raison d'état* overrides the normative constraints that provide sovereignty with its moral and ethical justification in the first place (Figure 2 and Table 1).

#### 3.2 Sovereignty, international law, and normative restraint

Following the bloody strife of the Thirty Years' War and the Eighty Years War' and the signing of the Treaties of Münster and Osnabrück in 1648, the principle of sovereignty became the cornerstone of the post-Westphalian order. The United Nations Charter, later codified these principles adopting prohibitions against the use of force in Article 2(4) and enshrined non-intervention in Article 2(7) [28]. Only Article 51 permits self-defense in response to armed attack [29]. Customary international law reinforces these prohibitions through the dual elements of state practice and *opinio juris*, creating a presumption of territorial inviolability. This presumption was later tempered by the normative principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) [30]. George F. Kennan's [19] provides an early realpolitik framework for understanding the management of power beneath open war. Kennan's concept of containment emphasized restraint and strategic patience rather than juridical justification. In contrast, and importantly, the Medusa Doctrine reveals how modern states replaces



Figure 2.  
*Spectrum of state control.*

| Theorist  | View of sovereignty                          | View of social contract                     | Legitimate use of force                              |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Hobbes    | Absolute, indivisible authority              | Individuals yield rights for security       | Total authority to preserve order                    |
| Locke     | Conditional, limited power                   | Granted to protect natural rights           | Justified only in defense of life, liberty, property |
| Rousseau  | Popular sovereignty through the general will | Authority legitimized by collective consent | Valid when aligned with the general will             |
| Pufendorf | Legal sovereignty within civil society       | Contract binds citizens to civil peace      | Necessary to enforce law and contracts               |
| Weber     | Empirical monopoly on force                  | Not contractual but institutional           | Defines the state's unique coercive role             |
| Kant      | Sovereignty bounded by republican law        | Legitimacy through rational autonomy        | Constrained by universal moral law                   |

**Table 1.**  
*Major theorists on sovereignty and the legitimate use of force.*

Kennan's model of pragmatic containment with juridical containment, displaying the evolutionary transformation of coercion into legitimacy through law [19].

Yet, as contemporary statecraft demonstrates, Grotius's vision of lawful restraint has evolved into what may be termed the Grotius Sanction [31], a modern condition in which legality itself becomes the enabling mechanism for coercion where States justify interventions, sanctions, or influence operations through selective readings of natural law principles, invoking legitimacy to normalize compulsion. The Grotius Sanction thus represents the juridical transformation of power into principle, *where moral language conceals strategic intent* [32].

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued that the rhetoric of moral absolutism in U.S. foreign policy often masked the pragmatic pursuit of power. In [17], he criticized the post-9/11 expansion of executive war powers as a return to "imperial presidency," where legality becomes a rhetorical instrument of authority rather than a restraint upon it. This critique illuminates how democratic states rationalize coercive behavior within a moral vocabulary that sustains public legitimacy while eroding normative boundaries [17].

However, the evolution of *Nation-State Influence Operations (NSIOs)* and *State-Sponsored and State-Supported Terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)* has exposed the inherent fragility of this framework. Covert actions, cyber intrusion, and proxy warfare operate in legal gray zones that elude conventional enforcement. The *Responsibility to Protect (R2P)* doctrine sought to balance sovereignty with moral duty, permitting intervention when a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities [30]. Yet the same logic has been misapplied to justify interventions motivated more by strategic self-interest rather than actual humanitarian need.

These contradictions reveal the gulf between the *ideal* and the *actual* in international law. Sovereignty, once conceived as a shield, now functions as both a right and a strategic imperative—a duality exploited by states that conduct influence operations while simultaneously invoking non-interference to avoid accountability.

### 3.3 The Rawls–Hume bridge: Morality and realpolitik

John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, imagined *justice as fairness*, achieved when institutions are designed from behind a "veil of ignorance," where actors know

nothing of their social position [33]. In contrast, David Hume warned that one cannot derive moral obligation from empirical reality—the famous paradox of the “is–ought” divide [34].

In practice, state behavior aligns more closely with Hume than with Rawls. Nations pursue strategic advantage, not impartial justice. They invoke Rawlsian ideals rhetorically, using moral language to justify actions that contradict those very norms. This dissonance exposes what might be called *strategic moral laundering*, where ethical vocabulary conceals coercive practice.

Bridging these theories clarifies why legal frameworks alone cannot constrain state conduct. Sovereignty provides the legal shell; *realpolitik* supplies the motive force. The resulting tension between these two paradigms defines the operational space of S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIOs—an arena where states normalize covert violence and narrative manipulation while preserving a façade of legitimacy.

## 4. Typologies of state-sponsored and state-supported terrorism (S<sup>3</sup>T)

### 4.1 The spectrum of state involvement

State involvement in terrorism exists along a continuum ranging from direct sponsorship to passive complicity and permissive tolerance, a pattern that reflects the hybrid warfare paradigm originally outlined by Hoffman [35]. At one end lies *state-sponsored terrorism*, where governments intentionally provide funding, training, or logistical assistance to violent non-state actors. At the other end is *state-supported terrorism*, where governments offer tolerance or indirect encouragement without formal alignment.

These distinctions, while conceptually useful, often collapse in practice. This inconsistency may be attributed to the fact that, in many cases, states maintain *plausible deniability* by outsourcing violence through intermediaries, private military contractors, or aligned militias. Such arrangements blur the line between policy and proxy, enabling coercion without attribution. The resulting ambiguity allows states to operate beneath the threshold of open conflict while achieving strategic influence equivalent to warfare [36].

The Medusa Doctrine situates these behaviors within a unified framework, identifying them as expressions of *Nation-State Influence Operations (NSIOs)* that employ both kinetic and non-kinetic instruments of power interchangeably.

### 4.2 Operational typologies

Three principal typologies define modern S<sup>3</sup>T activity: *proxy warfare*, *ideological manipulation*, and *gray-zone operations*. Proxy warfare remains the most visible expression of state involvement, allowing governments to pursue strategic objectives through intermediaries while maintaining deniability. Ideological and gray-zone variants extend the same logic into informational and economic domains, blending coercion with persuasion and lawfare. As Paul Pillar cogently observes, post-Cold-War interventions have often mirrored this dynamic, with states relying on local surrogates to achieve outcomes that might otherwise remain unattainable through formal military action [37]. Contemporary threat assessments further illustrate this identical pattern. Analyses of Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq show how states cultivate layered operational environments of proxy forces embedded within local political and

| Category          | Primary mechanism                               | Illustrative examples                                | Relation to S <sup>3</sup> T                                                       |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kinetic NSIOs     | Use of force via proxies or mercenaries         | IRGC–Hezbollah; Wagner Group in Africa               | Direct sponsorship of violence; deniable warfare                                   |
| Hybrid NSIOs      | Combined military and information operations    | Russian actions in Crimea and Donbas                 | Fusion of coercion and perception management                                       |
| Non-kinetic NSIOs | Cyber operations, propaganda, economic coercion | Chinese disinformation networks; Iranian cyber units | Indirect enabling of terrorism through radicalization, finance, and misinformation |

**Table 2.**  
*The NSIO–S<sup>3</sup>T Matrix illustrating the spectrum of modern state involvement in terrorism.*

security structures [38], while United Nations monitoring reports likewise observe that ISIL- and Al-Qaida-affiliated networks increasingly operate through decentralized cells and locally embedded recruitment mechanisms, reinforcing the broader shift toward distributed operational ecosystems in contemporary terrorism [39]. The subsequent section examines these typologies in greater empirical detail through select regional case studies.

### 4.3 Integrated framework: The NSIO–S<sup>3</sup>T matrix

The typologies above can be visualized through the operational logic of the *NSIO–S<sup>3</sup>T Matrix*, where kinetic and non-kinetic instruments intersect (**Table 2**).

### 4.4 Ideological convergence and crowd manipulation

Beyond explicit sponsorship, states have learned to manipulate public perception through affective mobilization. Drawing from *Gustave Le Bon's The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, modern influence campaigns exploit collective emotion to erode rational deliberation. Online disinformation ecosystems convert spontaneous protest movements into instruments of geopolitical signaling. During armed conflicts, such in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military operationalized such tactics employing specially trained *PsyOps* units.

Recent intelligence and media analyses indicate that some demonstrations in Western cities have received covert financial or logistical encouragement from hostile actors seeking to amplify internal polarization. These movements often begin organically but are redirected through selective narrative amplification, transforming civic dissent into an extension of strategic communication.

This phenomenon exemplifies what the Medusa Doctrine terms *narrative contagion*: the weaponization of public sentiment to destabilize institutions from within. Research on state information control similarly demonstrates how digital environments can be engineered to shape public perception; as Roberts' study of China's Great Firewall illustrates, modern censorship regimes frequently rely less on outright suppression than on strategic distraction and narrative redirection, subtly steering public attention away from politically sensitive topics while preserving the appearance of open discourse [40]. Monitoring reports from the United Nations further suggest that extremist organizations increasingly calibrate violence and messaging to influence local perception, deliberately reducing public claims for attacks in order to cultivate acceptance among vulnerable populations while expanding recruitment and logistical support networks [39].

## 4.5 Analytical summary

The emergence of State-like International Entities (SIEs) such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Donetsk People's Militia, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham demonstrates how non-state actors can occupy the gray zone between insurgency and governance. These entities exercise many of the functions of statehood—territorial control, taxation, and social regulation—yet remain excluded from legal legitimacy and international recognition. Their existence reveals how the instruments of sovereignty can be imitated and weaponized outside the boundaries of lawful state authority, extending the logic of state sponsorship into spaces of contested legitimacy [31].

The typological spectrum reveals that contemporary terrorism cannot be meaningfully separated from the machinery of statecraft. The convergence of kinetic and informational power, combined with technological enablers such as cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence, has made S<sup>3</sup>T an adaptive instrument rather than a categorical anomaly.

The following section examines the practical mechanisms through which these typologies are operationalized, tracing how states employ military, diplomatic, financial, and informational instruments to project coercion while maintaining legal and political insulation. As Jason Blazakis has emphasized in U.S. Congressional testimony, the greatest challenge in addressing proxy and hybrid threats lies not in identifying actors but rather, in attributing responsibility within these complex ecosystems [41].

## 5. Instruments and modalities

### 5.1 Operational mechanisms of S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIOs

Economic sanctions remain among the most frequently employed coercive instruments short of war, serving as a means to compel compliance while maintaining the appearance of legal restraint [42]. Financial warfare and digital asset seizure illustrate the weaponisation of global finance [43], while information operations complement economic coercion by shaping narrative environments [44]. These modalities reveal that contemporary power projection increasingly depends on the fusion of economic, informational, and psychological leverage rather than on overt military force. State-sponsored and state-supported terrorism depend not only on intent but also on the instruments that make plausible deniability and sustained influence possible. The Medusa Doctrine identifies five principal domains through which states operationalize coercive influence: *military and paramilitary assets*, *diplomatic infrastructure*, *legal and bureaucratic gray zones*, *financial networks*, and *information systems*. These modalities interact fluidly, allowing states to calibrate the intensity and visibility of their operations according to political need.

### 5.2 Military and paramilitary assets

Armed forces, intelligence units, and private contractors remain the most direct vehicles of influence.

- *Special forces and proxy militias* are trained or supplied to conduct targeted strikes and covert campaigns abroad, often under humanitarian or peacekeeping cover.

- *Private military companies*, such as the the infamous former Blackwater company (now Constellis), Wagner Group or Frontier Services Group, operate as extensions of state power while providing legal distance and political separation from government accountability.
- *Clandestine training programs* for insurgents or friendly factions, as seen in the Sahel and Syria, allow states to shape conflicts without formal declaration or oversight.

These instruments exemplify what the Medusa Doctrine describes as *deniable kinetic projection*, a strategy that merges force with invisibility.

### 5.3 Diplomatic infrastructure

Diplomatic networks often serve as logistical and informational conduits for covert activity. Intelligence officers posted under diplomatic cover can exploit immunity provisions, using embassies as nodes for funding or coordination. Cultural attachés, humanitarian agencies, Journalists, or front organizations may also serve dual roles, providing both legitimate outreach and clandestine support.

Historical investigations into Iranian, North Korean, and Soviet diplomatic missions have revealed consistent use of such structures for espionage, procurement, and covert financing. The legal protections afforded to embassies and diplomatic pouches make them uniquely valuable for moving assets, communications, and personnel beyond the reach of local jurisdiction.

### 5.4 Legal and bureaucratic gray zones

Modern influence operations exploit ambiguity within international and domestic law. By establishing *shell corporations* and employing dual-use trade classifications, states can move weapons, technologies, or funds while maintaining formal compliance. This practice, sometimes described as *lawfare*, weaponizes legal systems themselves—either to obstruct accountability or to shield covert activities behind procedural complexity.

In democratic systems, this approach can also include *legislative capture*, where lobbying, donations, or media influence gradually reshape policy landscapes to align with external interests. The convergence of corporate lobbying and foreign strategic finance blurs the boundaries between legitimate advocacy and covert interference.

### 5.5 Financial networks and digital currencies

Funding represents the connective tissue of all influence operations. Traditional systems such as *hawala* transfers, offshore banking, and charitable fronts remain effective but are now joined by digital currencies and decentralized finance. Cryptocurrencies, mixers, and blockchain obfuscation enable the transfer of large sums without traceable intermediaries.

The U.S. Department of Justice and Interpol has documented extensive use of cryptocurrency to bypass sanctions and finance state-linked cyber operations. North Korea's Lazarus Group, for instance, has used ransomware and crypto theft to fund intelligence and missile programs. The adaptability of such systems illustrates the financial elasticity of S<sup>3</sup>T networks.

| Modality                  | Primary function                            | Illustrative practices                                | Impact on attribution                                   |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Military/<br>paramilitary | Deniable kinetic<br>projection              | Proxy militias, private<br>contractors                | Conceals state engagement in<br>combat zones            |
| Diplomatic                | Covert logistics under<br>legal immunity    | Embassy-based intelligence,<br>cultural fronts        | Provides operational shield<br>through sovereignty      |
| Legal/<br>bureaucratic    | Manipulation of<br>formal mechanisms        | Shell companies, dual-use<br>trade, lawfare           | Obstructs accountability and<br>investigation           |
| Financial                 | Covert funding and<br>sanctions evasion     | Cryptocurrency laundering,<br>hawala, front charities | Enables sustained operations<br>beyond regulatory reach |
| Informational             | Narrative control and<br>perception warfare | State media, cyber<br>disinformation, bot networks    | Creates epistemic fog and<br>plausible deniability      |

**Table 3.**  
*Core modalities through which states operationalize S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIO strategies.*

## 5.6 Media and information systems

Perhaps, the most pervasive modality of S<sup>3</sup>T is informational control. State-aligned media outlets, social platforms, and cyber-operations divisions function as instruments of perception management. Networks such as RT, PressTV, CGTN, Al Jazeera, and Voice of America blend journalism and state messaging, producing narratives that legitimize national agendas under the ostensible guise of balanced reporting.

In the digital era, this control extends to *algorithmic manipulation* and *content flooding*, where state actors amplify selected narratives or overwhelm discourse with distraction. Social media campaigns, automated bot networks, and paid influencers shape sentiment, suppress dissent, or engineer polarization. These informational vectors embody the essence of the Medusa metaphor: a multiplicity of channels whose combined effect is to paralyze response through saturation and confusion (Table 3).

## 5.7 The logic of convergence

These instruments do not function independently; they form an integrated ecosystem of coercion. Military actions generate narratives that are reinforced through media campaigns, financed through gray-market systems, and protected by diplomatic and legal barriers. Each layer sustains the others, ensuring that exposure of one element rarely dismantles the whole.

The Medusa Doctrine therefore interprets modern state influence as a convergent system rather than a set of discrete acts. Its “snakes” represent the interdependence of force, finance, law, and narrative. Understanding these interconnections is essential for designing countermeasures capable of addressing hybrid threats without undermining the legal principles that distinguish legitimate governance from coercive manipulation.

# 6. Case studies of state-aligned terror ecosystems

## 6.1 Middle East and South Asia

The Middle East remains the archetype of state-aligned terrorism, where ideological, sectarian, and geopolitical motives intersect.

*Iran* represents the most institutionalized model of state sponsorship. Through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Quds Force, Iran provides training, funding, and arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and a network of Shia militias across Iraq and Syria. These groups serve dual functions: they expand Iranian strategic reach and advance a transnational ideological narrative of resistance [45]. Iran's actions illustrate how sponsorship can become structural, forming a shadow architecture of governance parallel to the state itself.

*Pakistan* exemplifies the ambiguous boundary between support and sponsorship. Its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has long been accused of providing sanctuary and logistical aid to groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani Network [46]. Pakistan's calculus blends deterrence and deniability, using militant groups to exert leverage in Afghanistan and Kashmir while maintaining plausible separation from direct command.

*Afghanistan*, historically the recipient of competing state agendas, demonstrates the cumulative consequences of decades of proxy warfare. External patronage during the Soviet and U.S. interventions fostered a culture of dependence that allowed extremist movements to evolve from client entities into autonomous political actors. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 marked the transformation of a proxy movement into a hybrid sovereign authority, legitimized domestically but shaped by decades of foreign sponsorship.

*Yemen* further illustrates the complexity of overlapping state alignments. Iranian support for the Houthis, combined with Gulf coalition intervention, has produced a proxy battleground that integrates conventional combat with psychological operations and digital propaganda. The Yemeni conflict now functions as a living laboratory for S<sup>3</sup>T dynamics: external sponsorship, ideological framing, and technological experimentation converge to perpetuate instability [37].

## 6.2 Eurasia

In Eurasia, the merger of military technology and information warfare defines the current paradigm of state-aligned coercion.

*Russia* employs a hybrid doctrine that fuses kinetic aggression with informational control. The Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine, Syria, and sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate how private military entities extend state reach without formal accountability. Simultaneously, cyber units such as APT28 conduct digital intrusions that reinforce physical campaigns through narrative manipulation and disruption of adversary infrastructure [41].

*Turkey* has adopted a distinctive form of soft imperial projection. By deploying Syrian mercenaries during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and conducting influence operations in Libya, Turkey leverages religious and ethnic solidarity for geopolitical gain. Its "neo-Ottoman" strategy employs both military and ideological instruments, reflecting a hybridized model of influence that combines kinetic operations, propaganda, and political patronage [47, 48].

*Azerbaijan* has further instrumentalized this approach through what may be termed narrative-driven militarization. During the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, Azerbaijan integrated drone warfare, cyber intimidation, and disinformation campaigns to secure military victory while simultaneously shaping global perception through financial *reputation laundering*. Multiple international bodies, including the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, documented the participation of Syrian

mercenaries in the fighting, despite official denials [49, 50]. These findings confirm the operational merger of state sponsorship and contracted violence.

*Syria*, long a focal point of proxy competition, remains both participant and victim within the Medusa framework. The former Assad government's reliance on external patrons, including Russia and Iran, demonstrates how sovereignty itself can become contingent and sustained through dependence on allied sponsors, rather than autonomous legitimacy.

### **6.3 East Asia**

East Asia reveals how authoritarian states adapt S<sup>3</sup>T and NSIO mechanisms to technological modernization.

*North Korea* conducts one of the most comprehensive state-linked hybrid campaigns in existence. Its Lazarus and APT43 groups engage in cyber-theft, ransomware, and cryptocurrency-laundering to evade sanctions and finance military programs [51]. These actions combine espionage, financial crime, and coercive diplomacy, producing economic and psychological effects comparable to terrorism.

*China*, while not engaging in overt terrorist sponsorship, exemplifies the non-kinetic reach of influence operations. Through the Belt and Road Initiative and a sophisticated global-media strategy, Beijing projects soft power while embedding surveillance and data-extraction capabilities within partner states' infrastructure. The same architecture used for economic cooperation doubles as an instrument of strategic leverage. In Xinjiang and Tibet, domestic control measures such as predictive policing and re-education facilities reveal how the techniques of subversion and social engineering can be internalized within the state's own governance model. More recently, China's irredentist claims have grown increasingly emboldened, pushing the strategic envelope of sub-threshold engagement across the Spratly Islands and the broader South China Sea [52].

*Myanmar's* military regime provides another variant, combining internal repression with external narrative control. Its persecution of the Rohingya and coordination with regional partners to manage information about the crisis illustrate how state violence and propaganda interact to sanitize atrocities and manipulate international response [53, 54].

### **6.4 Comparative synthesis**

Across these cases, several obvious patterns emerge and recur:

1. *Instrumental denial*: Each state employs mechanisms that obscure intent, complicating attribution and accountability.
2. *Functional substitution*: Non-state actors operate as cost-effective extensions of sovereign power, enabling states to externalize risk.
3. *Ideological convergence*: Moral or religious rhetoric legitimizes coercion while masking material objectives.
4. *Technological integration*: Cyber and digital systems amplify traditional tactics, turning influence into a continuous and borderless process.

The proliferation of State-like International Entities (SIEs) underscores the diffusion of sovereignty in the twenty-first century. Operating on the margins

of international law, such entities wield administrative and coercive power while remaining formally illegitimate. They are frequently sustained by state patronage, strategic neglect, or both. This dynamic illustrates how governance structures and coercive capacity can persist beyond the confines of recognized sovereignty, sustaining conflict ecosystems where legitimacy and control no longer coincide.

The Medusa Doctrine interprets these dynamics as symptoms of a single evolutionary trajectory in statecraft, where the boundary between war and peace, and between state and non-state, collapses into a spectrum of managed coercion.

## **7. Future threats and technological convergence**

### **7.1 The expanding digital battlespace**

Technological innovation is reshaping the environment in which state influence and terrorism operate. Artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and decentralized financial tools are transforming how states project power below the threshold of open conflict. These developments do not replace earlier forms of coercion; they multiply them. Digital connectivity now provides the medium through which coercive narratives, financial flows, and psychological operations converge, creating an ecosystem of continuous sub-threshold warfare.

Joseph Nye Jr.'s conception of cyber power—a step beyond his former conception of soft power—as both coercive and normative remains foundational. He argues that digital networks allow states to mobilize influence by embedding themselves into the informational and economic infrastructure of global society [49]. Payne extends this logic by demonstrating how artificial intelligence accelerates threat detection, alters escalation timelines, and changes how national security decision-makers interpret risk [50]. Together, these insights reveal the structural shift produced by algorithmic systems: national power now operates at machine speed.

### **7.2 Autonomy, attribution, and algorithmic ambiguity**

The diffusion of machine autonomy challenges existing legal frameworks of accountability. Scharre warns that as autonomous weapons become integrated into command structures, traditional notions of responsibility and proportionality lose clarity [55]. Scharre likewise notes that the ethics of AI-enabled warfare remain unsettled, particularly when algorithmic opacity complicates battlefield decision-making [56]. These developments strain the normative architecture of international humanitarian law (IHL), raising questions neither treaties nor states are adequately prepared to resolve.

Attribution remains a central challenge in this environment. Rid and Buchanan argue that cyber operations generate inherent uncertainty that undermines conventional deterrence theory [51]. Because adversaries can cloak their origins behind digital proxies, states struggle to distinguish probing from attack, coercion from espionage, or signaling from sabotage. This ambiguity erodes the stabilizing value of mutual recognition.

### **7.3 Informational warfare and cognitive manipulations**

Information manipulation and AI-driven propaganda amplify the destabilizing potential of hybrid conflict. Singer and Brooking describe this phenomenon as the weaponization of the narrative environment, where states leverage social media

architectures to influence public sentiment, radicalize audiences, and shape political outcomes [42]. Their work illustrates how informational ecosystems have become contested battlespaces in which perception is as decisive as material capability.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt situate these dynamics within the broader rise of “netwar,” where networked actors use agility, decentralization, and informational dominance to compete with hierarchical states [43]. This paradigm is rooted in distributed power and rapid adaptation and helps explain why modern influence operations thrive under conditions of structural uncertainty.

#### **7.4 Environmental stress and systemic vulnerability**

Environmental stress, resource scarcity, and the competition for natural resources increasingly drive state instability and transnational conflict. Homer-Dixon argues that scarcity-induced tensions, exacerbated by climate change and demographic pressures, function as catalysts for violence and displacement [44]. These pressures strain governance capacity and foster conditions in which extremist movements may thrive. Recent assessments by the World Bank underscore the accelerating interaction between climate disruption, migration, and security fragmentation [57].

#### **7.5 Interdependence, governance, and normative erosion**

Global interdependence complicates traditional models of coercion. Keohane and Nye contend that in an interconnected world, power derives as much from asymmetric vulnerability as from material capability [52]. This insight helps to explain why states increasingly exploit technological and economic interdependence to exert influence below the threshold of open force.

The ethical stakes of these transformations are significant. Walzer’s account of just and unjust war underscores that evolving forms of coercion demand renewed attention to moral reasoning and restraint [53]. Habermas asserts that legitimacy in the postnational context relies on transparent accountability in the exercise of power [54]. As Freedman notes, strategy itself becomes a narrative amidst profound uncertainty, compelling states to grapple with the conceptual boundaries of control in a fragmented and accelerating world [56].

### **8. Strategic synthesis and theoretical integration**

The evolution of sub-threshold conflict reveals that contemporary statecraft no longer conforms to the binary architecture of war and peace. Instead, states operate across a continuum of calibrated coercion, exploiting interdependence, technological asymmetry, and informational leverage to exert influence without triggering the legal and political consequences associated with overt hostilities. The Medusa Doctrine interprets this landscape as a system of *managed coercion*, where strategic ambiguity is not a by-product but an operational requirement. The following synthesis integrates the chapter’s empirical and conceptual findings into a coherent interpretive framework.

#### **8.1 Power, interdependence, and asymmetric vulnerability**

Keohane and Nye’s conception of complex interdependence provides a foundation for understanding the structural dynamics that enable sub-threshold statecraft. In

a world where technological, financial, and informational systems are deeply intertwined, power increasingly operates through asymmetries of vulnerability rather than conventional military advantage [58]. States exploit these dependencies to extract advantage, impose selective costs, disrupt essential services, or manipulate narrative environments without crossing the threshold of armed attack. This transformation underscores a central pillar of the Medusa Doctrine: *coercive leverage now resides in the architecture of global connectivity itself*.

## 8.2 Hybrid conflict and the transformation of violence

Kaldor's theory of "new wars" illuminates how the boundaries between state and non-state violence have blurred to the point of strategic convergence. Identity, criminality, and ideology intersect in ways that render traditional typologies inadequate [59]. Hybrid conflict reflects a complex interplay of proxy forces, non-kinetic operations, information warfare, and economic pressure, creating an operational environment in which violence is but one instrument within a broader system of influence operations. The Medusa Doctrine situates S<sup>3</sup>T within this landscape, arguing that state-aligned terror ecosystems are not outliers but rather integral components of a diversified strategic arsenal.

## 8.3 Harm, normativity, and the ethics of modern coercion

Linklater's theory of harm expands the analysis beyond material coercion to highlight the ethical dimensions of sub-threshold strategies. Modern influence operations impose diffuse, cumulative forms of harm. These include psychological manipulation, economic marginalization, narrative erosion, which all fall outside traditional notions of force [60]. These harms operate below the legal thresholds that trigger formal accountability, enabling states to pursue coercive objectives while avoiding costly reprisals and the stigma of overt aggression. The Medusa Doctrine identifies this normative gap as a defining feature of twenty-first-century statecraft: the ability to shape behavior while displacing responsibility.

## 8.4 Strategic restraint and the erosion of order

The question is no longer whether states can operate below the threshold of armed conflict, but whether they can *restrain themselves* from exploiting the vast range of sub-threshold tools now available. Zala's analysis of strategic restraint highlights the importance of self-limitation as a stabilizing mechanism within the international order [61]. Yet the proliferation of digital, informational, and financial instruments of coercion has weakened the incentive structures that once encouraged prudence and restraint. The Medusa Doctrine contends that as restraint erodes, so too does the boundary between competition and conflict, thus creating a strategic environment defined by chronic friction, episodic escalation, and ultimately anomie.

## 8.5 Security as practice: The sociological dimension

Williams' sociological account of security practices underscores that state behavior is not merely the product of rational calculation but also one of institutional habit, cultural expectation, and bureaucratic momentum [62]. Sub-threshold operations thus reflect more than strategic ingenuity; they are, according to

Williams, embedded in organizational routines that normalize ambiguity, secrecy, and deniability. This perspective reveals why coercive influence often persists even when it contradicts declared policy: states act not only through strategy but also through practice. The Medusa Doctrine incorporates this insight by recognizing NSIOs as emergent behaviors shaped by the internal logics of security institutions.

## **8.6 Strategic narrative and the limits of control**

Freedman reminds us that strategy is ultimately a narrative, a story or myth that states tell themselves about the future, structured around assumptions that may not hold up under conditions of volatility and uncertainty [56]. Sub-threshold coercion amplifies this challenge: when influence operations unfold across opaque, decentralized networks, states struggle to predict second-order effects. The strategic narrative begins to lose internal consistency, and intended objectives become detached from operational outcomes. The Medusa Doctrine therefore asserts that the true risk of sub-threshold conflict lies not merely in escalation, but in the overall *loss of strategic control* associated with distributed, algorithmic, and deniable modalities of influence.

## **8.7 Integrated synthesis**

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a coherent picture of modern coercion. Interdependence creates structural vulnerabilities; hybrid conflict blurs traditional categories; diffuse harm complicates ethical reasoning; the erosion of restraint weakens the international order; institutional practices normalize ambiguity; and fractured narratives undermine strategic control. Within this environment, the Medusa Doctrine conceptualizes state behavior as an adaptive system of influence—fluid, deniable, and calibrated—designed to achieve geopolitical objectives while avoiding the legal and political liabilities associated with the use of overt force.

This synthesis provides the intellectual foundation for the next section, which articulates the policy implications and strategic recommendations that emerge from this analysis.

# **9. Policy and strategic implications of the Medusa Doctrine**

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that sub-threshold coercion is not an aberration but the central modality of modern statecraft. States increasingly operate within liminal spaces where influence is exerted through a combination of digital, informational, political, and economic instruments rather than overt force. The Medusa Doctrine conceptualizes this environment as one in which power is dispersed, deniability is strategic, and ambiguity is weaponized. The policy implications are therefore profound: traditional doctrines, legal frameworks, and institutional responses are not merely inadequate—they are structurally mismatched to the operational realities of twenty-first-century conflict. The following recommendations outline how states and international institutions must adapt if stability, legitimacy, and accountability are to be preserved.

## **9.1 Recalibrating deterrence for a sub-threshold world**

Classic deterrence presumes transparency: identifiable actors, predictable escalation pathways, and clearly defined thresholds. In contrast, modern state influence

operates through proxies, digital intermediaries, and opaque forms of coercion that elude classical deterrent logic. Effective policy requires replacing rigid, force-centric models with layered deterrence, combining:

- Normative signals (public attribution, diplomatic censure)
- Economic countermeasures (targeted sanctions, asset freezes, financial exclusion)
- Digital resilience (network redundancy, rapid attribution capabilities)
- Reputational costs (strategic exposure of covert actors)

Deterrence must shift from a model of punishing clear violations to one of raising the cost of persistent ambiguity. The Medusa Doctrine argues that credible deterrence today lies in predictable and carefully planned proportionate responses to sub-threshold actions, not in escalation dominance.

## **9.2 Enhancing resilience through structural hardening**

Because sub-threshold coercion exploits systemic vulnerabilities such as networked infrastructure, financial systems, information architectures, defensive policy development must emphasize resilience over retaliation. Structural hardening should include the following:

- Distributed network architectures that reduce single points of failure
- Secure financial monitoring systems to detect covert asset transfers
- Cognitive resilience programs to inoculate populations against disinformation
- Red-teaming and adversarial simulation to anticipate hybrid threats
- Integrated civilian-military cyber protocols

Resilience is not merely technical but societal. States must cultivate public awareness, democratic literacy, and adaptive institutional practices to reduce the psychological and political impact of coercive influence.

## **9.3 Reconfiguring legal and normative frameworks**

International law was built for a world in which force was physical, territorial, and attributable. The sub-threshold paradigm exposes the limits of this model. The Medusa Doctrine identifies three legal imperatives:

1. Threshold reform: Clarify that severe non-kinetic coercion such as digital sabotage, systemic disinformation, strategic economic disruption can constitute a prohibited use of force.
2. Attribution standards: Develop evidentiary thresholds for cyber and informational operations consistent with technical uncertainty.
3. Responsibility through enablement: Recognize state accountability for actions conducted by proxies, private actors, or NSIO-aligned networks.

Without these reforms, the law will continue to incentivize coercion in precisely the spaces it cannot regulate. On a more conservative note, given vested state interests, success in instituting such wide ranging legal interventions remains a speculative venture at best.

#### **9.4 Integrating intelligence, diplomacy, and strategic communication**

Sub-threshold operations exploit the seams between institutions—intelligence, diplomacy, law enforcement, military commands. Effective policy requires integration rather than compartmentalization.

This includes the following:

- Fusion centers for hybrid threat monitoring
- Cross-domain intelligence assessments
- Unified messaging strategies to counter foreign narratives
- Diplomatic signaling frameworks applied consistently across technologies and domains

Strategic communication becomes central to statecraft: credibility, transparency, and controlled escalation must replace ambiguity and reactive messaging.

#### **9.5 Reinforcing strategic restraint**

As Section 8 demonstrated, restraint remains a cornerstone of international stability, but it is increasingly eroded by national interests, the competition for resources, technological temptation, and geopolitical rivalry. Policy must therefore institutionalize restraint through the following:

- Internal oversight of influence operations
- Transparency thresholds for digital and algorithmic tools
- Interagency review of gray-zone activities
- International agreements limiting autonomous or AI-enhanced coercion

Restraint cannot depend on goodwill; it must be codified, monitored, and incentivized.

#### **9.6 Addressing the sociological foundations of security practice**

Security institutions operate not only through strategy but through state-mandated practice, bureaucracy, and culture. To curb destabilizing sub-threshold behaviors, states must reform the internal habits that normalize the following:

- excess secrecy
- mission creep

- deniable operations
- expansive interpretation of mandates

This includes the following:

- Training programs emphasizing ethical risk
- Reforms to classification and transparency regimes
- Accountability mechanisms for influence operations
- Institutional incentives favoring prudence over opportunism

The Medusa Doctrine significantly highlights that *unchecked organizational behavior*, not explicit strategy, is often the engine of sub-threshold escalation.

### **9.7 A framework for cooperative security in the Gray zone**

Because sub-threshold threats are diffuse and transnational, unilateral responses are inherently limited. Cooperative security must evolve to include the following:

- Joint attribution mechanisms
- Shared cyber threat intelligence
- Hybrid-threat task forces
- Multilateral sanctions frameworks
- Coordinated counter-disinformation campaigns

The Medusa Doctrine calls for a new cooperative paradigm grounded in collective situational awareness and synchronized proportional response. Given the inherent difficulties associated with international cooperation, combined with the complexity of NSIOs, narrative setting, and sub-threshold operations, this will prove significant challenge.

### **9.8 Strategic implications for the future international order**

The strategic trajectory outlined in this chapter suggests the following:

1. Ambiguity will increasingly replace clarity as states pursue coercive objectives through NSIOs.
2. Sovereignty will diffuse as non-state, quasi-state, and algorithmic actors operate within global networks.
3. Conflict will intensify at the cognitive, economic, and digital layers, even as kinetic violence becomes rarer.

4. Legitimacy will erode unless legal and ethical norms evolve to encompass non-physical harm.
5. Restraint will become both increasingly necessary and increasingly fragile.

The Medusa Doctrine therefore argues that the future international order will be shaped not by decisive battles or major wars, but by persistent, low-visibility competitions in which influence, perception, and systemic disruption outweigh firepower.

## **9.9 The Medusa Doctrine: Final synthesis**

The Medusa Doctrine provides a unified framework for understanding and responding to contemporary statecraft. It holds the following:

- States now project power through distributed influence systems, not overt force.
- Coercion is exercised through ambiguity, deniability, and calibrated pressure.
- Technological convergence amplifies these dynamics by fragmenting attribution and accelerating decision cycles.
- Stability depends on restoring strategic restraint, modernizing legal norms, and building resilience across technical and societal domains.

In this environment, the challenge is not merely to counter threats, but to rethink the architecture of security itself. The Medusa Doctrine concludes that the fate of international order will hinge not on the weapons states wield, but on the degree to which they can manage influence responsibly in a world where coercion is everywhere and certainty is nowhere.

## **Author details**

James P. Welch  
Alliance School of Law (ASOL), Alliance University, Anekal, Karnataka, India

\*Address all correspondence to: james.welch@alliance.edu.in

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Laqueur W. *The Age of Terrorism*. Boston (MA): Little, Brown; 1987
- [2] Hoffman B. *Inside Terrorism*. 3rd ed. New York (NY): Columbia University Press; 2017
- [3] Byman D. *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*. Cambridge (MA): Cambridge University Press; 2005
- [4] Crenshaw M. *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences*. New York (NY): Routledge; 2011
- [5] United States Department of State. *State Sponsors of Terrorism*. Washington (DC); 2025. Available from: <https://www.state.gov> [Accessed: March 10, 2025]
- [6] United States. *Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, § 620A*. 22 U.S.C. §2371. Washington (DC): U.S. Government Publishing Office; 1961
- [7] United States. *Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1976*. 28 U.S.C. §§1330, 1602-1611. Washington (DC): U.S. Government Publishing Office; 1976
- [8] Bassiouni MC. The civil and criminal liability of Libya for the Pan Am 103 bombing. *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy*. 2003;31(3):361-390
- [9] Pufendorf S. *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press; 1991
- [10] Lambert F. *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World*. New York (NY): Hill and Wang; 2005
- [11] LaFeber W. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York (NY): W.W. Norton; 1993
- [12] Schoultz L. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 1998
- [13] De Witte L. *The Assassination of Lumumba*. London (UK): Verso; 2001
- [14] Belgian Parliamentary Inquiry on Lumumba. *Final Report*. Brussels (BE); 2001
- [15] U.S. Senate. *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee)*. Washington (DC); 1976
- [16] U.S. House of Representatives. *CIA Activities in Chile (Hinchey Report)*. Washington (DC): U.S. Government Printing Office; 2000
- [17] Schlesinger AM Jr. *War and the American Presidency*. New York (NY): W.W. Norton; 2004
- [18] Kissinger H. *Reflections on containment*. *Foreign Affairs*. 1954;33(3):451-467
- [19] Kennan GF. *The sources of soviet conduct*. *Foreign Affairs*. 1947;25(4):566-582
- [20] Lippmann W. *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York (NY): Harper & Brothers; 1947
- [21] Reagan RR. *Executive Order 12333: United States Intelligence Activities*. Washington (DC): The White House; 1981 [Accessed: March 10, 2025]

- [22] Grotius H. *De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres*. Paris; 1625. (Original edition)
- [23] Hobbes T. In: Macpherson CB, editor. *Leviathan*. London (UK): Penguin Classics; 1982 (original work published 1651)
- [24] Locke J. *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press; 1988
- [25] Rousseau JJ. *The Social Contract*. London (UK): Penguin Classics; 1968
- [26] Kant I. *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. Indianapolis (IN): Hackett Publishing; 1983
- [27] Weber M. *Politics as a Vocation*. Philadelphia (PA): Fortress Press; 1965
- [28] United Nations. *Charter of the United Nations*. San Francisco (CA): United Nations; 1945
- [29] Brownlie I. *International Law and the Use of Force by States*. Oxford (UK): Clarendon Press; 1963
- [30] United Nations. *World Summit Outcome Document*. UN GA Res 60/1; 2005
- [31] Welch JP. *The Grotius Sanction: Deus Ex Machina—The Legal, Ethical, and Strategic Use of Force*. Leiden: Leiden University Scholarly Publications; 2019 [Accessed: March 10, 2025]
- [32] Rawls J. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev ed. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 1999
- [33] Hoffman FG. *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington (VA): Potomac Institute; 2007
- [34] Hume D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford (UK): Clarendon Press; 1978
- [35] Libicki MC. *Cyberspace in Peace and War*. Washington (DC): Naval Institute Press; 2016
- [36] Mazarr MJ. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Carlisle (PA): U.S. Army War College Press; 2015
- [37] BBC News. *The Syrian Mercenaries Used as “Cannon Fodder” in Nagorno-Karabakh*. London (UK): BBC News; 2020 [Accessed: July 15, 2025]
- [38] International Crisis Group. *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. Brussels (BE); 2023
- [39] United Nations Security Council. *Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report*. New York (NY); 2024
- [40] Roberts ME. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 2018
- [41] Blazakis J. *Testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs: Addressing Proxy and Hybrid Threats*. Washington (DC): U.S. GPO; 2023
- [42] Singer PW, Brooking EM. *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media*. Boston (MA): Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2018
- [43] Arquilla J, Ronfeldt D. *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*. Santa Monica (CA): RAND Corporation; 2001
- [44] Homer-Dixon TF. *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 1999
- [45] Bryjka F. *Russian Private Military Companies: Instruments of Hybrid Influence*. Prague (CZ): Czech Defence Review; 2023

- [46] Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. Report 15363 – Use of Mercenaries and Foreign Fighters. Strasbourg (FR); 2021
- [47] Selth A. Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis. Peaceworks No. 140. USIP: Washington (DC); 2018
- [48] Albert E, Maizland L. The Rohingya Crisis. New York (NY): Council on Foreign Relations; 2023
- [49] Nye JS Jr. Cyber Power. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 2010
- [50] Payne KR. I, Warbot: The Dawn of Artificially Intelligent Conflict. London (UK): Hurst & Co.; 2021
- [51] Rid T, Buchanan B. Attributing cyber attacks. *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 2015;**38**(1-2):4-37
- [52] Keohane RO, Nye JS Jr. Power and Interdependence. 4th ed. Boston (MA): Longman; 2011
- [53] Walzer M. Just and Unjust Wars. 5th ed. New York (NY): Basic Books; 2015
- [54] Habermas J. The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press; 2001
- [55] Lomami FE, Fobanjong J. Ethics of AI in battlespace. In: *Artificial Intelligence and Security Studies*. London (UK): InTechOpen; 2025
- [56] Freedman L. Strategy: A History. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press; 2013
- [57] World Bank. World Development Report 2024: Climate and Conflict. Washington (DC): World Bank; 2024
- [58] Le Bon G. The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind. Mineola (NY): Dover; 2002
- [59] Kaldor M. New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era. 3rd ed. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press; 2012
- [60] Linklater A. The Problem of Harm in World Politics. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press; 2011
- [61] Zala B. Interpreting strategic restraint: Power, order and the future of international politics. *International Affairs*. 2020;**96**(1):167-185
- [62] Williams M. The virtue of security: A sociological account of the practice of security. *International Studies Quarterly*. 2018;**62**(2):275-288



# Perspective Chapter: Intelligence Reform – A Strategic Overhaul of the Intelligence Community

*Johnny B. Davis*

### Abstract

Intelligence agencies should be consolidated as part of the intelligence community's overdue strategic and operational reevaluation. The Intelligence Community (IC) is currently divided into 19 different agencies, which leads to fragmented authorities and stove-piped communications, hindering comprehensive strategic analysis. This reform aims to enable the IC to develop a learning culture suited to the twenty-first century, allowing for streamlined operations that effectively address modern challenges. The proposed consolidation includes creating a single foreign diplomatic intelligence agency under the Department of State (DOS), a unified intelligence agency under the Department of Defense (DOD), and merging the FBI and Secret Service into a single domestic intelligence agency under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This strategic overhaul will enhance accountability, improve public confidence, and better equip the IC to adapt to emerging technologies, ultimately strengthening national security.

**Keywords:** intelligence reform, intelligence community, national security, agency consolidation, learning culture, consolidation, strategic reevaluation

### 1. Introduction

Intelligence agencies should be consolidated as part of the intelligence community's overdue strategic and operational reevaluation. The Intelligence Community (IC) is divided into 19 different agencies that divide authorities and stove-pipe communications, hindering complete strategic analysis. The intelligence reform would enable the IC to develop a learning culture suited to the twenty-first century and operate more streamlined and effectively to address modern challenges. The reform will help the intelligence community follow the analytical standards of Intelligence Community Directive 203 [1].

### 2. Consolidation and strategic reevaluation

The recommended course of action is to consolidate intelligence agencies into a single foreign diplomatic intelligence agency governed by the Department

of State (DOS), a single intelligence agency under the Department of Defense (DOD), and the FBI and the Secret Service should be folded into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for a single domestic intelligence agency. The Central Intelligence Agency should be abolished, and its non-covert and non-military functions transferred to the DOS intelligence agency. At the same time, the covert and military-related functions should be rolled into the DOD intelligence agency. All other intelligence would likewise be consolidated based on functions into foreign/diplomatic intelligence under DOS, military intelligence under the DOD, and law enforcement intelligence under the DHS.

The consolidation should represent adopting an innovative approach to fit the modern realities and align with the values and expectations of the American people. Such consolidation will help break up ingrained habits, ideological influence, and institutional resistance to strategic reevaluation. Intelligence reform will aid the intelligence community in adapting to modern technologies, such as AI and quantum computers. Intelligence will be even more vital to national security in a new world where nations like China possess the same capabilities as non-state actors that will increasingly use.

The most significant reform that the Director of DNI could advocate is improving intelligence analysis by consolidating intelligence agencies as part of an overdue strategic operational reevaluation of the intelligence community. This reform will help the intelligence community follow the analytical standards of Intelligence Community Directive 203 [1]. The recommended course of action is to consolidate intelligence agencies into a single foreign diplomatic intelligence agency governed by the State Department, a single Department of Defense intelligence, and the FBI and the Secret Service folded into DHS for a single domestic intelligence agency.

However, the consolidation should represent adopting a new approach to fit the modern realities and maintain the trust of the American people. The consolidation will help break up habits, ideology, and institutional resistance to strategic reevaluation. Retaining presuppositions in a changing world is the most significant block to correctly following the analytical standards [1].

The Central Intelligence Agency should be abolished, and its functions, in part, should be given over to the State Department of Intelligence regarding non-military intelligence. At the same time, all other functions should be rolled into the consolidated Department of Defense Intelligence, which combines all intelligence operations in the DOD. The need for consolidated operations is widely recognized, and structural consolidation needs to be considered along with the adoption of improved technologies [2].

DOD has considered adopting regional intelligence centers where the different DOD agencies would work. The system fits with the reform COA. The regional centers aim to improve cooperation, communication, and oversight, develop a common culture, and enhance accountability [3]. An organizational consolidation would serve all those goals.

All other intelligence would likewise be consolidated based on functions into foreign/diplomatic intelligence under the State Department, military intelligence under the DOD, and law enforcement intelligence under the FBI [4]. Duplicate bureaucracies would be eliminated, and the leadership positions consolidated, potentially providing significant savings [5]. The most significant benefit is facilitating a complete strategic overhaul of national intelligence.

The 9-11 Commission also urged consolidation, though not to this extent. The benefits would go beyond cost savings. The new structure would improve

accountability, oversight, and enhance the public's confidence in intelligence operations. The CIA has the worst image with the American people, and public confidence is vital for operations. DOD would have the lead in military operations, unhindered by the CIA and untroubled by the CIA seeking to manipulate Presidents to further their agenda, operating outside their expertise by advising Presidents on DOD operational planning, as happened under President Johnson in the Vietnam War and with drone and detainee programs after 9-11 [6, 7].

Intelligence reform would also aid the intelligence community in adapting to the challenges and opportunities posed by new technologies, such as AI and quantum computers. Big Data will soon be the subject of thorough analysis and will transform intelligence collection and analysis. Predictions can then be made in a detailed manner at strategic, operational, and tactical levels like never before [8]. Intelligence will be even more vital to national security, and keeping up with the new world order is key to dealing with China's challenge, which will involve using the same technologies [9, 10].

Adapting to new technologies will require much greater integration and immediate information sharing. Consolidation will break down clearance and access barriers. The new mission will be more rapid than ever, and analysis will need even more access to the entire scope of information, since China also collects Big Data rapidly [3, 11].

Reducing the number of intelligence agencies will significantly reduce interagency rivalries and improve communication and intelligence sharing. Each agency will have clear missions that align with the department's subject expertise and legal authorities. The reform can end the sense that the CIA or any other intelligence agency has a special relationship with the President and push each other toward carrying out its mission with loyalty to the Republic [12].

The consolidation would require a reassessment of intelligence agency funding. Each intelligence agency should be required to submit justifications for its current capabilities and missions. The funding would be reallocated based on mission priority. Therefore, the agencies that present the weakest cases for their capabilities and missions will receive the most significant cuts. Agencies must identify the less critical capabilities that can be eliminated to ensure the intelligence community has the budget to fund the capabilities necessary to accomplish the mission. The challenges from China are too significant to do otherwise [13]. Furthering national interests and security are best served by making deliberate strategic and operational priorities between agencies [14]. The intelligence community must rise to the challenge, carry out systematic reforms, and set priorities in a way not seen since the end of the Cold War [15].

The DNI has the authority to impose priorities on the intelligence community, including program parameters and limitations on NIP funding, budgeting, and programming. Furthermore, the DNI reviews and approves NIP funding for programs and budgets, forming the NIP portion of the President's proposed budget. Therefore, the DNI can direct the intelligence agencies to justify spending and prioritize funding [16]. The DNI has the duty to fulfill intelligence needs to support national security. The DNI must make the best use of the resources it has been given to accomplish the mission.

### **3. Mission reset**

The national security and defense strategies provide the framework for evaluating competing priorities between agencies [17, 18]. National security and intelligence must prioritize allocating limited resources to address China's and Russia's strategic

threats and the challenges of emerging technologies like AI that are transforming the world. Furthermore, the nature of technology is increasing, making cyber operations increasingly frequent and vital, instead of focusing on traditional intelligence collection missions [19].

National Security and National Defense Strategies give the strategic objectives for the Intelligence Community. However, they need to provide precise guidance. The IC must begin collecting data on how well its intelligence products serve its consumers to understand better how to serve its customers. The IC must track who views and uses which intelligence reports. Further, a system to evaluate the successes or failures of analysis in hindsight needs to be established. Collecting and assessing the work of the IC is necessary to understand what is working and should receive total funding, as well as what is not working and needs to be cut back or eliminated [20].

Another avenue for improved performance is reviewing the management side of intelligence agencies to look for cuts. Intelligence is divided into management and execution. The execution side carries out the missions. Therefore, savings on management costs would absorb cuts without harming the accomplishment of the mission. Historically, the intelligence community needs to improve to keep management costs down [21].

Some areas are especially ripe, such as the various DOD service intelligence agencies, which can be consolidated into a single DOD intelligence agency that serves all DOD and eliminates duplicate senior leadership and bureaucracy. DOD's Intelligence Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Evaluation (IPBPE) process allocates funding and personnel resources for intelligence capabilities through NIP funding and budgeting. DOD's Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) process provides the funding for DOD agencies [22]. These processes can be used to review and prioritize DOD requests for funding. These processes can be amplified to examine the consolidation of agencies, contracts, and capabilities [23].

The intelligence community has historically preserved the status quo and resisted change. However, this tendency has undermined public confidence and hurt mission accomplishment. The intelligence community must remember that it serves the people, is transparent, and upholds accountability. Accountability includes showing it is a faithful steward of taxpayers' money. The intelligence community must make priority choices to establish themselves as good stewards, which will help the community receive more funding and authority over the long run [24].

Intelligence operations will be even more vital to national security and to dealing with China's challenge, which will use the same technologies [10, 25]. Adapting to new technology will require making the right choices regarding capability and training and cutting down old methods that are no longer effective. National security and intelligence will be more rapid, and analysis will need even more access to the entire scope of information [26]. Therefore, the priorities of rights and cuts are necessary to overcome these challenges.

Intelligence reform can help overcome a longstanding cultural problem. The IC needs to become a learning organization. The lack of a learning culture makes the IC slow to adapt to a changing world and technologies. The IC tends to follow habits and old presuppositions without seriously reevaluating those presuppositions. Businesses face the same cultural problem of adaptation, and long-term successful businesses are the ones that learn to fix their cultural problems [27].

The lack of adaption contributed to many of the intelligence failures. The CIA's assessment of weapons of mass destruction that helped prompt the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was, in part, the result of habit and unchallenged presuppositions. The IC still

has a Cold War mindset and needs help understanding the nature of China's challenge correctly. The IC needs a new culture to adapt to how new technologies such as AI, quantum computing, and social media have changed intelligence operations [28].

Cultural issues must be addressed at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Leadership must reconsider its presuppositions and provide authentic visionary leadership that adapts to a changing world and new challenges [29]. Tactical cultural adaptation requires a mature exchange culture in which leadership also learns from team members and adapts based on the team's wisdom. Operational adaptations require a mix of leadership vision and exchange [30].

Schein's *The Corporate Culture* contains a thriving story of corporate culture transformation that provides valuable lessons for the IC. The Alpha Power Corporation was a mature, successful business specializing in surge protection and power devices. Regulators found the company had used asbestos and accused it of lying. The corporation faced heavy fines and restrictions and had to prove its change to survive [31].

Schein was brought in as an outside consultant to help the company transform. He identified that the culture was centralized and had a culture of resisting accountability and change. Therefore, the company needed structural and cultural changes. Structural changes included creating a resident for environmental affairs to oversee the adaptation and adoption of environmentally friendly technologies [32].

Alpha Power's most essential changes involved a new vision and communication from the leadership. Individuals who had risen in the corporate ranks from cronyism were removed. The corporation adopted a system of rewards for merit, talent, and new ideas from team members. Systematic auditing and environmental oversight programs were established at all levels. The leadership encouraged member feedback and established a system for reporting issues with protections for those reporting [33].

The leadership set up feedback sessions with members to communicate the new vision and learn from them. The leadership adopted an exchange leadership culture in which leaders at each level systematically got feedback from members to learn from the employees and help the corporation adopt a new culture and overcome present and future challenges. The corporate leadership publicly gave credit and awards to members whose ideas aided in the company's transformation. As a result, the corporation survived the crisis and continues to be successful decades later [34].

The IC needs a similar culture change to allow it to become a learning community. It must begin with a change in IC leadership, moving from its historical resistance to accountability to becoming accountable. The IC leadership must understand that it serves the American people and is sworn to uphold the Constitution and the Republic. An example of this problem was former CIA director Brennan, who was arrogant and dismissive in reaction to congressional oversight and even lied to Congress [35]. Therefore, it must accept congressional oversight and become more transparent in upholding the trust of the American people, which is essential to mission accomplishment.

Historically, IC leadership tends to cling to habit and ideology, especially an old Cold War mindset. It must encourage and reward dissent and creative thinking. Lip service is given to alternative thinking, but it is primarily discouraged and even punished in practice. An example of this was how the intelligence on ISIS in CENTCOM was pushed to conform to the Obama administration's agenda. The result was a DOD IG complaint by many intelligence members [36]. However, the whole affair was hushed up [37].

The pattern of senior IC leaders needing to be held to account must end for the IC to become a learning organization that adapts to new challenges and the

technological challenges transforming the world, warfare, and intelligence operations. Accountability must be established and enforced at all levels of the IC to establish a new culture of learning. The IC does a good job at the lower levels. Still, the senior IC leadership needs to be reformed with a new mindset to respect Congressional Authority and the Constitution and to maintain the trust of the American people [4, 5, 38].

Intelligence analysis must no longer be linked to tasking alone. The entire IC community needs to establish a planning process along the lines of the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP), which will result in intelligence analysis and collection operating with a clear view of helping a decision-maker to make a decision based on the choice of courses of action, with the risks and assumptions carefully considered. Therefore, intelligence analysis will improve over time rather than just responding to tasks. The new process will create the proper process to enable a learning culture [3].

The IC must reward and acknowledge those who think creatively and discover weaknesses in their agencies' assumptions, planning, and analysis. Intelligence analysts should be able to choose between paths in which they become long-term subject matter experts and those who move around. Individuals should be used in ways that best fit their talents, enabling them to grow to their full potential, learn individually, teach their agencies, and grow collectively [39].

The current stove-piping must be ended by reforms such as consolidating the number of intelligence agencies to remove structural barriers. Military intelligence could be consolidated into one agency that serves each service, with DOD and NSA folded into it. Diplomatic intelligence could be consolidated into a single agency under the State Department. Law enforcement intelligence could be consolidated under the DOJ. The CIA would be folded in part into military intelligence and in part into diplomatic intelligence. The DNI would no longer be needed. The common sharing of information and missions, along with clear lines of communication, authority, and accountability, would greatly enhance the learning culture of the IC [40].

#### **4. Conclusion**

Intelligence agencies should be consolidated as part of the intelligence community's overdue strategic and operational reevaluation. The intelligence reform would enable the IC to develop a learning culture suited to the twenty-first century and operate more streamlined and effectively to address modern challenges. The reform will help the intelligence community follow the analytical standards of Intelligence Community Directive 203 [41].

The Intelligence Community (IC) can learn from positive examples in the business community to address its cultural problem, which is not a learning organization. The lack of a learning culture makes the IC slow to adapt to a changing world and technologies. The IC tends to follow habits and old presuppositions without a serious reevaluation of those presuppositions. Businesses face the same cultural problem of adaptation, and long-term successful businesses are the ones that learn to fix their cultural problems.

The IC must undergo a strategic and operational reassessment to transform its culture. The IC needs structural organizational changes. The IC needs a change in doctrine, planning, and leadership to become a learning organization. The IC needs to

establish clear communication and accountability at all levels. Presuppositions must be identified and continually reassessed. The IC needs to have exchange leadership in which leaders provide the vision, and they also learn from the members of the IC to allow the IC to adapt and learn.

## **Author details**

Johnny B. Davis  
Liberty University, Alexandria, VA, USA

\*Address all correspondence to: [jbdavis3@liberty.edu](mailto:jbdavis3@liberty.edu)

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Intelligence Community Directive 203. 2015:2-4
- [2] Riles AR. Consolidated National Intelligence Centers: The Potential Impact on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of America's National Intelligence Community. Washington, DC: Defense Technical Information Center; 2011. Available from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA547509,32-35,42-45,61-65>
- [3] Ackerman R. Intelligence Consolidation Looms for the US Military. Washington, DC: AFCEA; 2013. Available from: <https://www.afcea.org/signal-media/intelligence-consolidation-looms-us-military>
- [4] Mayer MA. Consolidate Domestic Intelligence Agencies under the FBI. American Enterprise Institute; 2016. Available from: <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/consolidate-domestic-intelligence-entities-under-the-fbi/>
- [5] John J. The Case for Abolishing the CIA. Washington, DC; 2005. Available from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2005/12/20/case-for-abolishing-cia-pub-1784>
- [6] Peterson P. The truth about Tonkin. Navy, Navy History Magazine. 2008;42(1):8-12. Available from: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2008/february/truth-about-tonkin>
- [7] Genovese MA. Presidential Prerogative Imperial Power in an Age of Terrorism. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 2011. pp. 151-154, 157-161
- [8] Guangyu Q-F, Bode I. Weaponised artificial intelligence and chinse practices of human-machine interaction, the Chinese. Journal of Politics. 2023;9-10:13-15, and 19-21. Available from: <https://academic.oup.com/cjip/advancearticle/doi/10.1093/cjip/poac024/6976053?login=false>
- [9] Kasapoglu C, Kirdemir B. Wars of None: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Conflict. Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies; 2019. pp. 6-9, 17-19. Available from: <https://edam.org.tr/en/wars-of-none-artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-conflict/>
- [10] Franke U. Harnessing Artificial Intelligence. European Council on Foreign Relations; 2019. pp. 3-5, 7
- [11] Johnson JS. Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of Warfare: The USA, China, and Strategic Stability. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press; 2021. pp. 85-88, 111-114
- [12] Zeisberg M. War Power: The Politics of Constitutional Authority. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2013. pp. 233-238, 252-256
- [13] James S. Johnson, Artificial Intelligence. England: Manchester University Press 38-42, 58-63, 95-98
- [14] Johnson and Schied. Spending for Spies. England: Manchester University Press. 18-22
- [15] Lowenthal MM. Intelligence from Secrets to Policy. 9th ed. Vol. 196-198. Thousand Oaks, CA New: CQ Press; 2017. pp. 310-314, 378-382, 373-376
- [16] Elkins D. Chapter 4. In: Managing Intelligence Resources. 4th ed. Dewey, AZ: DWE Press; 2014. pp. 3-4

- [17] United States National Security Strategy. 2022. Available from: <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2022>
- [18] United States National Defense Strategy. 2022. Available from: <http://nssarchive.us/national-defense-strategy-2022>.
- [19] Lowenthal MM. *Intelligence from Secrets to Policy*. 9th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA New: CQ Press; 2017. pp. 378-382, 422-424
- [20] Mulligan K, Schmitt A. *What the Intelligence Community Doesn't Know Is Hurting the United States*. The Center for American Progress; 2020
- [21] Lowenthal MM. *Intelligence from Secrets to Policy*. 9th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA New: CQ Press; 2017. pp. 45-49
- [22] Intelligence Community Directive 116. Washington DC. 2011:2-3
- [23] Primer D. *Budgeting for National and Defense Intelligence*. Congressional Research Service; 2023. pp. 2-3
- [24] Johnson LK, Wirtz JJ. *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies*. 4th ed. Oxford University Press; 2018. pp. 366-369
- [25] Kasapoglu C. *Can and Baris Kirdemir, Wars of None: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Conflict*. Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies; 2019. pp. 6-9, 17-19. Available from: <https://edam.org.tr/en/wars-of-none-artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-conflict/>
- [26] Johnson JS. *Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of Warfare: The USA, China, and Strategic Stability*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press; 2021. pp. 76-78, 103-017
- [27] Schein EH. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. Vol. 23-25. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing; 2009. pp. 58-62, 73-75, 85-87
- [28] Pherson KH, Pherson RH. *Critical Thinking for Strategic Intelligence*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press; 2021. pp. 34-38, 159-164, 193-198
- [29] John P. Kotter. *The Key Differences between Leading and Managing*. 2013. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEfgCqnMI5E&t=3s>.
- [30] Northouse PG. *Leadership Theory and Practice*. 7th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE; 2016. pp. 138-143
- [31] Schein EH. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing; 2009. pp. 146-149
- [32] Schein EH. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing; 2009. pp. 151-154
- [33] Schein EH. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing; 2009. pp. 156-159
- [34] Schein EH. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing; 2009. pp. 158-163
- [35] Trimm T. *CIA Director John Brennan Lied to you and the Senate. Fire him*. The Guardian; 2014
- [36] Mazzetti M, Apuzzo M. *Analysts Detail Claims that Reports on ISIS Were Distorted*. New York Times; 2015
- [37] Garamone J. *DOD Investigation Clears Central Command Intelligence Leaders*. DOD News; 2017. Available

from: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1068382/dod-investigation-clears-central-command-intelligence-leaders/>

[38] Burch J. The Domestic Intelligence Gap. Homeland Security Affairs; 2008. Available from: <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/129>

[39] Pherson KH, Pherson RH. Critical Thinking for Strategic Intelligence. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press; 2021. pp. 27-30, 164-166, 193-194

[40] Lowenthal MM. Intelligence from Secrets to Policy. 9th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA New: CQ Press; 2017. pp. 80-82

[41] Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Intelligence Community Directive 203, Analytic Standards. Office of the Director of National Intelligence; 2007. pp. 2-4

# Perspective Chapter: The Evolution of Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century – Challenges and Countermeasures

*Fadil Curri*

## Abstract

This chapter examines how terrorism has changed in the twenty-first century, emphasizing the shift from state-sponsored terrorism to dispersed extremist networks. Countering violent extremism (CVE) has emerged as a critical strategy in combating terrorism by addressing radicalization at its roots. Unlike traditional counterterrorism approaches that emphasize law enforcement and military responses, CVE focuses on prevention through community engagement, education, digital counter-messaging, and rehabilitation programs. By fostering trust between law enforcement and communities, promoting critical thinking in educational settings, and challenging extremist narratives online, CVE seeks to disrupt the recruitment process before individuals turn to violence. Despite its potential, CVE faces significant challenges, including concerns over civil liberties, difficulties in measuring effectiveness, and the risk of stigmatizing targeted communities. However, international initiatives such as the U.S. CVE strategy, the European Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), and UN-backed programs highlight the growing recognition of CVE as a key component of modern counterterrorism efforts. As extremist groups continue to adapt to geopolitical and technological changes, CVE remains essential in fostering long-term resilience and mitigating the spread of violent ideologies. By integrating CVE into broader security policies, governments can develop more comprehensive strategies to prevent radicalization and enhance societal stability.

**Keywords:** terrorism, extremism, radicalization, cyberterrorism, lone-wolf attacks, digital platforms, counterterrorism, transnational terrorism, security, propaganda

## 1. Introduction

Terrorism in the twenty-first century has undergone profound changes, moving away from traditional state-sponsored activities toward more decentralized and independent extremist networks. This transformation has been largely driven by

globalization, technological advancements, and the increasing use of digital platforms for radicalization and recruitment. Unlike the Cold War era, where terrorism was often linked to ideological struggles between states, modern terrorism is characterized by fluid and adaptive groups operating across borders with minimal direct state involvement. The rise of transnational terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda [1], has demonstrated the effectiveness of decentralized structures, where individuals and small cells operate autonomously while sharing a common ideological framework.

One of the most significant drivers of this evolution is technology. The internet and social media have become powerful tools for terrorist organizations to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize individuals. Online radicalization, often facilitated through encrypted messaging applications, discussion forums, and propaganda videos, allows extremist groups to reach a global audience with minimal risk of detection. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook, have been used to disseminate extremist narratives, create echo chambers, and encourage lone-wolf attacks [2]. The shift from physical to digital radicalization presents a major challenge for law enforcement agencies, as monitoring online activities while respecting privacy rights remains a contentious issue.

Cyberterrorism has also emerged as a new threat, with terrorist groups leveraging cyberspace to conduct attacks on critical infrastructure, financial institutions, and government networks. Unlike traditional terrorist attacks, which often rely on physical violence, cyberterrorism aims to disrupt societies through hacking, data breaches, and misinformation campaigns [3]. The increasing reliance on digital systems in modern economies makes nations more vulnerable to such attacks, necessitating advanced cybersecurity measures and international cooperation to combat this evolving threat.

Governments around the world have been forced to adapt their counterterrorism strategies to address these emerging challenges. A key dilemma in counterterrorism efforts is balancing security measures with the protection of civil liberties. Mass surveillance, data collection, and counter-radicalization programs have sparked debates about privacy rights and the potential for government overreach. Striking a balance between security and individual freedoms is crucial to maintaining democratic values while effectively preventing terrorist activities.

Kosovo, like many other nations, has faced challenges related to terrorism and radicalization. In response, the country has developed a comprehensive legal framework and strategic approach to counter violent extremism (CVE). Kosovo's CVE strategy places strong emphasis on resocialization and rehabilitation, recognizing that punitive measures alone are insufficient in addressing the root causes of radicalization. Programs aimed at reintegrating individuals who have participated in foreign conflicts focus on education, psychological counseling, vocational training, and community engagement. These efforts highlight a shift from purely repressive counterterrorism tactics to a more holistic approach that includes prevention, rehabilitation, and de-radicalization.

Some countries, such as the Netherlands, have taken stricter measures to prevent radicalized individuals from returning. The Netherlands, for example, has implemented laws that prevent its citizens from re-entering the country if there is credible evidence that they have participated in foreign conflicts [4]. This policy aims to minimize security risks and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies within national borders.

Terrorism in the twenty-first century has evolved into a complex, technologically driven phenomenon that poses significant challenges for governments and societies

worldwide. The shift from state-sponsored terrorism to decentralized networks, coupled with the rise of online radicalization and cyberterrorism, has necessitated adaptive and multifaceted counterterrorism strategies. Kosovo's approach, emphasizing both security measures and rehabilitation efforts, reflects a broader trend toward addressing the ideological and social dimensions of terrorism while upholding fundamental human rights.

The shift from state-sponsored terrorism to decentralized networks, coupled with the rise of online radicalization and cyberterrorism, has necessitated adaptive and multifaceted counterterrorism strategies. Kosovo's approach, emphasizing both security measures and rehabilitation efforts, reflects a broader trend toward addressing the ideological and social dimensions of terrorism while upholding fundamental human rights.

## **2. Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the evolution of terrorism in the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on decentralized extremist networks, online radicalization, cyberterrorism, and counterterrorism strategies. The study incorporates a combination of literature review, case study analysis, and policy evaluation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

### **2.1 Research methodology**

This study employs qualitative research methods, specifically content analysis, to explore contemporary terrorism trends and counterterrorism measures. The research adopts descriptive and analytical approaches, drawing on secondary data sources, including academic articles, government reports, legal frameworks, and case studies. This method enables a comprehensive examination of existing literature and policy documents to identify key patterns and implications for counterterrorism efforts.

### **2.2 Data collection**

The data for this research will be collected through: Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports from international security organizations (e.g., UN, Europol, and NATO). Government and Policy Documents: Counterterrorism strategies, national security policies, and legal frameworks from Kosovo and other relevant countries. Case Studies: Analysis of specific instances of terrorism and counterterrorism responses, including Kosovo's CVE strategy and the Netherlands' restrictive policies on returning foreign fighters. Media and Digital Sources: Reports from credible news agencies, think tanks, and online security databases to track emerging trends in online radicalization and cyberterrorism.

### **2.3 Data analysis**

A qualitative content analysis will be conducted to identify key themes and patterns related to: The shift from state-sponsored terrorism to decentralized networks; the role of technology and digital platforms in radicalization; the rise of cyberterrorism and its implications for national security.

This study explores the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures, including Kosovo's CVE strategy and international approaches. A comparative analysis will be used to evaluate different counterterrorism strategies across countries, assessing their impact and challenges. Additionally, the study will examine the balance between security measures and human rights in counterterrorism policies.

### **3. The shift from state-sponsored terrorism to dispersed extremist networks**

Traditionally, terrorism was often linked to state sponsorship, where governments provided financial, logistical, and ideological support to militant groups [5]. However, in the twenty-first century, terrorist organizations have become more fragmented, relying on decentralized cells and lone-wolf actors who are often radicalized online [6]. This shift has made counterterrorism efforts more challenging, as authorities must now combat ideologically motivated individuals rather than state-backed entities.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) did receive support from external sources, including individuals and groups in the United States. However, it is important to underscore that this support primarily came from non-government-affiliated individuals and organizations rather than official U.S. government backing [7]. Irish nationalist supporters in the U.S.A, particularly within the Irish-American community, provided financial assistance through organizations like Noraid (Irish Northern Aid Committee), which claimed to offer humanitarian aid but was suspected of channeling funds to the IRA. Some sympathizers also facilitated arms shipments and other logistical support [8].

However, in the twenty-first century, terrorism has undergone a significant transformation. Many contemporary terrorist organizations have moved away from centralized command structures and state sponsorship, evolving into more dispersed networks that rely on decentralized cells and lone-wolf actors. This shift is particularly evident in the rise of jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS), which, while initially structured as hierarchical organizations, increasingly encourage independent attacks by radicalized individuals across the globe [6]. Terrorist groups increasingly encourage independent attacks to reduce infiltration risks, enhance leader security, maintain operational flexibility, expand global reach with minimal resources, and instill greater societal fear. This strategy protects leadership while making attacks harder to prevent. The widespread availability of extremist propaganda online has facilitated the radicalization process, allowing terrorist ideologies to spread without direct organizational involvement.

The internet and social media have played a pivotal role in this transformation. Online platforms enable extremist recruiters to reach vulnerable individuals, who may become self-radicalized without direct contact with terrorist groups. Digital propaganda, encrypted communication channels, and the anonymity of the internet have empowered individuals to carry out attacks without formal training or logistical support from a centralized entity. The 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack and the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing exemplify how individuals, radicalized through online content, can execute lethal assaults with minimal organizational involvement. A more recent instance is the February 13, 2025, Munich car attack, where a 24-year-old Afghan asylum seeker drove into a crowd during a labor union demonstration, resulting in 39 injuries and two fatalities [9]. These incidents highlight the challenges

in preventing lone-wolf attacks, as decentralized strategies by terrorist groups make it difficult for authorities to anticipate and thwart such actions.

This shift poses significant challenges for counterterrorism efforts. Traditional methods—such as targeting financial networks, cutting off state support, and dismantling leadership structures—are less effective against ideologically driven individuals who require little material backing. Law enforcement agencies must now focus on countering online radicalization, enhancing intelligence-sharing, and implementing community-based interventions to prevent extremist violence.

Ultimately, while state-sponsored terrorism has not disappeared, the rise of decentralized extremist networks represents a fundamental change in the landscape of global terrorism. Governments and security agencies must adapt to this evolving threat by developing innovative strategies to counter radicalization, disrupt online extremist networks, and enhance international cooperation in combating terrorism.

#### **4. Online radicalization and cyberterrorism**

Terrorist organizations have increasingly relied on the internet to expand their influence, radicalize individuals, and coordinate attacks. Encrypted messaging apps, the dark web, and decentralized communication networks provide extremists with secure platforms to plan operations while evading law enforcement surveillance [10]. Online radicalization has become a significant concern, as individuals can be exposed to extremist content without any direct physical contact with recruiters [11]. This process is often gradual, involving exposure to ideological narratives, engagement with extremist communities, and eventual encouragement to carry out violent acts.

Lone-wolf attackers, radicalized primarily through online forums and social media, pose a particularly difficult challenge for counterterrorism efforts. Unlike members of organized terrorist cells, these individuals act independently, making them harder to detect and prevent from carrying out attacks [12]. Social media algorithms, designed to promote engaging content, have inadvertently facilitated radicalization by directing users toward increasingly extreme material based on their interests and interactions [13]. With the rise of AI-generated text, this issue is further exacerbated, as AI can produce persuasive extremist narratives at scale, reinforcing echo chambers and accelerating radicalization. Recent studies have highlighted concerns regarding AI-generated content's role in reinforcing extremist narratives. For instance, Author Kris McGuffie demonstrated that advanced neural language models like GPT-3 can produce extremist texts that emulate influential content, potentially facilitating large-scale online radicalization and recruitment [14].

Governments and technology companies have responded by implementing measures to curb online extremism. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are being developed to detect and remove terrorist content more efficiently, while social media companies have increased collaboration with law enforcement to monitor and shut down extremist accounts [15]. Digital literacy programs aim to educate users about the dangers of online radicalization, helping them recognize and reject extremist narratives. However, terrorists continue to adapt, utilizing emerging technologies such as block chain and decentralized platforms to bypass censorship and maintain anonymity. Notably, the potential creation of Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) on the Ethereum block chain using smart contracts could provide terrorist networks with self-executing financial and operational structures, further complicating counterterrorism efforts [16].

The challenge for governments is to counter online extremism effectively without infringing on civil liberties. While stricter regulations on online content can help disrupt terrorist networks, they also raise concerns about freedom of speech and privacy rights. Striking a balance between security and digital freedoms remains a complex issue. The use of drones in counterterrorism raises significant legal and ethical concerns, particularly regarding sovereignty and collateral damage [17]. As terrorist organizations evolve alongside technological advancements, counterterrorism strategies must remain dynamic and proactive to combat the continuously shifting online landscape of extremism. The fight against cyberterrorism requires a multi-faceted approach, combining law enforcement efforts, technological innovations, and public awareness campaigns to prevent radicalization and mitigate the threat of online-facilitated terrorism.

## **5. Countering violent extremism (CVE) and Kosovo's approach**

Kosovo's approach to countering violent extremism (CVE) is shaped by its experience with foreign fighters and the need for a balanced strategy that combines legal enforcement with rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. *The Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory* criminalizes involvement in foreign conflicts, ensuring that those who engage in such activities are held accountable. However, recognizing that punitive measures alone are insufficient, Kosovo has also developed reintegration mechanisms to support individuals returning from conflict zones.

The National Strategy Against Terrorism [18] outlines a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to preventing radicalization and violent extremism. This strategy emphasizes early prevention through education, awareness campaigns, and engagement with at-risk communities. Schools, religious institutions, and civil society organizations play a crucial role in countering extremist narratives and promoting social cohesion. Additionally, Kosovo works closely with international partners, including the European Union and the United Nations, to align its counterterrorism efforts with global best practices ([19], pp. 457-460).

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs are key components of Kosovo's CVE approach. These programs provide psychological counseling [20], vocational training, and social reintegration support for individuals who have been radicalized. Special attention is given to women and children returning from conflict zones, ensuring that they receive tailored assistance to reintegrate into society. The government collaborates with local communities to reduce stigma and encourage acceptance of returnees, mitigating the risk of recidivism [21].

Despite these efforts, Kosovo faces challenges in fully implementing its CVE strategy. Limited resources, societal resistance to reintegration, and the evolving nature of extremist threats require continuous adaptation of policies and programs. Strengthening cooperation between security agencies, social services, and local communities remains essential to effectively counter violent extremism. By focusing on prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration, Kosovo aims to build a resilient society capable of addressing the root causes of radicalization and ensuring long-term security.

The Banjska attack, orchestrated by the Radojcic group in 2023 [22], stands as a clear terrorist attack against Kosovo's constitutional state. The Banjska attack, orchestrated on September 24, 2023 in village Banjska in northern

Mitrovica-Kosovo, was a brutal act of aggression against the Republic of Kosovo, carried out by a group of heavily armed Serbian militants. This terrorist operation was led by Milan Radoičić, a paramilitary leader with deep ties to Belgrade and the Serbian state apparatus. The attack represented yet another in a series of attempts by Serbia to destabilize Kosovo and challenge its hard-won independence. The group driven by radical nationalist ideologies and backed by external elements, sought to destabilize Kosovo by threatening its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The attack, which targeted Kosovo's security forces and institutions in the northern region, was part of a broader strategy to undermine the authority of Kosovo's government and provoke ethnic tensions [23]. By attacking police officers and attempting to seize control of key infrastructure, the Radojčić group aimed to create chaos and escalate violence, attempting to draw Kosovo into a protracted conflict. The act was not only an assault on the peace and stability of Kosovo but also a direct challenge to the established democratic and post-independence constitutional framework. It sought to disrupt the rule of law and undermine Kosovo's international legitimacy. Kosovo's police force, responded swiftly and decisively. After hours of intense fighting, several terrorists were neutralized, while others fled back to Serbia, once again escaping justice under Belgrade's protection. Despite overwhelming evidence linking the attackers to Serbian state structures, Serbia firmly denied direct involvement, exposing its continued policy of destabilization and hybrid warfare against Kosovo. In the wake of the attack, Prime Minister Albin Kurti condemned the act as an "orchestrated terrorist aggression" and directly accused Serbia of supporting the militants. He called on the international community to take firm action against Belgrade's destabilizing role in the region. However, history has shown that mere words of condemnation are not enough—Kosovo demands concrete measures to hold Serbia accountable for its persistent attempts to undermine peace and security.

This attack shook the region, serving as a strong reminder of Serbia's refusal to accept the reality of an independent Kosovo. The sacrifice of the Kosovo Police in defending the country's sovereignty is a testament to the resilience of its people. The heroism demonstrated by the Kosovo Police and the unwavering stance of the country's leadership reaffirm Kosovo's determination to protect its territorial integrity. The Banjska attack is not an isolated incident but part of Serbia's long-standing campaign against Kosovo. This should serve as a call for Kosovo and its allies to strengthen national security and ensure that such provocations are met with firm and unwavering resistance.

## **6. Balancing security and civil liberties**

One of the greatest challenges in counterterrorism efforts is ensuring that security measures do not infringe on civil liberties. Governments must strike a balance between preventing attacks and upholding human rights, particularly in areas such as mass surveillance, data privacy, and freedom of expression [24]. Overly restrictive policies risk alienating communities, fueling grievances, and potentially contributing to the very radicalization they seek to prevent. This delicate balance is especially crucial in democratic societies, where the rule of law and fundamental freedoms must remain protected even in the face of security threats.

Kosovo's counterterrorism strategy emphasizes the importance of human rights in counterterrorism operations, aligning with international legal standards such as

those outlined by the Council of Europe and the United Nations [25]. The country has adopted a legal framework that criminalizes terrorist activities while ensuring due process and judicial oversight. The Law on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing [26] provides mechanisms to track and disrupt financial networks linked to extremism while safeguarding privacy rights. Similarly, Kosovo's approach to countering online radicalization includes monitoring extremist content without imposing blanket restrictions on freedom of speech.

Community engagement plays a crucial role in Kosovo's efforts to balance security with civil liberties. Law enforcement agencies work closely with local communities, religious institutions, and civil society organizations to build trust and enhance cooperation in identifying and preventing radicalization. Educational initiatives that promote critical thinking and resilience against extremist narratives are prioritized to prevent the need for heavy-handed security measures.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring that counterterrorism laws are not misused for political purposes or to suppress dissent. Moving forward, Kosovo must continue refining its approach by enhancing transparency, ensuring judicial oversight, and fostering greater collaboration with human rights organizations to maintain a security framework that is both effective and rights-based.

## **7. Emerging threats and future counterterrorism strategies**

Terrorist organizations continuously adapt to geopolitical changes and technological advancements. The rise of artificial intelligence, encrypted communication platforms, and the dark web poses new challenges for security agencies [27]. These tools enable extremist groups to recruit, finance operations, and plan attacks while evading traditional surveillance methods. The growing use of AI-driven propaganda and deep fake technology further complicates counterterrorism efforts, making it more difficult to distinguish between authentic and manipulated information. As a response, governments must develop innovative counterterrorism strategies that incorporate intelligence-sharing, technological advancements, and community-based initiatives to stay ahead of evolving threats.

Kosovo's experience highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches that include both punitive and rehabilitative measures. While legal frameworks such as the Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory [28] criminalize participation in terrorist activities, the country also recognizes the need for reintegration programs. By focusing on resocialization, Kosovo aims to prevent recidivism and promote long-term security [20].

International cooperation plays a vital role in Kosovo's counterterrorism strategy. The country collaborates with the European Union, the United Nations, and regional security institutions to enhance intelligence-sharing and align its policies with global best practices. This partnership strengthens Kosovo's ability to address transnational threats, particularly those involving cyberterrorism and extremist networks operating beyond national borders.

Furthermore, Kosovo invests in preventive measures by engaging with local communities, religious leaders, and educators to counter radical narratives before they take root. Digital literacy campaigns and counter-radicalization programs are designed to build resilience against extremist propaganda, especially among young people who are most vulnerable to online recruitment.

Despite progress, challenges remain, particularly in adapting to the rapidly changing landscape of terrorist tactics. Kosovo must continue to refine its counterterrorism policies by integrating emerging technologies, strengthening cybersecurity capabilities, and ensuring that human rights remain at the core of its security efforts. Through a balanced approach, Kosovo seeks to enhance both national and regional stability while upholding democratic values.

## **8. Recommendations**

**Strengthening International Cooperation:** States should enhance information sharing through intelligence networks and security agencies such as INTERPOL and EUROPOL.

**Establishing joint mechanisms for tracking terrorist networks and their financial sources:** Harmonizing anti-terrorism laws between countries to prevent terrorists from seeking refuge in legally unregulated areas.

**Utilizing Technology for Counterterrorism:** States should invest in artificial intelligence and data analysis to identify terrorist threats before they occur. Developing communication surveillance systems and monitoring social networks to prevent recruitment and the spread of extremist propaganda. Collaborating with technology platforms such as Google, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) to block content that promotes terrorism.

**Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalization:** Governments should invest in quality education and programs to promote critical thinking to prevent extremist indoctrination. Reducing economic inequalities and social discrimination, often creates fertile ground for radicalization. Encouraging interfaith and intercultural dialog to reduce ethnic and religious conflicts may lead to extremism.

**De-radicalization and Reintegration Programs:** Establishing rehabilitation centers for individuals who have been part of terrorist groups to help them reintegrate into society. Engaging former extremists who have renounced terrorism as ambassadors against radicalization to help at-risk youth. Involving families and communities in the reintegration process to ensure that individuals receive continuous support.

**Strengthening the Legal Framework for Counterterrorism:** Drafting clear laws for prosecuting individuals who finance or support terrorist groups; implementing stricter travel and immigration regulations to prevent terrorists from crossing international borders; establishing special courts for terrorism cases to ensure swift and effective prosecution.

**The Role of International Organizations:** The United Nations (UN) and regional organizations such as NATO, the EU, and the African Union should implement joint policies for terrorism prevention and intervention. Providing financial and technical assistance to countries lack the necessary capabilities to combat terrorism. Improving coordination among international organizations to avoid overlapping efforts and increase effectiveness.

**Engaging Civil Society in Counterterrorism Efforts:** Supporting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to prevent violent extremism. Encouraging the media to promote positive narratives and counter terrorist propaganda, developing awareness campaigns in communities and schools to prevent youth radicalization.

## 9. Conclusion

Terrorism in the twenty-first century is a dynamic and evolving threat that demands comprehensive and adaptable responses. The rise of digital technologies, encrypted communications, and cyber capabilities has enabled terrorist organizations to recruit, radicalize, and coordinate attacks with greater efficiency. However, these advancements have also bolstered counterterrorism efforts, providing governments with sophisticated surveillance tools, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and cyber-security measures to track and disrupt terrorist activities. Kosovo has emerged as a notable example in counterterrorism, implementing a multifaceted approach that combines legal frameworks, CVE strategies, and resocialization programs for former extremists. The country has enacted stringent legislation to criminalize terrorist activities while also emphasizing prevention through education, community engagement, and rehabilitation programs. Its efforts to reintegrate individuals returning from conflict zones demonstrate the importance of balancing security measures with long-term de-radicalization initiatives. Understanding these processes is essential for developing effective counterterrorism policies worldwide. By learning from successful models like Kosovo, governments can enhance their ability to combat terrorism while addressing its root causes and preventing future threats.

## Author details

Fadil Curri

Kosovo Academy for Public Safety, Prishtinë/Pristina, Kosovo

\*Address all correspondence to: fadil.curri@rks-gov.net

## IntechOpen

---

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Fuller C. Rise of ISIS: Background & Perspective from the UK & U.S. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science; 2015
- [2] Morina M, Curri F, Krasniqi A, Azemi F. The role of social media in the spread of extreme terrorism in Kosovo the legal and criminal view of these crimes. *Journal Human Research in Rehabilitation*. 2023;**13**(2):208-215. DOI: 10.21554/hrr.092303
- [3] Alaofin T. Anarchy of Cyberterrorism: What you Should Know about Cyber Crimes, Cyber Espionage, Cyber Attack, Cyberwarfare & Social Engineering. Morgan Hill, CA: Bookstand Publishing; 2022. ISBN: 9781956785128
- [4] The Netherlands: Extremism and Terrorism. 2024, September 12. Available from: [Counterextremism.com: https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/netherlands-extremism-and-terrorism?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/netherlands-extremism-and-terrorism?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- [5] Hoffman B. Inside Terrorism. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; 2017
- [6] Neumann PR. Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West. Mistletoe Rd, Ashland: Blackstone Audiobooks; 2016
- [7] Wilson AJ. Irish-America and the Ulster Conflict, 1968-1995 (1991). Dissertations. 3317. Chicago: Loyola University Chicago. Available from: [www.ecommons.luc.edu](https://www.ecommons.luc.edu); 1991, p. 286 [https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4316&context=luc\\_diss](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4316&context=luc_diss) [Accessed: March 03, 2025]
- [8] Wilson AJ. Irish-America and the Ulster Conflict, 1968-1995; Dissertations. 3317. Chicago: Loyola University Chicago; 1991. p. 321. Available from: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4316&context=luc\\_diss](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4316&context=luc_diss) [Accessed: March 03, 2025]
- [9] Moon J. Suspected Attack Comes Ahead of Crucial Security Summit. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 2025, February 13. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/cd9x22dj423t>
- [10] Gill P. Controlling state crimes by national security agencies. In: Controlling State Crime. Milton: Routledge; 2017. pp. 81-114. DOI: 10.4324/9781315080376-4. ISBN: 9781315080376
- [11] Klausen J, Campion S, Needle N, Nguyen G, Libertti R. Toward a behavioral model of “homegrown” radicalization. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 2016;**39**(1):67-83. DOI: 10.1080/1057610x.2015.1099995
- [12] Curri F. The causes of terrorism. In: International Conference on Social and Healthcare Studies. Prishtinë: Uni Universum; 2024. pp. 163-174. ISBN: 978-9951-531-28-3
- [13] Demolli H. Krimet Kundër Njerëzimit. Prishtinë: Kolegji AAB; 2007. p. 126
- [14] McGuffie K, Newhouse A. The Radicalization Risks of GPT-3 and Advanced Neural Language Models. (C. University, Editor, & A. Newhouse, Producer) 2020, September 15. DOI: 10.48550/arXiv.2009.06807
- [15] Bertram L. Terrorism, the internet and the social media advantage: Exploring how terrorist organizations exploit aspects of the internet, social

media and how these same platforms could be used to counter-violent extremism. *Journal for Deradicalization*; 2016:225-252. ISSN: 2363-9849. Available from: <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/63> [Accessed: January 22, 2025]

[16] Clifford B. Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (rmve) Attack Planning and United States Federal Response, 2014-2019. 2021, May. Available from: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ncitereportsresearch/11/> [Accessed: September, 23 2024]

[17] Wellch JP. The Grotius Sanction: Deus Ex Machina. The Legal, Ethical, and Strategic use of Drones in Transnational Armed Conflict and Counterterrorism. Retrieved from Leiden University, Scholarly Publications. 2019, March 21. Available from: <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/69816>

[18] Kosovo Go. Strategjia Shtetërore Për Parandalimin Dhe Luftimin E Terrorizmit 2023 2028. 2023, February 16. Available from: <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=41769> [Accessed: November 17, 2024]

[19] Salihu I. E Drejta Penale Ndërkombëtare. Prishtinë: FAMA; 2011, fq. 457-460

[20] Rks-gov. National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Terrorism 2023 2028. 2023, March 16. Available from: <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=41769>

[21] rks-gov. State Strategy Against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018-2023. 2018, February. Available from [kryeministri.rks-gov.net](https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net): [https://](https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net)

[wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Strategjia-Shtetërore-kunder-Terrorizmit-dhe-Plani-i-Veprimite-2018-2023-narrative.pdf](https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Strategjia-Shtetërore-kunder-Terrorizmit-dhe-Plani-i-Veprimite-2018-2023-narrative.pdf) [Accessed: November 18, 2024]

[22] Ozturk T. Interpol Issues Arrest Warrant for Kosovo Serb Politician Radoicic. 2023, December 08. Available from: [www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr): <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/interpol-issues-arrest-warrant-for-kosovo-serb-politician-radoicic/3076233> [Accessed: January 12, 2025]

[23] Gadzo M. Kosovo to Start Trial for Banjska Attack by Serb Group: Why It Matters. 2024, October 08. Available from [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/8/kosovo-to-start-trial-for-banjska-attack-by-serb-group-why-it-matters>

[24] Schmid AP, Jongman AJ. Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature. New York, NY, USA: Routledge; 2005. ISBN-10-1412804698; ISBN-13-978-1412804691

[25] Europe, C. o. Council of Europe Adopts New Counter-Terrorism Strategy for 2023-2027. 2023, February 23. Available from [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-adopts-new-counter-terrorism-strategy-for-2023-2027> [Accessed: December 10, 2024]

[26] 05/L-096, L. N. On the Prevention of Money Laundering and Combating Terrorist Financing. 2016, June 15. Available from [fiu.rks-gov.net](http://fiu.rks-gov.net): [https://fiu.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/LAW\\_NO.\\_05\\_L-096\\_ON\\_THE\\_PREVENTION\\_OF\\_MONEY\\_LAUNDERING\\_AND\\_COMBATING\\_TERRORIST\\_FINANCING.pdf](https://fiu.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/LAW_NO._05_L-096_ON_THE_PREVENTION_OF_MONEY_LAUNDERING_AND_COMBATING_TERRORIST_FINANCING.pdf) [Accessed: January 02, 2025]

[27] Veersamy N. A high-level conceptual framework of cyber-terrorism. *Journal of Information Warfare*. 2009;8(1):45-55

[28] Law No. 05/L-002. On Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory. 2015, April 02. Available from: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=10763&langid=2>



# Perspective Chapter: Beyond Firepower – Building Trust and Partnerships in the Fight against Terrorism

*Jostein Matningsdal*

## Abstract

This chapter explores partnership dynamics in counterterrorism through the lens of the high-profile terror attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul on September 27, 2017. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration, shared tactical knowledge, and unified leadership, focusing on the joint efforts of the Afghan Counterterrorist Police Force, Crisis Response Unit 222 (CRU 222), and the Norwegian Special Operations Advisory Team (SOAT) during the incident. The chapter argues that effective counterterrorist capability building relies on strategic patience and institutional alignments, as demonstrated by the two-decade development of CRU 222 under Norwegian mentorship. Their response to the HKIA attack highlights the necessity of tactical flexibility, ethical considerations to minimize civilian casualties, and decentralized decision-making. Within the broader context of “Terrorism in Transition,” this chapter highlights the evolving tactics of Islamic terrorist groups, underscoring the need for a more dynamic and coordinated response from counterterrorist forces. It advocates for initiatives that emphasize cultural competence, innovative problem-solving, and mutual trust to effectively adapt strategies to the shifting landscape of global threats. Additionally, the chapter offers recommendations to enhance future Special Operations Forces (SOF) engagements and improve their effectiveness in military assistance missions.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, special operations forces, military assistance, countering violent extremist organizations, leadership

## 1. Introduction

On September 27, 2017, a high-profile terror attack targeted Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul [1]. ISIS-Khorasan-affiliated terrorists launched a coordinated rocket barrage, coinciding with the political visit of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, suggesting possible insider information being leaked about their presence. Although Stoltenberg and Mattis had left the airport before the attack and avoided harm,

the incident highlights how terrorism can disrupt sensitive political processes and underscores the importance of strict operational security during distinguished visits in conflict zones.

The attack commenced at 11:00 a.m. local time, with terrorists using mortars and rocket-propelled grenades to target the military section of the airport, where a special operations advisory team (SOAT) was stationed. The SOAT, composed of Norwegian soldiers, was mentoring CRU 222 [2]. Concurrently, the Norwegians received information indicating that terrorists were also firing heavy weapons at one of the U.S. Embassy's facilities in Kabul, known as Camp Sullivan [3]. The dual threats created immediate ambiguity: was this a limited mortar strike or a precursor to a complex ground incursion with diversionary tactics designed to overwhelm response efforts? This uncertainty forced the SOAT to prepare for multiple contingencies—securing their personnel against the incoming fire while evaluating the need to divert resources to Sullivan.

In accordance with HKIA standard operating procedures, the SOAT initially took shelter within the impact zone. However, as the situation worsened over the next 30 minutes, they received a request for assistance from the U.S. Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) at Camp Sullivan, which fell outside their direct command structure. Challenged with the decision to either stay sheltered or confront the attackers, the SOAT chose to assist the DSS, exiting their shelter and gearing up for combat while coordinating with CRU 222 on their way to the target [4].

As the joint Norwegian/Afghan force advanced toward the site of the mortar attacks at 12:00, information from multiple sources made it apparent that the attackers at Sullivan were the same individuals involved in the HKIA barrage. Upon reaching the target area, the DSS confirmed that there was no ongoing attack directly on Sullivan and that the terrorists were located outside the embassy's facilities. Once this confusion was cleared, the joint force engaged the terrorists, who continued to attack HKIA from a compound in the residential area adjacent to the airport. At that moment, information gathered from locals revealed that the terrorists had meticulously planned their assault for months, anticipating potential counterterrorist actions. They fortified their positions with obstacles and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to complicate the operational environment. In response, CRU 222, in coordination with the SOAT, implemented a 'hammer and anvil' tactic, using a static force to contain the enemy while a mobile element cleared the terrorist compound.

At 12:45, the SOAT encountered a critical situation when their superior commander was unable to assume command effectively due to the airport's lockdown. This required the Norwegians to take charge and lead the NATO aspects of the operation, making crucial decisions without clear guidance from higher command. They brought in experts skilled in advanced weaponry from a collaborative network established through years of cooperation among various security agencies, significantly enhancing the joint force's capabilities in support of the Afghan government's objectives. Additionally, the SOAT communicated with other coalition troops to coordinate assistance from both governmental and nongovernmental organizations, a task typically managed by higher headquarters.

An hour later, U.S. military aircraft conducted an airstrike using Hellfire missiles from Apache helicopters in direct response to the attack on Camp Sullivan. This air support represented a shift from the conventional urban counterterrorist tactics previously employed by CRU 222. While it provided a substantial tactical advantage,

it also introduced collateral damage, as the first missile malfunctioned, resulting in civilian casualties [5].<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the Afghan and Norwegian leadership mutually decided to call off all airstrikes for the remainder of the operation.

Even with these challenges, the joint force continued its efforts, engaging the terrorists in close combat [7]. As the situation intensified, the terrorists detonated an IED concealed underground at the entrance of the compound around 16:00. The explosion caused extensive damage to the targeted structure and temporarily incapacitated both the SOAT and CRU 222 (**Figure 1**). As the Joint Forces recalibrated its approach, two suicide bombers attempted to reach them but were neutralized before detonating their explosives at around 16:45. Notwithstanding, the presence of undetonated bomb vests necessitated extreme caution as the force continued operations.

As the confrontation extended into the evening, the remaining terrorists, suspected to be suicide bombers, retreated into a nearby building to regroup for a final assault [8]. Recognizing the potential dangers, at around 17:30, Afghan authorities instructed the joint force to conclude the operation promptly. The joint force faced a dilemma: a hurried direct assault risked significant casualties, while delay could endanger civilian safety. To address this, they developed a risky maneuver that involved modifying existing equipment and procedures. This allowed a small team to infiltrate the building undetected under the cover of darkness to plant explosives on the structure at 18:15.

Ultimately, after more than 6 hours of intense fighting, the joint force succeeded in neutralizing the terrorist threat, preventing significant loss of life and damage.



**Figure 1.**  
*Detonation of an Improvised Explosive Device. The left image captures the immediate aftermath of the explosion, while the right image depicts the extensive damage to the target compound and impact on the surrounding area. SOAT and CRU 222 operatives can be seen on the rooftops. Photo: Forsvaret/Norwegian Armed Forces.*

<sup>1</sup> While no authoritative figures on casualties from the U.S. airstrike was publicly released by NATO, local media accounts suggest that six civilians sustained injuries [6].

## 2. Reasoning and structure

This chapter examines the complexities of trust-building and partnership dynamics in counterterrorism, using the HKIA high-profile attack as a critical case study. This highly coordinated rocket barrage exposed vulnerabilities in security protocols, potentially facilitated by insider intelligence, and underscored the need to adapt traditional military doctrines to address evolving asymmetric threats. Through this incident, the case study emphasizes the necessity of collaboration, shared tactical knowledge, and unified leadership in crafting adaptive responses to terrorist operations. By leveraging the complementary strengths of local and international forces, effective strategies can mitigate risks while enhancing operational resilience [9].

*Core argument.* The 2017 HKIA attack illustrates the challenges of modern counterterrorism and the imperative of international collaboration supported by strategic patience [10]. This chapter contends that the success of the joint Norwegian/Afghan force stemmed from pre-established trust between Norwegian Special Operations Forces (SOF) and its Afghan partner force (CRU 222). This trust, built through thoughtful personnel selection and mutual commitments and supported by leadership from both NATO and Afghan command levels, enabled cohesive decision-making during the crisis. The argument is structured around three central claims:

- i. *Collaborative relationships as a foundation for success:* Effective counterterrorism hinges on interpersonal trust and institutional alignment rooted in cultural competence [11]. The SOAT/CRU 222 partnership exemplifies how mutual respect, cultural understanding, and organizational support at higher echelons (NATO and Afghan leadership) foster unity of effort. Their ability to coordinate during the attack highlights the value of bridging cultural and procedural divides to achieve shared objectives.
- ii. *Reconciling strategic orders with tactical realities:* Counterterrorist operations often involve conflicting priorities between strategic directives and on-ground demands [12]. Leaders must balance adherence to higher command mandates with the flexibility to adapt to dynamic threats. The 2017 HKIA attack demonstrates how the joint force navigated this tension, such as when Norwegian advisors recalibrated tactics in real time while maintaining alignment with broader NATO-Afghan mission goals.
- iii. *Capability development for sustainable security:* Long-term success in military assistance<sup>2</sup> (MA) initiatives requires prioritizing partner force self-reliance over short-term wins [14]. The Norwegian model focused on empowering CRU 222 through skill development, leadership training, and institutional capacity building [15]. This approach ensured that CRU 222 could independently manage complex threats post-engagement, exemplifying how capability development fosters enduring resilience.

---

<sup>2</sup> Military assistance (MA) is one of the core tasks of NATO SOF. It involves various activities to support and influence friendly assets. This includes training, advising, mentoring, and combined operations. It also covers building security force capabilities, engaging with leaders at all levels, and civic actions to support the local population [13].

In the following sections, each claim is supported by elements from the case study, illustrating how these factors contributed to the effective response to the terrorist attack. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the broader implications of the case study for contemporary counterterrorist efforts, including recommendations for refining NATO's MA framework.

## 2.1 Collaborative relationships

The collaboration between the Norwegian SOF and CRU 222 began in 2005 as part of Norway's NATO-led commitment to stabilize post-2001 Afghanistan. Initially dedicated to special reconnaissance and direct-action missions, Norwegian SOF shifted its focus to a mentorship role, emphasizing the development of institutional capacity with Afghan special police in Kabul. By 2009, this partnership was formalized with the creation of CRU 222, a specialized police unit tasked with nationwide counterterrorist operations [16].

*Hands-on mentorship and shared risk.* Norwegian advisors embedded directly with CRU 222, offering real-time guidance grounded in mutual respect and cultural sensitivity. Instead of imposing an external agenda, they operated within Afghanistan's legal and institutional structures to strengthen CRU 222's ability to manage complex threats while upholding the rule of law. Their training program focused on three key areas: (1) tactical proficiency, emphasizing skills in hostage rescue, urban combat, and warrant-driven operations; (2) leadership development, enhancing decision-making, mission planning and evidence processing capabilities; and (3) interagency coordination, promoting collaboration with Afghan military, intelligence, and governance bodies.

Through this approach, Norwegian SOF built trust and facilitated continuous organizational improvements, refining its advising techniques based on feedback from Afghan counterparts who had the best understanding of the local context [17].

*Beyond kinetic solutions.* CRU 222's responsibility for neutralizing high-profile attacks underscored that effective counterterrorism requires advisor engagement beyond just direct-action missions. Norwegian SOF recognized this early on, adopting an approach that emphasized understanding organizational power structures, tribal dynamics, and local grievances to preempt radicalization and insider threats. They also fostered civilian partnerships by collaborating with the diplomatic community, government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and village elders. This enhanced CRU 222's intelligence-gathering capabilities and its ability to disrupt terrorist networks [18]. For instance, CRU 222's success in thwarting the 2017 HKIA attack relied on tips from local informants, demonstrating that community trust in authorities can lead to improved situational awareness and operational effectiveness.

*Operational legacy.* Over the years, Norwegian SOF and CRU 222 conducted numerous counterterrorist operations, including high-risk arrests against terrorist suspects, as well as rapid responses to high-profile attacks. Notable missions include:

- 2015 May 13: Park Palace Guesthouse Attack: CRU 222 responded to the attack, rescuing hostages and neutralizing the attackers.
- 2017 July 31: Embassy of Iraq Attack: CRU 222 intervened in the suicide bombing and assault on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul, resulting in the death of all attackers and the rescue of embassy staff.

- 2018 January 20: Intercontinental Hotel Kabul Attack: CRU 222 played a crucial role in ending the siege, rescuing hostages, and neutralizing the attackers.

By 2021, CRU 222 operated independently, demonstrating mastery of intelligence collection, mission planning, and after-action analysis. However, the unit's disbandment following the Taliban's takeover revealed the limits of counterterrorist partnerships without political scaffolding [19]. Despite tactical success, the collapse of Afghan governance erased institutional gains, a stark reminder that MA efforts require systemic stability.

## **2.2 Reconciling strategic orders with tactical realities**

The 2017 HKIA attack underscores a central lesson: Counterterrorist forces must institutionalize adaptability to navigate the friction between rigid strategic directives and fluid battlefield realities [20]. This necessity is particularly evident in the following aspects.

*Urban warfare.* The attack occurred in a densely populated urban environment, where terrorists took advantage of residential buildings to conduct ambushes and deploy IEDs. This situation necessitated a shift away from conventional counterterrorist tactics, emphasizing the unique challenges of fighting in built-up areas. The terrorists' deliberate use of human shields and fortified positions further complicated the response. The proximity of noncombatants required the joint force to prioritize proportionality<sup>3</sup> and distinction<sup>4</sup> over sheer firepower. They avoided heavy weaponry, such as airstrikes, to minimize collateral damage, despite pressure from higher headquarters for a swift resolution.

*Civilian safety.* The accidental civilian casualties resulting from a U.S. airstrike during the operation highlight the ethical dilemmas inherent in urban counterterrorism [22]. While air support offered tactical advantages, the incident underscores the delicate balance between operational efficiency and moral responsibility. Any further collateral damage would raise questions about the self-sufficiency of Afghan security forces. Consequently, ground-level maneuvers became essential, focusing on the joint force's expertise in close combat to neutralize threats precisely. Additionally, the joint force prioritized strategic restraint, avoiding escalation despite tactical delays to maintain long-term rapport with the local population.

*Innovative tactics.* Faced with fortified insurgent positions, the joint force devised a new technique that had not been tested or used before to neutralize threats, a course of action born from necessity. This exemplifies their problem-solving agility, enabling frontline personnel to improvise when pre-planned tactics falter. It also highlights the importance of training focused on minimizing risks, simulating complex urban scenarios to prepare leaders for the prudent management of a crisis's escalatory tendencies.

*Decentralized decision-making.* In the absence of the SOAT's superior commander and with guidance fragmented during the attack, the leadership of SOAT/CRU 222

<sup>3</sup> Proportionality means that an attack against an otherwise lawful military target is nevertheless unlawful if it causes damage to civilian persons or objects that is too extensive in relation to the expected concrete and direct military benefit, according to the 1977 Additional Protocols (Articles 51 and 57 of Additional Protocol I) of the 1949 Geneva Conventions [21].

<sup>4</sup> Distinction means that participants in an armed conflict must always distinguish between military targets on the one hand and civilian persons and objects on the other, according to the 1977 Additional Protocols (Article 48 of Additional Protocol I) of the 1949 Geneva Conventions [21].

relied on established relationships to operate independently, adjusting tactics in real time, such as rerouting teams to avoid IED chokeholds. They aligned their efforts with strategic objectives by incorporating the Afghan government's broader goals, such as civilian protection, without the need for micromanagement. This unintended decentralization proved essential, as a strict reliance on centralized commands would have impeded the SOAT's ability to make efficient decisions when operational oversight was insufficient. However, the existing Afghan command structure remained in place, with its own flaws, which occasionally hindered the CRU 222's ability to make autonomous decisions.

*Reconciling priorities.* The HKIA attack highlighted the tension between immediate tactical imperatives and long-term strategic goals. Conflicting guidance from within and outside the NATO command structure, such as orders to stay sheltered while responding to allies' calls for help or mandates to use airpower against threats while protecting civilians, forced SOAT leadership to balance urgency with mission integrity. Success relied on leaders' ability to flexibly interpret and align both Afghan and allied aims, ensuring that ground actions supported overarching objectives, like regional stability and partner force legitimacy.

Thus, the joint force's counterattack highlights the need for flexible chains of command, enabling on-ground leaders to make adjustments while staying aligned with overarching goals. It also underscores the importance of ethical frameworks that incorporate proportionality and civilian safety into operational doctrine. Continuous learning is essential, with lesson-identified processes aimed at refining the dialog between strategic and tactical echelons [23].

### **2.3 Prioritizing capability development over immediate operational success**

The Norwegian SOF approach prioritized long-term capability development over short-term wins to ensure strategic patience in NATO and enhance the counterterrorism capacity of CRU 222, focusing on their organizational integrity and self-reliance [24]. This required continuous leadership development, training both Norwegian and host nation commanders to make autonomous decisions under pressure, as demonstrated during the 2017 HKIA attack when CRU 222 and SOAT neutralized the threat with minimal guidance from higher headquarters. It also involved mastering staff functions and building skills in intelligence analysis, logistics, and interagency coordination to ensure operational sustainability. Key elements of this approach include:

*Warrior culture.* A unified, mission-focused ethos was crucial to the effectiveness of both the Norwegian SOF and CRU 222 [25]. The SOAT cultivated a culture of initiative and camaraderie, which was evident during the HKIA attack when the joint force improvised their tactics to breach terrorist-held buildings. Shared experiences from high-risk operations prepared the joint force for the complexities of urban counterterrorism, fostering resilience and reducing reliance on external guidance. Ethical discipline was also prioritized, emphasizing civilian protection even in moments of tactical urgency to maintain community trust, a crucial lesson reinforced by the U.S. airstrike misfire. This cohesion fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among team members, which are vital for sustaining effectiveness in high-pressure situations.

*Local integration as a force multiplier.* CRU 222's deep understanding of Kabul's urban terrain and social dynamics played a significant role in minimizing civilian casualties during the operation. For instance, the joint force's engagement with local leaders amplified intelligence networks, as seen in the 2017 HKIA attack, where tips

from residents were crucial. This local integration functioned as a key force multiplier, allowing the unit to employ culturally informed tactics that resonated with the community. Such familiarity not only enhanced operational effectiveness but also reinforced the legitimacy of the force in the eyes of the local population, a crucial element in prioritizing long-term development over short-term wins.

*Balancing external support.* While external support, particularly from U.S. air assets, provided tactical advantages, it also underscored the inherent long-term risks associated with reliance on foreign military capabilities. The collateral damage associated with airstrikes highlighted the necessity for precision in ground operations. CRU 222's ability to conduct effective ground maneuvers demonstrated how partner forces can mitigate the risks of dependence on external firepower, thereby fostering a more sustainable model of security.

*The sustainability paradox.* The operational success of CRU 222 in 2017 illustrated that capability development can enhance agility and effectiveness, even in challenging urban environments. However, the unit's eventual dissolution following the Taliban's resurgence in 2021 starkly revealed the limitations of such an approach when divorced from stable governance and sustained international commitment. The gains achieved through military assistance were ultimately undermined by geopolitical abandonment, emphasizing that institutional resilience cannot be taken for granted.

In sum, the lessons learned from the operational successes and subsequent challenges faced by CRU 222 and the SOAT serve as a reminder of the need for ongoing commitment and support from the international community to ensure the long-term viability of MA initiatives and the prosperity of the local forces involved [26].

### **3. Broader lessons for future counterterrorism efforts**

The 2017 HKIA attack offers critical insights for refining global counterterrorism strategies, extending beyond Afghanistan's borders. First, effective counterterrorism demands leaders capable of rapid, ethical decision-making in chaotic environments. The joint force's ability to pivot tactics during the attack—eschewing airstrikes for ground-level precision—highlighted the necessity of training that prioritizes moral courage alongside tactical skill. Second, robust communication networks and decentralized command structures proved vital when higher headquarters' guidance faltered. Investing in realistic training and fostering a culture of shared purpose ensures operational teams remain resilient and mission-focused [27]. Third, cultivating a culture of accountability and mission focus, evident in the SOAT/CRU 222 partnership, strengthens team cohesion, enabling forces to endure prolonged operations.

These operational lessons yield four policy recommendations. First, operational agility must be embedded into MA programs through advisor training and feedback loops involving local partners, such as community leaders and diplomats. Regular evaluations should assess how well tactics align with socio-political realities, as seen in CRU 222's reliance on local informants. Second, adaptability must be institutionalized through police/military exercises that simulate ambiguity, such as urban sieges with civilian presence. These drills should emphasize creative problem-solving and decentralized decision-making, mirroring the joint force's improvised tactics during the HKIA attack. Third, fostering local ownership and self-reliance is crucial; partner forces need to be equipped to conduct effective ground maneuvers independently, thereby reducing their reliance on external firepower. This entails ensuring that local forces have access to necessary resources, such as weapons, ammunition, and

equipment, which might involve investing in local production or procurement channels. Fourth, strategic objectives must be translated into actionable plans with clear performance standards, including partner force autonomy and the trust of the international community. These plans should be reviewed biannually to prevent mission drift.

## 4. Conclusion

The 2017 high-profile attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), resolved through the collaborative efforts of Afghan Crisis Response Unit 222 (CRU 222) and the Norwegian Special Operations Advisory Team (SOAT), serves as both a validation of effective host nation capacity building through military assistance (MA) efforts and a cautionary tale about the fragility of progress in unstable political contexts. The HKIA attack underscores three interconnected pillars for successful counterterrorism partnerships.

First, collaborative relationships rooted in trust and cultural sensitivity are essential. Norway's CRU 222 partnership demonstrated that trust is forged through shared risk and respect for the ability of host nation individuals to act independently and make their own choices. By integrating special operations forces (SOF) advisors into Afghan structures and emphasizing cultural sensitivity, the Norwegians avoided the pitfalls of being seen as imposing external frameworks. This approach allowed CRU 222 to transition from a dependent unit to a self-sufficient force. This trust proved critical during the HKIA attack, where decentralized decision-making and mutual respect allowed rapid adaptation to terrorist tactics.

Second, adaptability serves as a bridge between strategy and tactics. The HKIA attack revealed the inherent tension between strategic mandates, such as civilian protection, and tactical realities, such as the challenges of urban combat. The SOAT/CRU 222 joint force's ability to adjust established procedures while balancing proportionality highlighted the need for operational flexibility. Future MA programs must institutionalize training that empowers tactical forces to interact with allies and partners dynamically, as rigid adherence to centralized command structures risks mission failure.

Third, capability development amid systemic fragility is crucial. While Norway's MA model successfully transformed CRU 222 into a self-sufficient unit, its collapse in 2021 exposed the limits of MA initiatives without political scaffolding. Sustainable capability requires pairing tactical proficiency, such as warrant-driven operations, with investments in governance and community legitimacy. The 2017 HKIA attack's legacy is clear: Partner forces can achieve tactical brilliance, but enduring security demands systemic stability.

*A path forward.* Future MA efforts must prioritize operational agility, with advisors who understand local power dynamics and foster community trust. Ethical knowledge is essential, integrating the principles of proportionality and distinction into partnered operations while emphasizing legal considerations to ensure compliance with both international law and the laws of the host nation. Additionally, strategic patience is required, aligning MA with long-term governance-building to prevent hard-won gains from unraveling. Norwegian SOF's CRU 222 experience challenges military leaders and political decision-makers to rethink counterterrorism, not as a quick fix, but as a generational project rooted in partnership, adaptability, and systemic resilience. The fight against terrorism is not won with drones or checkpoints but through the slow, unglamorous work of building institutions that outlast geopolitical winds.

## **Acknowledgements**

This study would not have been possible without the support and funding from the Norwegian Defense University College and the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy. I extend my deepest gratitude and respect to the men and women of CRU 222, the coalition partners, and the various NATO personnel involved in the Norwegian special operations forces' effort in Afghanistan. I would also like to acknowledge Kjetil Mellingen and Richard Røsjorde, whose insights as subject matter experts were invaluable to this study.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **Generative AI disclosure**

When preparing this work, the corresponding author used Avidnote to refine the text. Following this, the author edited the content, assuming full responsibility for the chapter's final content.

## **Other declarations**

The author had direct operational involvement with the SOAT mentoring CRU 222 during the 2017 terrorist attack on HKIA. To ensure analytical depth and accuracy, the author consulted key personnel involved in the operation, corroborating perspectives across institutional boundaries. Data were collected through document analysis (e.g., academic assessments, media reports), facilitating an in-depth understanding of the case. Proactive steps were taken to mitigate bias, including peer debriefs with colleagues and iterative validation of interpretations against raw data.

## **Author details**

Jostein Mattingsdal

Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, Leadership and Seapower Department, Norwegian Defense University College, Bergen, Norway

\*Address all correspondence to: [jomattingsdal@mil.no](mailto:jomattingsdal@mil.no)

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] McKirdy E, Allen K, Browne R. Mattis Target of Failed Kabul Airport Rocket Attack, Taliban Says. Atlanta, Georgia, USA: CNN; 2017. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/26/politics/mattis-afghanistan/index.html> [Accessed: February 27, 2025]
- [2] Johnsen N. Norwegian Special Forces in Afghanistan: Those we Fight against, Fight to the Death. Oslo, Norway: VG; 2021. Available from: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/i/yvMbqx/norske-spesialsoldater-i-afghanistan-de-vi-slaass-mot-kjemper-til-doeden> [Accessed: February 27, 2025]
- [3] Davies P. Antiterrorism assistance program: Preventing the spread of terrorism worldwide. 2017. Available from: <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/antiterrorism-assistance-program/> [Accessed: March 05, 2025]
- [4] Arstad S. Defied the rain of grenades in Kabul. 2017. Available from: <https://www.forsvaretsforum.no/afghanistan-krigsmedaljen-marinejegerkommandoen/trosset-granatregnet-i-kabul/123625> [Accessed: February 27, 2025]
- [5] Mackenzie J. Militants Attack Kabul Airport during Mattis Visit, U.S. Strike Hits Civilians. London, United Kingdom: Reuters; 2017. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/militants-attack-kabul-airport-during-mattis-visit-us-strike-hits-civilians-idUSKCN1C20RD/> [Accessed: February 27, 2025]
- [6] AJMN. Anger in Kabul after US air raid wounds civilians. 2017. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/9/28/anger-in-kabul-after-us-air-raid-wounds-civilians> [Accessed: February 28, 2025]
- [7] Bentzrød S. It Started with a Shower of Grenades. With Jens Stoltenberg in Town, 14 Norwegian Soldiers Fought off an IS Attack on the Airport. Oslo, Norway: Aftenposten - Schibsted; 2020
- [8] Sandstøl M. Led Norwegian and Afghan Forces during Terrorist Attacks in Kabul: I Thought it Was over. Bryne, Norway: Jaerbladet; 2020. Available from: <https://www.jbl.no/jostein-40-ledet-militare-styrker-under-terrorangrep-i-kabul-jeg-tenkte-at-naer-det-slutt/f/5-103-459414> [Accessed: March 04, 2025]
- [9] NATO. RS Security Force Assistance Guide 3.1. Vol. 3.1. Kabul: International Security Assistance Force/United States Forces-Afghanistan; 2014
- [10] Solomon Amiara A. America and the global war on terrorism: Explaining the past and determining the future. In: Aslam MM, Gunaratna R, editors. Global War on Terrorism - Revisited. London, UK, Rijeka: IntechOpen; 2024
- [11] Cocq CC. Conclusion. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland; 2024. pp. 379-393
- [12] Gray CS. Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion. MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, USA: JSOU Press; 2015
- [13] NATO. AJP-3.5 Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations Edition B. Vol. 1. Brussels, Belgium: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; 2019
- [14] NATO. NATO Special Operations Forces Military Assistance Handbook. Mons, Belgium: NATO Special Operations Headquarters, SHAPE; 2015

- [15] Maugesten HM. The Special Forces' Recipe for Success That Attracts Attention Abroad. Oslo, Norway; 2021. Available from: <https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/aktuelt/spesialstyrkenes-suksessoppskrift> [Accessed: March 07, 2025]
- [16] Melien TJ. Our Secret Soldiers: Norwegian Special Forces 1940-2012. Oslo: Spartacus; 2012
- [17] Røsjorde R. Marinejegerkommandoen's ability to provide military advice. In: Crisis Response Unit 222 Special Operations Advisory Team in Afghanistan, 2015-2018. Bergen, Norway: BORA; 2019
- [18] Godal BT et al. A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001-2014. Oslo, Norway; 2016
- [19] Veum E. Norwegian Major General: "They Are our Brothers in Arms". Oslo, Norway; 2021. Available from: [https://www.nrk.no/urix/\\_-elitesoldatene-i-afghanistan-er-vare-vapenbrodre-1.15627805](https://www.nrk.no/urix/_-elitesoldatene-i-afghanistan-er-vare-vapenbrodre-1.15627805) [Accessed: March 07, 2025]
- [20] Arney DC, Arney K. Modeling insurgency, counter-insurgency, and coalition strategies and operations. The Journal of Defense Modeling and Simulation. 2013;**10**(1):57-73
- [21] The Protocols are International Treaties. Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I). Switzerland: International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva; 1977
- [22] Stanar D, Tonn K. The Ethics of Urban Warfare: City and War. Vol. 10. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill; 2022
- [23] Dyson T. The military as a learning organisation: Establishing the fundamentals of best-practice in lessons-learned. Defence Studies. 2019;**19**(2):107-129
- [24] Hedenstrom A, Kristiansen M. NORSOF Military Assistance Capability Development. Monterey, California, USA: Calhoun; 2016
- [25] Danielsen T. Making Warriors in a Global Era. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield; 2018
- [26] Sobchak FK. Training for victory: U.S. special forces advisory operations from El Salvador to Afghanistan. In: Transforming War. 1st ed. Annapolis, Maryland, USA: Naval Institute Press; 2024
- [27] Eid J et al. Developing local crisis leadership – A research and training agenda. Frontiers in Psychology. 2023;**14**:1-9

---

### Section 3

# Ideology, Political Narratives, and Regional Transformations

---



# The Ideological and Political Transformation of Contemporary Islamic Groups: Toward a New Model of Understanding HTS's Ideological and Political Transition

*Emad Al-Hammadin*

## Abstract

This study examines whether contemporary Islamic groups' ideological and political transformation reflects authentic moderation or strategic adaptation. The study employed a framework synthesizing social movement theory, resource dependency theory, and rational choice approaches. The research argues that ideological change is mediated by leadership agency, which navigates four interdependent variables: objectives, resource dependency, ideological flexibility, and political context. Focusing on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria—a former al-Qaeda affiliate now governing parts of northwestern Syria—the analysis extends to comparative cases, including the Taliban, Egypt's Islamic Group (IG), and Islamic Jihad (IJ). Through qualitative case study analysis, process tracing, and discourse examination of manifestos, sermons, and historical records, the research reveals that groups like HTS and the Taliban leverage leadership decisions to prioritize governance and survival, distancing themselves from rigid ideologies, while retaining legitimacy. In contrast, movements like IJ and IG reject such compromises, underscoring leadership's pivotal role in mediating structural constraints. The findings challenge binary narratives of “moderation versus deception,” demonstrating instead that ideological transformation is a fluid, context-driven process shaped by localized objectives (e.g., territorial control vs. revolution), resource environments (e.g., foreign patronage vs. grassroots support), and political landscapes (e.g., civil war vs. authoritarianism). By integrating agency-centered and structural theories, the study advances a novel framework for analyzing ideological evolution in militant groups, contributing to debates on deradicalization, post-conflict governance, and counterterrorism policy. It concludes that sustainable ideological change hinges on leaders' ability to reconcile doctrinal legacies with pragmatic governance demands—a dynamic critical for policymakers engaging with hybrid actors transitioning from insurgency to statehood.

**Keywords:** ideological transformation, leadership agency, Hay'at Tahrir al-sham (HTS), Taliban, deradicalization, strategic adaptation, counterterrorism policy

## 1. Introduction

The ideological and political transformation of contemporary Islamic groups, particularly those transitioning from transnational Jihadism to localized governance, remains a critical yet contested area of study in conflict research, political sciences, and sociology. While deradicalization efforts have been documented in a context such as Egypt (Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad), the Syrian case of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) presents a paradoxical phenomenon. HTS was once a terrorist group rooted within the Al-Qaida network. Now HTS has control over Syrian territory after it surprisingly ousted the Syrian regime and its allies, including Iran and Russia. This transformation has ignited debates among scholars and policymakers: Can militant groups rooted in transnational Jihadism authentically moderate their ideology when governing territory, or are such shifts merely strategic adaptations to secure survival, legitimacy, and resources? Addressing this question is pivotal to understanding the authenticity of ideological change and its implications for conflict resolution, counterterrorism, and post-war governance.

The study argues that the ideological transformation of contemporary Islamic groups is shaped by the dynamic interplay of four dependent variables—*objectives*, *resource dependency*, *ideological flexibility*, and *political context*—alongside one mediating factor: leadership agency. Drawing on organizational, political, and sociological theories, this framework illustrates how leadership navigates structural constraints to realign group ideology and strategy in pursuit of evolving goals. Rational choice theory (RCT) complements this framework by explaining why groups like HTS choose to prioritize survival over ideological purity, while other groups like ISIS reject such trade-offs.

This study proposes a new framework combining social movement theory (how groups mobilize for change), conflict studies (how conflicts evolve), strategic agency (how groups make deliberate choices), and rational choice theory (how actions align with goals) to explain ideological transformation. It compares cases from Salafi-Jihadi groups such as Egypt's Islamic Group (IG) and Islamic Jihad (IJ) that underwent a deradicalization process, to locally oriented Jihadi groups such as the Taliban. The Taliban and HTS represented exceptional cases: While both HTS and the Taliban were at different points aligned with al-Qaida, the Taliban's original ideology was distinct, and only later, post-1996, came under AQ influence—an affiliation both groups eventually distanced themselves from. Additionally, both managed to run a country, though in the case of the Taliban, it was during their second iteration post-2021. Finally, the study challenges binary narratives of "moderation" versus "deception," instead revealing ideological transformation as a fluid, context-driven process.

The chapter employs qualitative case study analysis methodologically, combining process tracing of ideological discourse, including media interviews, manifestos, and sermons, with historical-institutional analysis of shifting political and resource environments. The Syrian case study of HTS serves as a focal point, contextualized against broader patterns observed in Egypt and Afghanistan.

The chapter is structured into four sections. It begins with a review of existing literature on Islamic group ideological and political transformation, identifying gaps in the mobility of leadership agency and structural interdependencies. This section discusses why Islamic groups evolve and transform and the factors influencing this process. The next section presents the theoretical framework, integrating RCT to explain strategic decision-making and resource dependency theory to unpack material constraints. Following this, the chapter categorizes transformative groups into

three typologies—localized liberation movements, Takfiri-Jihadi<sup>1</sup> groups, and proxy actors—illustrating how each type navigates ideological adaptation. The concluding section applies this framework to the HTS case, analyzing how a leadership agency mediates territorial governance demands and ideological legacies.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The evolution of the contemporary Islamic group

Studies of the rise of contemporary Islamic movements in the Middle East and of Islamic ideologies in the twentieth and twenty first centuries emphasize the interplay of historical, political, and socioeconomic factors. Fadi Hyilani [1] asserts that the Islamic group emerged soon after the Arab countries gained independence from colonization powers and following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire [1]. He suggested that the rise of Islamic groups was a consequence of the failure of Arab secular and nationalist regimes to establish truly sovereign and independent states [1]. By addressing these gaps left by the governments, these movements transcend their spiritual mandates to become socially and politically accepted actors, enabling them to rise as viable political alternatives [2].

Critically, these movements leveraged socioeconomic grievances to build legitimacy. As Asef Bayat [3] notes, Islamist groups in Egypt, Turkey, and Algeria filled gaps in education, health care, and welfare functions neglected by brittle secular states [3]. This “social service Islamism” not only expanded their grassroots appeal but also established their role as political actors. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for example, emerged as a hybrid entity blending religious revivalism with anti-imperialist nationalism; this also was witnessed with groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

The absence of government services in marginalized communities and impoverished areas is not the sole reason Islamic movements gained a foothold and support, as they have gained popularity in rich and wealthy cities as well [4]. Their ability to fully replace government depends largely on their capacity to articulate a comprehensible ideological framework that resonates with the people. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood strategically merged its political discourse with theological concepts like *ḥākimiyyah* (divine sovereignty) and *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal) [5].

The emergence of the Islamic movements and their rise in their popularity among people were met with resistance from governments, such as in the case of the Jihadi movement and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic movement in Algeria, Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (notably in the late 1982 crackdown), and more recently the Syrian revolt [6]. The hardline approach adopted by state regimes to confront these movements has entrenched them in ideology and forced them to become violent extremist groups [7]. Others have escaped the oppression of governments and formed their groups in alternative parts of the world, such as Al-Qaida.

The Jihadi movement builds its legitimacy on the alleged necessity that every Muslim has to confront what is deemed as “pre-Islamic ignorance” (*Jahiliya*). Also, a religious duty to “rebel against rulers of disbelief” who are “Western puppets [8].” The Salafi-Jihadi groups do not recognize any form of change except that which comes

---

<sup>1</sup> Takfiri-Jihadi groups refer to militant Islamist organizations that practice takfir — the act of declaring other Muslims (or even non-Muslims) as “apostates” (kuffar, unbelievers) — to justify violence against them. This ideology is considered extreme and rejected by mainstream Muslims and Islamic scholars.

through Jihad. In Jihadi literature and media communication, participating in parliamentary proceedings, democracy, or working in a public institution considers such secular activities as “deviant” acts [5]. During the time of Abu Musab AL Zarqawi, anyone who worked in such government capacity or did not rebel against them was considered “Kafir”<sup>2</sup> and should be killed [9].

Jihadist theorists, such as Abu Muhammad Almaqdisi, have long fixated on religious themes such as “rebellion against apostate rulers,” “combating occupation,” “the heresy of democracy,” and the rejection of man-made laws and constitutions. They also respond with religious narrative to delegitimized religious scholars aligned with state power, labeling them as scholars of the sultan “(*fuqaha al-salatin*).” To recruit followers, they promote ideologies rooted in Islamic tradition, making them nonnegotiable, strongly appealing to the public, and difficult to reject [8]. This dogmatic approach, derived from Salafist traditions, reinforces ideological cohesion and ensures unwavering commitment among adherents.

However, recent years have witnessed a notable shift in the rigidity of Jihadist discourse. A new Jihadist theory has started to engage with terms such as “freedom,” “coexistence,” “political participation,” and “constitutional governance” as well as themes such as “Shura (consultation)” and the “right of the people to elect or depose rulers” [10]. Even Ayman Alzawahri, in his eleven messages to the revolutionary movement in Egypt—entitled *The Messages of Hope and Glad Tidings to our people in Egypt*—has adopted more moderate discourse, which was enough for ISIS to accuse him of Kufuor [10]. These transformations in Jihadi discourse do not necessarily indicate a change in ideology; however, they have led to the fading of classical Jihadi terms such as “rebellion,” and “the triumph group.” Even at the level of the classical language of traditional Jihadi theorists’ language, these terms have gradually been replaced in recent years by more moderate alternatives.

## 2.2 Contemporary Islamic movement classification

To support the central argument of this study, the theoretical framework employed integrates social movement theory with conflict theory—referred to here as the integrated social movement–conflict theory approach—to explain the transformation of contemporary Islamic movements. The following sections examine examples of intellectual and ideological transformation, classifying militant groups into three categories:

*First category* consists of groups with Salafi-Jihadi orientation that pursue the establishment of a religious state or *Caliphate*. This includes *Takfiri* groups focused on Global Jihad, who reject the legitimacy of borders or local states. Examples of this category include Al-Qaida and its affiliate branches, ISIS, and the Islamic Jihad group in Egypt. This study suggests that such organizations generally achieved limited success in ideological transformation, and this kind of transformation tends to occur only under significant military and security pressure (see **Table 1**, category 1).

*The second category* includes liberation-oriented Jihadist movements, or localized jihad, which aim to resist colonialism, tyranny, or occupation with the explicit goal of liberating a specific population. While these groups employed Jihadist tactics,

<sup>2</sup> The term Kafir (Arabic: كافر, plural: Kuffār كُفَّار or Kāfirūn كَافِرُونَ) is an Arabic and Islamic theological term with a complex meaning and significant weight. Its core meaning is rooted in the concept of disbelief or rejection, specifically regarding the fundamental tenets of Islam.

| Category                                      | Integrated Social Movement-Conflict Analysis                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Salafi-Jihadi Groups (groups of Global Jihad) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Universalist framing + decentralized networks → Ideological rigidity.</li><li>• Deradicalization tends to only occur under extreme pressure; for example, both the Jihad Islamic group in Egypt and the Islamic group underwent deradicalization while under security pressure and in prison settings.</li></ul> |
| Liberation-Oriented                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rooted in local grievances → Flexible framing.</li><li>• Can shift from violence to politics if opportunities arise (e.g., Hamas participating in elections, Taliban governing Afghanistan, HTS Syria).</li></ul>                                                                                                |
| State-Sponsored                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Geopolitical tools → Goals mirror patron states (e.g., Houthis opposing Saudi Arabia).</li><li>• Little ideological agency; transformation depends on the sponsor's interests.</li></ul>                                                                                                                         |

**Table 1.**  
*Classification of contemporary Islamic movement.*

their objectives are geographically and politically bounded, distinguishing them from the transnational Salafist-Jihadi movement. Groups in this this category include the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Taliban, Hamas, and HTS in Syria (**Table 1** Category 2).

The *third category* consists of militia movements backed by external state sponsors or operating as proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi movement in Yemen. This category, however, falls outside the scope of this study (Table Category 3). It is important to emphasize that this categorization, proposed by the author of this study, serves as a heuristic framework to facilitate the analysis of militant group transformation.

### 2.3 Salafi-Jihadi groups (groups of Global Jihad)

#### 2.3.1 Egypt's Islamic group (*al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*) and Islamic Jihad (*al-Jihad*)

An example of groups that underwent a deradicalization process include Islamic Group (IG) and Islamic Jihad (IJ). While IG operates within Egypt, its *objectives* are universal and align with of Al-Qaida. Some IG members participated in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat in 1981. Between 1992 and 1997 IG led a guerrilla war against Egyptian law enforcement and also plotted to assassinate the late President Mubarak [11].

In 1997, the IG announced a ceasefire with the Egyptian government, which followed by deradicalization process or what was referred to as an intellectual review [12]. In 2002, the group's intellectual revision produced 24,000 texts in support of its argument for ideological transformation, using a narrative based on Islamic jurisprudence. Two of these publications criticized Al-Qaida and its leadership [13]. The leadership of IG played a significant role in convincing its followers of the importance of this transformation in maintaining the objectives of the group. Omar Ashour asserts that the process of deradicalization of IG was successfully redirected 15,000 Al-Qaida sympathizers toward nonviolent activism [14]. Rational choice theory (RCT) suggests that this kind of intellectual review is a rational choice

to minimize the loss and maintain the main objectives of IG; without it the group risked dissolution [15]. Ashour applies RCT to explain IG's ceasefire and ideological revisions, arguing that the group's leadership rationally chose moderation to avoid annihilation by the Egyptian state (p. 74). He notes "The Islamic Group's leadership framed deradicalization as a survival strategy, leveraging religious reinterpretations to justify pragmatism while retaining core objectives" [13].

However, in terms of success or not, it has been noticed that this revision occurred under the pressure of law enforcement and in a prison setting. Many scholars affirm that under these circumstances, this transformation may not be genuine [13, 16].

In contrast, the Islamic Jihad (IJ) organization, the former group of Ayman al-Zawahiri, underwent a deradicalization process under conditions similar to those of IG, yet it was not successful [16]. Its former Amir, Dr. Sayyed Imam Sharif, led the group's intellectual revision and authored two significant titles, "*The Document of Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the Muslim World*" (ملاءالاورصم في يداهجاللمعلا ديشرت) and "*Expose*" (هيعرعتلا) [5]. However, his leadership failed to persuade the group to abandon terrorism. Ashour affirms that the ideological transformation of IJ was ultimately unsuccessful [13]. He offers limited contextual or rational explanation as to why the IG's transformation succeeded under the same circumstances while IJ's did not. RCT suggests that what constitutes a rational choice for one group may not be rational for another, as circumstances and calculations may differ.

Ibrahim 2017 positing that strategic cost-benefit calculation—such as the Islamic Group's recognition of unsustainable losses versus Islamic Jihad's fragmented leadership—help explain the disparity in outcomes [17].

IG has relied on religious endowment (Waqif), an income from mosques, charitable institutions, and wealthy individuals in Egypt. Although there are no precise statistics on these sources of income, the Egyptian government sought to cut off this funding, leading to a shortage of resources. While it is not certain that this shortage directly triggered the group's ideological revision. When resource scarcity is combined with other pressures, it may prompt a rational choice aimed at ensuring the group's survival. Wickham documents how Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, historically relied on mosque networks, Islamic charities, and waqf (religious endowments) for financial support [18]. Similarly, Sullivan [19] highlights how Islamic social institutions—particularly those tied to the Muslim Brotherhood—were financed through private donations and religious endowments. A more significant explanation by Ibrahim is that the extent of change and transformation within a group depends on its leaders' and religious theorists' ability to shift static religious terms from their rigid interpretations to more flexible ones. This Ibrahim affirms is where IG succeeded—while IJ did not [16, 17].

Tammam [20] argues that many Islamic groups suffer from a weak intellectual and ideological foundation. He attributes this flaw primarily to their theorists and leaders, whose decisions may eventually lead the group to adopt ineffective strategies that fail to meet its objectives [20]. According to Husam, the turning point occurs when the group's ability to continue is undermined by a significant political and military defeat, compelling it to reassess its approach. However, Hussam contends that extremist groups undertake intellectual review and ideological transformation only under pressure; otherwise, they are unlikely to engage in deradicalization. In contrast to Ibrahim, who emphasizes the importance of socioeconomic and political contexts in prompting groups to reconsider their ideological narratives, Hussam suggests that only a hard approach can compel such revision.

Hizb Tahrir, on the other hand, argues that these intellectual reviews reveal weaknesses in the ideological foundations and methodologies of the groups. The success of such transformations, according to Hizb ut-Tahrir, is not due to the groups themselves but to the actions of the ruling regime, which uses coercion and political inclusion to divert them from their original goals.

### 3. Islamic group in Algeria

The Islamic Group movements in Algeria offer a compelling example of how the interaction between political context, military pressure, ideological fragmentation, and the cost-benefit calculation may trigger intellectual review and the deradicalization process. In 1992, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of the parliamentary elections; however, the army overturned the results, forcing the group underground and into a decade-long conflict with the government, culminating in the deaths of more than 20,000 persons [21]. Classifying such groups as either Global Jihadists or local liberation movements is not always straightforward. The FIS initially emerged as a social movement that aimed at compensating for the absence of the state. However, once it was driven underground, it fragmented into different factions, many of which adopted the ideology of Salafi-Jihadist groups. This ideology justified the indiscriminate killing of individuals as long as they were not seen as supporting the group [22].

From an RCT perspective, the FIS's decision to engage in the political process and participate in the parliament can be understood as a strategic move to capitalize on its popular support. However, this decision came after intense internal debate between its two key leaders—Abbasi Madani, who favored political engagement, and Ali Belhadj, the group's prominent figure—over whether to join the elections. This debate suggests that the group may have always had broader political aspirations, which the Salafi-Jihadist ideology has previously constrained [18].

The group's transformation is ideologically similar to that of Egypt's Islamic Group: it occurred under the combined pressure of law enforcement, declining public support, resource limitations, and the desire to preserve the group's core values. What distinguishes the transformation of FIS is the political context that followed the reconciliation process initiated by then-President Bouteflika, who granted pardons and fostered an atmosphere of renewed nationalism [23].

*In summary*, Global Jihadist groups such as the Islamic Group (IG), the Islamic Jihad (IJ) group in Egypt, and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria underwent only superficial ideological transformations, despite having led IG and FIS in particular, having laid down arms. These shifts were not the result of genuine internal reform, but were driven by government pressure, loss of public support, and a lack of resources [24].

Unlike the liberation movements, Salafi-Jihadist groups such as IG, IJ, and FIS were not fighting against foreign occupation or tyranny. Their objectives were rooted in a broader Global Jihadist struggle, as evidenced by their alignment with Al-Qaida. Moreover, the ideological flexibility of IG, IJ, and FIS in Algeria was largely conducted under government patronage, rather than authentic internal assessment.

In the case of IG leadership played a more active role in pressuring followers and mediating between government demands and group objectives. By contrast, leadership in IJ and FIS was more fragmented. For all three groups, however, the loss of *resources*—such as public support, funding, and weapons—had a more significant

impact on their intellectual review than any deliberate ideological transformation. As previously noted, these shifts often occurred in prison or under severe losses of manpower and financial support. Numerous studies suggest that these reviews were primarily intended to alleviate state pressure, and many of those supposedly reformed later merged with other Global Jihadist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS [10, 20, 25].

### **3.1 Liberation-oriented Jihadist movements or localized Jihadist groups**

If we consider the Taliban beyond its usual classification as a terrorist group, it may serve as an example of a local Jihadist-liberation movement that illustrates the dynamic interplay of objectives, political context, resource dependency, ideological flexibility, and leadership agency in ensuring a group's survival and pursuit of its objectives. As discussed earlier in this study, alongside HTS, the Taliban stands as one of only two Islamist groups in the modern era that has successfully governed a state, despite its ideological roots in the Al-Qaida network.

### **3.2 Objectives: From liberation to Global Jihad and Back**

During its initial phase, the Taliban succeeded in revolting against the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime in 1993, a government widely accused of corruption and oppression. The group's early objectives, rooted in Pashtun nationalism and Islamic governance, aligned with the moderate jurisprudence of the Hanafi school [26]. Traditionally, the Taliban adheres to the Hanafi madhhab, a school of Islamic thought that is considered less rigid than Wahhabism. However, the Al-Qaida leaders and members who came from Arab countries had a tremendous impact on the ideology of the Taliban, steering it toward Al-Qaida's traditional Jihadist framework during its initial phase [27].

Following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and two decades of war, the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American forces in 2021. The Taliban's second iteration demonstrates a comparatively more tolerant and less rigid posture than in 1993 [28]. The movement has adopted more localized objectives focusing on consolidating internal governance and seeking international recognition, while publicly denouncing ties to al-Qaeda. This shift may reflect lessons learned from prolonged warfare, evolving public sentiment, and the strategic reassessment of the Taliban's earlier governance model.

### **3.3 Political context: Exploiting grievances and power vacuum**

During Soviet occupation and its aftermath in the 1990s, the Taliban capitalized on public disillusionment with warlord rule, presenting itself as a Jihadi force capable of restoring order and ending oppression [26]. Later, during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban reframed its identity as a resistance movement against foreign occupation, leveraging Afghan resentment over civilian casualties and widespread corruption under the U.S.-backed government [29].

Currently, in the local context, the movement has adopted a marginally more tolerant stance toward minorities such as the Hazara and Shia [30]. It also permits cooperation with UN agencies. The Taliban has also softened its stance on education, allowing broader access—though controversially continuing to bar girls from schooling, which it claims is a temporary measure) [31]. Internationally, factions within

the Taliban now advocate for engagement with the global community, signaling of internal debates over governance and legitimacy.

### **3.4 Resource dependency**

In its early days with Al-Qaida, the Taliban relied on Arab donors and foreign fighters, which entrenched Wahhabi ideological influences. However, much of this external support diminished significantly in the aftermath of the U.S.-led War on Terror. As a result, the group was forced to depend on its internal legitimacy and financial support. It managed to diversify funding through local taxation, including border smuggling, trade, and rural Pashtun support—compensating for its earlier reliance on the transnational Jihadist network [32].

Today, the Taliban appears more open to cooperating with international humanitarian efforts, particularly those led by the United Nations. It has also softened its public rhetoric in an attempt to attract foreign aid and gain broader international recognition [31]. Efforts to combat the Islamic State (ISIS) within Afghanistan have been framed by the Taliban as part of this moderating shift, intended to signal a break from Global Jihadist extremism [33]. The ongoing need for resources and legitimacy may be contributing to internal debates and power struggles within the group, which in turn could influence its gradual ideological transformation.

## **4. Ideological flexibilities: Hanafi pragmatism versus Wahhabism rigidity**

As previously mentioned, the Taliban's adherence to the Hanafi tradition has allowed for greater flexibility in governance, in contrast to Al-Qaida's Salafi-Wahhabi ideology. The Taliban now exhibits a degree of pragmatism absent from its earlier iteration. For example, it consulted a prominent Muslim religious leader with a Muslim Brotherhood background to obtain a fatwa supporting negotiation with the Americans [34]. This stands in stark contrast to Al-Qaida's absolutist rejection of diplomacy. While the Taliban does not appear to have undergone a systematic deradicalization process, it has publicly denounced any connection with Al-Qaida or its ideology. The Taliban's evolution underscores the tension between ideological rigidity and pragmatic survivalism in Jihadist movements. While its human rights record remains deeply problematic, its tactical concessions—such as distancing from transnational terrorism and moderating certain policies—highlight the potential for localized Jihadist groups to adapt when confronted with the demands of governance.

### **4.1 Leadership agency: Strategic decision-making**

Mullah Omar led the Taliban from 1994 to 2013. Initially, a unifying figure, his decision to protect Bin Laden after 9/11—prioritizing ideological loyalty over political survival—may have seemed rational from his point of view; however, it ultimately led to the regime's collapse [35]. Despite this, the group remained loyal to him until his death. On the other hand, the new leader Haibatullah Akhundzada (2016–Present), has prioritized military consolidation and backchannel diplomacy, including the Doha Agreement [36]. Nevertheless, leadership factions continue to debate governance strategy: hardliners resist concessions, while pragmatists seek international legitimacy.

| Factor                  | First Iteration (1990s)          | al-Qaeda Era (2001–2021)      | Second Iteration (Post-2021)       |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Objectives              | Local liberation                 | Global Jihadist alignment     | Local governance & recognition     |
| Political Context       | Post-Soviet chaos                | U.S. occupation               | Post-withdrawal legitimacy crisis  |
| Resource Dependency     | Local taxation                   | Arab donors, opium trade      | International aid, formal taxation |
| Ideological Flexibility | Hanafi pragmatism                | Wahhabi rigidity              | Pragmatic Hanafi revival           |
| Leadership Agency       | Mullah Omar's decentralized rule | Omar's deference to Bin Laden | Akhundzada's balancing act         |

**Table 2.**  
*Taliban's transformation through the framework.*

*Summary of the Taliban case:* The political context that gave rise to the Taliban included widespread discontent with the Najibullah regime and the legacy of the Soviet invasion. The influences of Al-Qaida on the Taliban were undeniable, transforming the group before the 9/11 attack into a more globally oriented Jihadist movement (see **Table 2** below). While the original objective of the Taliban was national liberation, it gradually aligned itself with Al-Qaida's Global Jihad ideology. In terms of resources, the group was heavily dependent on Bin Laden and other wealthy Arab donors, which also shaped its ideological stance. Under the leadership of Mulla Mohammad Omar—who admired Bin Laden's charisma and influence—the Taliban maintained close ties with Al-Qaida.

In its second phase, the group appears more flexible in applying Sharia law. The political context—including public resentment toward coalition airstrikes, government corruption, and socioeconomic hardship—paved the way for the Taliban to garner public support. This support facilitated the group's ability to mobilize resources and sustain its fight against coalition forces for 2 decades. The integrated social movement–conflict theory model suggests that the interplay of these factors has contributed to the Taliban's more pragmatic stance on ideological and political affairs.

It is worth noting that a close study of ideological transformation reveals that the classification of armed Islamic movements into terrorist groups is not always accurate and often politically charged. The problem of conflating liberation movements resisting specific occupations with groups that indiscriminately kill civilians highlights the need for critical analysis. Generalizing such movements oversimplifies a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Instead, each case should be examined individually, analyzing its ideological affiliations, links to parent organizations and the nature of its ideological evolution.

#### 4.2 Comparing liberation-oriented Jihadist movements and Salafi-Jihadist groups

Drawing on the integrated social movement–conflict theory, the ideological transformation of Jihadist movements hinges on the interplay between objectives, political context, resource dependency, ideological flexibility, and leadership agency.

Salafi-Jihadi groups with universalist objectives aligned with Al-Qaida's Global Jihad—such as al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (IG), Egyptian Islamic Jihad (IJ), and the

Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria (after adopting Salafi-Jihadi positions in response to militarization)—tend to resist deradicalization due to their ideological rigidity. While they may demonstrate tactical pragmatism under state pressure, such as IG in Egypt, these shifts are often superficial and motivated by survival rather than sincere theological reform.

In contrast, groups with localized objectives, such as the Taliban, tend to display greater openness to change in exchange for achieving limited strategic goals. The Taliban have demonstrated a greater capacity for pragmatism and ideological adaptation. Their focus on national or regional enables them to pursue negotiated settlements or adjust strategies without appearing ideologically inconsistent to their base. Their shift from a Global Jihadist narrative to a more nationalist, survival-oriented agenda reflects a deeper ideological transformation—driven by changes in the international landscape and their desire to retain grassroots legitimacy.

Political context emerges as a critical variable, and Salafi-Jihadi groups often exploit transnational grievances but reject local political engagement, using ideology to justify terrorism while benefitting from the suffering of Muslim communities under occupation. Localized movements, by contrast, respond more directly to specific, locally experienced forms of oppression. This responsiveness helps them maintain social legitimacy and a clear constituency. Additionally, Global Jihadist groups often rely on unstable external support networks—foreign donors, smuggling, and illicit funding—all of which are vulnerable to disruption. Localized groups are more embedded within their communities and thus better positioned for long-term sustainability and political adaptability.

On ideological flexibility, the Jihadist groups often conduct ideological reviews under duress—typically in prison settings which compromises the authenticity of their transformation. In contrast, localized groups tend to evolve more organically, responding pragmatically to shifting local and international conditions.

Leadership agency also differs significantly in Global Jihadist movements such as IG and IJ, fragmented leadership has led to divergent outcomes in ideological transformation. In localized movements, leadership is more cohesive. While they may temporarily align with Global Jihadist goals, these groups tend to diverge when objectives conflict, prioritizing survival, and local legitimacy.

As summarized in **Table 3**, these distinctions underscore why some groups successfully undergo deradicalization, while others remain ideologically inflexible.

| Factor                  | Ideological transformation, deradicalization (Taliban) | Failed deradicalization (IJ/FIS)           |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Objectives              | Shifted from Global Jihad to local survival            | Retained universalist goals                |
| Political Context       | State coercion + selective reconciliation              | Coercion without political opportunity     |
| Resource Dependency     | Shifted to grassroots legitimacy                       | Relied on external/illicit networks        |
| Ideological Flexibility | Theological reinterpretation                           | Superficial revisions under duress         |
| Leadership Agency       | Unified, pragmatic leadership                          | Fragmented, ideologically rigid leadership |

**Table 3.**  
*Why some groups deradicalize and others not.*

The Taliban’s case illustrates how localized objectives, grassroots legitimacy, genuine theological reinterpretation, and unified leadership can foster ideological transformation. In contrast, the persistent failure of IJ and FIS to meaningfully adapt reflect the constraints of Global Jihadist ideology, unstable external support structures, and fragmented internal leadership.

5. Theoretical framework for classification of contemporary Islamic movements

As the hypothesis of this study suggests, the success of ideological transformation and the deradicalization process depends on the interplay of several variables, objectives, resource dependency, ideological flexibility, political context, and leadership as mediating factors (see **Figure 1** below).

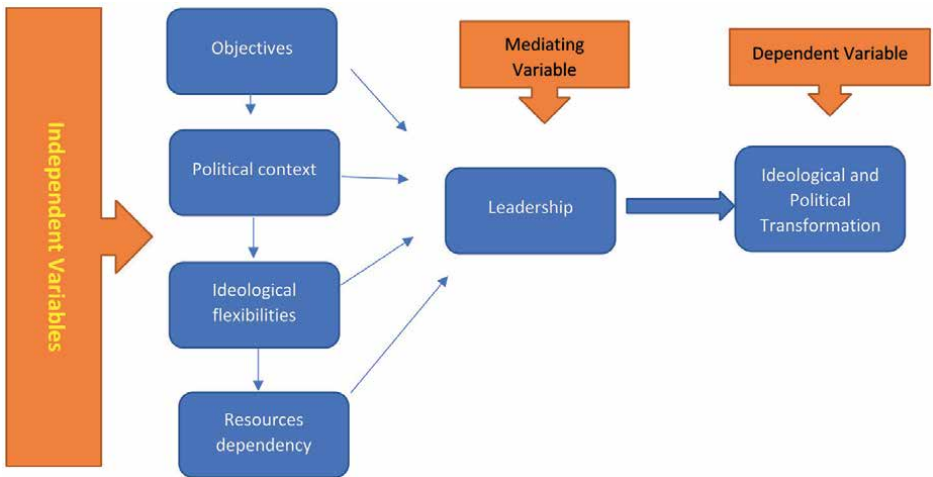
In this context, the theoretical framework used to understand the transformation of contemporary Islamic movements integrates social movement theory with conflict theory—referred to here as the integrated social movement–conflict theory.

5.1 What follows is an explanation of each factor and its theoretical foundations

- a. *Objectives* (universalist vs. localized) → Key theory: *Framing Theory* [37] + *Darrow’s Cosmopolitan vs. Rooted Movements* [38].

Groups are shaped by their objectives. *Framing theory*, as developed by Snow et al. [37] and Tarrow [38], suggests that groups articulate their objectives using three elements:

- *Diagnostic framing*—where problems are identified (e.g., the Syrian regime oppresses Sunnis).



**Figure 1.**  
*Integrated social movement–conflict theory.*

- *Prognostic framing*—the proposition of a solution. For example: “We must overthrow the Assad regime through coordinated armed resistance and establish a democratic government representing all Syrians.”
- *Motivational framing*—where action is inspired. For example, Motivational Frame: “Join the revolution! Defend your brothers and sisters! Victory or martyrdom – our sacrifice will free Syria from tyranny!”

Global Jihadi groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaida employ *cosmopolitan frames* such as the concept of a borderless caliphate. In contrast, localized Jihadi groups adopted *rooted frames* drawn from local grievances and contextual realities. For example, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) frames its objective as protecting Syrians from the Assad regime.

b. Resource Dependency (external sponsors, local support) → *Key Theory: Resource Mobilization Theory* [39, 40].

This perspective suggests that groups behavior is significantly influenced by the resources that they can access or mobilize to survive and grow. The origin of these resources—whether internal or external—affects strategic choices [39].

- *Category 1: Transnational Salafi-Jihadi Groups* (e.g., ISIS, Al-Qaida) rely on ideological networks for recruitment, online engagement, and diaspora funding. Their survival depends on maintaining ideological purity and a global agenda. These groups are rigid, with limited flexibility, unless faced with existential threats.
- *Category 2: Localized Jihadi Groups*: (e.g., The Taliban) rely heavily on local communities for resources and legitimacy. This dependency compels them to align more closely with local needs, enabling potential for deradicalization when their legitimacy is at risk.
- *Category 3 State-sponsored militias* (Category 3, **Table 1**): such groups rely on external patrons such as Iran-backed Hezbollah. Their goals align with their sponsor’s geopolitical interests, not grassroots ideology, making them resistant to internal transformation.

c. *Ideological Flexibility* → *Key Theory: Wiktorowicz’s Ideological Commitment* [41] and *Sage’s Network Theory* [42].

Global Salafi-Jihadi groups view their struggle as divinely mandated, rejecting negotiation or ideological evaluation. Their decentralized structure such as in ISIS provinces amplifies ideological consistency and encourages local cells to compete in demonstrating ideological “purity.” These Takfiri groups, which include Al-Qaida and Islamic Jihad in Egypt, focus on Global Jihad and disregard national boundaries or political participation. This study suggests that such organizations often achieve limited success in ideological transformation, and that this kind of transformation only occurs under military and security pressure.

Conversely, *liberation-oriented groups* focus on attainable objectives such as expelling foreign forces. Their more hierarchical structure (e.g., Hamas's political and military wings) allows leadership to negotiate or moderate tactics without alienating their base.

d. *Political Context* → *Tilly's contentious politics* [43].

The broader political environment determines whether groups choose negotiation or violence. Global Jihadi groups reject the legitimacy of the state over Sharia law and view participation in parliamentary or secular politics as *haram* (forbidden). Localized groups, by contrast, operate within more fluid political spaces, where bargaining is feasible—for instance, the Taliban's engaging with the U.S. post-2020.

State-sponsored groups, such as the Houthis, serve as instruments of foreign policy for their patrons—underscoring Clausewitz's maxim that “war is the continuation of politics by other means” [44]. Their behavior aligns with external geopolitical strategies rather than local sociopolitical dynamics. This strategic dependency often limits their ideological or operational flexibility, making them less susceptible to deradicalization initiatives or local negotiations.

e. *Leadership* → *Key Theory: Strategic Agency Theory* [45].

Leadership is a critical but often underexamined variable in understanding militant groups' strategic and ideological trajectories. Strategic agency theory posits that leaders balance ideological purity with pragmatic concerns for group survival. Leadership shapes how groups navigate their objectives, resource dependencies, ideological posture, and political context. (See **Table 3** for variable interaction).

## 5.2 The significance of this framework

Traditional theories tend to isolate single causal variables—ideology, resources, or political structure—limiting their explanatory power regarding the complex interplay of the complex dynamics of militant groups.

- *Ideology-centered theories* such as Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and works focusing on scholars such as Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi and Sayyed Qutub, often assume that ideology alone drives group behavior.
- *Resource mobilization theory (RMT)* [40] emphasizes funding, logistics, and recruitment, treating ideology as a secondary concern.
- *Politics-centric theories* [46] foreground factors such as regime type, state repression, or international geopolitics treating ideology as a byproduct of the political landscape [43].

Such approaches struggle to explain, for example, why two ideologically similar groups like Al-Qaida and HTS adopt divergent strategies. They also overlook how material conditions and political opportunity structures influence ideological adaptation.

5.3 The integrated social movement: Conflict theory

This proposed framework bridges the limitations of single-variable models by demonstrating how *objectives*, *ideology*, *resource dependency*, and *political context* dynamically interacts to shape militant behavior and transformation.  
Key insights include:

- How objectives—universal and localized—interact with framing;
- How resource dependencies—external or internal—shape ideological flexibility; and
- How political contexts open or constrain pathways for strategic adaptation.

For example, HTS transitioned from Global Jihad to local Jihad by reframing ideology from establishing a Caliphate to pursuing Syrian liberation, this required secure, non-state-dependent resources and engagement with local political realities, including forming external alliances and managing internal legitimacy.

5.4 Summary of framework application

This framework helps explain:

- *Why Category 1 groups* (al-Qaida, ISIS) resist deradicalization—due to rigid ideology, transnational goals, and structural isolation.
- *Why Category 2 groups* (the Taliban) have greater transformational potential—grounded in local support and negotiable objectives.
- *Why Category 3 groups* (Hezbollah, Houthis) fall outside traditional deradicalization frameworks—their proxy status subordinates ideological evolution to patron-state interests (**Table 4**).

| Framework Element       | Leadership’s Role                                                    | Example                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Objectives              | Leaders set/reframe goals.                                           | Julani shifted HTS from Global Jihad to governing Idlib.                                |
| Resource Dependency     | Leaders secure resources (e.g., Julani negotiating Turkish support). | The Muslim Brotherhood’s Guidance Office manages diaspora funding.                      |
| Ideological Flexibility | Leaders reinterpret doctrine (e.g., moderating rhetoric).            | Taliban’s Haibatullah allowing girls’ primary education to retain aid.                  |
| Political Context       | Leaders exploit opportunities (e.g., ceasefires, state collapse).    | Hamas’s Yahya Sinwar is using the 2017 reconciliation. with Fatah to regain legitimacy. |

**Table 4.**  
*Interaction of variables model.*

## **6. Ideological transformation of Hay’at Tahrir al-sham (HTS): A model-driven analysis**

Formed on January 28, 2017, through the merger of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, HTS later absorbed additional factions and foreign fighters. Despite this amalgamation, the group remains dominated by leaders from Jabhat Al Nusra [47].

The evolution of HTS in Syria exemplifies the interplay of objectives, resource dependency, ideological flexibility, political context, and leadership agency in shaping the ideological transformation of militant groups. Rooted in al-Qaeda’s Global Jihadist ideology as Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS rebranded itself in 2017 as a localized liberation movement, reflecting strategic adaptation to Syria’s shifting realities [48]. This transition aligns with RCT, where HTS prioritized survival and governance over ideological purity—balancing costs such as alienating transnational Jihadists against benefits such as local legitimacy, and international tolerance [13, 14, 22].

### **6.1 Ideological flexibility**

In his early interviews with an Al Jazeera correspondent [49], Al-Julani continued to praise Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, referring to them respectfully as “sheikhs,” and crediting al-Zarqawi with “opening the war against Iranians in Iraq [49]” He said, “Abu Musab AL Zarqawi, may Allah accept him, initiated this blessed war in Iraq.” Al-Julani’s rhetoric against Arab rulers echoed classic Al-Qaida propaganda, accusing them of betraying Sunni Muslims and “paying tribute (jizyah) to America.” He added, “There is no trust in Arab or Gulf rulers” [49]. These statements, however, stand in stark contradiction to HTS’s current government under Al-Julani (now President al-Sharee) which actively engages diplomatically with Arab states; Al-Julani himself has reportedly visited many of them.

The HTS leadership appears to have drawn strategic lessons from the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. While initially critical of the Brotherhood for compromising with Western norms and abandoning core Islamic principles, al-Julani noted that it had deviated from the ideological path of Sayed Qutub and Hassan al-Banna. In one interview he stated:

*“Even the Muslim Brotherhood, who submitted to the will of the West and aligned with it beyond what the West demanded—even Morsi fought Jihadists in Sinai, accepted the Camp David Accords, engaged with the United Nations framework, failed to govern by the Sharia of Allah, accepted elections, and acquiesced to all that America desired... We differ from the Muslim Brotherhood. Our ideology is derived from the Quran and Sunnah...”[50]*

He further criticized their abandonment of armed resistance: “Therefore, this [political path] is not the correct approach. We had hoped the Muslim Brotherhood would 1 day realize that the program they follow is erroneous, return to their roots, take up arms, and fight as mujahideen in the path of Allah. This is our path: to carry weapons and fight in jihad for the sake of Allah Almighty” [49].

Interviews with Al-Julani suggest that the international pressure along with insights drawn from the Brotherhood’s transformation influenced HTS’s leadership to adopt positions, it had previously rejected in its early days. RCT supports the notion that groups choose the path that best preserves their goals. In the present case, HTS’s

adaptation to international norms—including the selective embrace of democratic values—was a strategic decision. This paradoxical posture reflects what Shapiro terms “strategic dissonance”—maintaining ideological rhetoric while practicing opportunistic pragmatism [45].

HTS’s ideological transformation has been neither linear nor absolute. While al-Julani praised al-Qaeda figures like Osama bin Laden in early interviews, he later suppressed hardline factions such as Haras al-Din to consolidate control. This evolution reflects Quintan Wiktorowicz’s concept of ideological “selective scripting,” whereby leaders reinterpret doctrine to justify pragmatic decisions [41]. HTS’s refusal to adopt full democratic norms—despite courting international recognition—highlights the limits of its flexibility. It has preserved a core Islamist identity while tactically moderating its extremism.

## **6.2 The dynamics of local and international context (political context)**

Since the 9/11 attacks and the launch of the U.S.-led War on Terror (WOT), the operational environment for Islamist groups across the Middle East has shifted dramatically. Events such as the Arab Spring (2010–2012), the 2006 Lebanon war, the unending Gaza conflicts, the ban of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, the Yemeni civil war, and the Syrian revolution created new political opportunity structures [46]. As Shapiro notes, HTS rebranded itself to navigate these dynamics [45]. Distancing from Al-Qaida helped HTS to avoid the USA and Russia’s counterterrorism campaigns.

## **6.3 The leadership of Al-Julani**

Al-Julani’s leadership has been central to HTS’s transformation into a localized liberation movement. His ability to maintain Al-Qaida’s ideological legacy while simultaneously engaging in pragmatic alliances—even with former adversaries—illustrates the groups strategic balancing act. HTS’s evolution underscores how localized Jihadist groups adapt to geopolitical realities, even as their ideological roots persist beneath the surface. According to Dr. al-Qasir, al-Julani’s pragmatism, political ambition, and strategic fluidity—including oscillations between extremism, moderation, and coercion—enabled HTS to reframe itself as a Syrian nationalist movement free from transnational ties. This repositioning allowed it to dominate the opposition landscape and project itself as capable of confronting the Assad regime [51]. Al-Julani’s leadership approach aligns with Jacob Shapiro’s theory of strategic agency, wherein leaders mediate between ideological commitments and operational demands [45].

## **6.4 Adaptation to local realities and cultivating local resources**

HTS strategically rebranded itself within the broader context of the Syrian revolution, adopting localized rhetoric emphasizing justice, equality, and governance—values largely absent from al-Qaida’s and ISIS’s Global Jihadist narratives. This approach earned HTS a degree of legitimacy in Idlib and the surrounding self-proclaimed areas before the fall of the Assad’s regime.

However, governance in HTS-controlled territories met with resistance. Protests erupted over harsh living conditions, including allegations of torture in prisons, and excessive taxes at checkpoints. Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi, a former HTS religious scholar and co-founder, cited these grievances: “We protested due to

systemic oppression, torture in prisons, and crippling taxes on civilians at crossings [52].” Following direct engagement with al-Julani, who pledged reforms, al-Mahdi noted improvements: “After the demonstrations, the torture stopped, and taxes were reduced [52].” These reforms, enacted shortly before HTS’s attempted advance toward Damascus, demonstrated al-Julani’s recognition that credible governance and public stability are essential to sustaining power.

HTS under al-Julani’s balanced governance with military readiness in Aleppo, while maintaining strategic ambiguity regarding al-Qaeda. Al-Julani’s public remarks neither explicitly endorsed nor entirely denounced al-Qaeda’s ideology, signaling calculated political pragmatism. As researcher Abd al-Razzaq observes, this ambiguity allows HTS to send a dual message to members and observers—rejecting neither Al-Qaida’s ideology nor fully embracing it [51].

HTS has also worked to marginalize violent elements such as the Haras al-Din faction, adhering to hardline al-Qaeda doctrines. Al-Julani reportedly used military force against them, signaling a decisive break. Still HTS avoided overtly adopting democratic norms—an unspoken condition for Western legitimacy—revealing that its evolution remains tactical, not ideological. This duality underscores HTS’s survival strategy: shedding just enough extremism to consolidate local power, while avoiding commitments that could alienate its core base, or attract international backlash [53].

## **7. Conclusion**

HTS’s trajectory validates the hypothesis that ideological transformation results from dynamic interactions between objectives, resources, ideology, politics, and leadership. Unlike rigid Salafi-Jihadi groups such as ISIS by blending governance with Jihadist symbolism, HTS’s localized narrative and adaptive leadership enabled it to survive and even flourish amidst Syria’s volatile landscape, yet its refusal to embrace full democratization or renounce al-Qaeda underscores the constraints of deradicalization under pressure. This case reinforces the relevance of social movement theory, RCT, and leadership analysis in understanding resilience and adaptability in militant groups operating in contested political environments.

## **Author details**

Emad Al-Hammadin  
The Royal Jordanian National Defense College (RJ-DNC), Amman, Jordan

\*Address all correspondence to: ehamaden@gmail.com

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Hyilani F. Challenges and Opportunities of Islamic Movement Post Arab Spring. Aljazeera: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2025/2/25/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A9>; [Accessed: May 25]
- [2] Lo M. Political Islam, Justice and Governance. Duke University: Springer; 2018
- [3] Bayat A. Making Islam democratic: Social movements and the post-Islamist turn. In: Making Islam Democratic. Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2007
- [4] Mousseau M. Urban poverty and support for Islamist terror: Survey results of Muslims in fourteen countries. Journal of Peace Research. 2011;**48**(1):35-47
- [5] Zadalmaad. The Transformation in the Rhetoric of Islamic Groups. Zaalmaad Publisher, Online, 2024; 2025. Available from: [https://zaadaltabiyan.com/post/6441#\\_ftn9](https://zaadaltabiyan.com/post/6441#_ftn9) [Accessed: June 11, 2024]
- [6] Munson Z. Islamic mobilization: Social movement theory and the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood. The Sociological Quarterly. 2001;**42**(4):487-510
- [7] Sakthivel V. Political Islam in post-conflict Algeria. Current Trends in Islamist Ideology. 2017;**22**:116-143
- [8] Wagemakers J. A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2012
- [9] Alkhayer T. Fragmentation and grievances as fuel for violent extremism: The case of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Social Sciences. 2021;**10**(10):375
- [10] Holbrook D, Moore C. Message of hope and glad tidings to our people in Egypt, part 8: December 2011 by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In: Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader. 2018; online ed. Oxford Academic; 2019. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190856441.003.0003 [Accessed: June 11, 2025]
- [11] Calvert J. Islamism beyond Politics: Sayyid Qutb's Journey to Radicalism. Routledge Handbook of Political Islam: Routledge; 2020. pp. 11-25
- [12] Roberts H. North African Islamism in the Blinding Light of 9-11, Crisis States Research Centre Working Papers Series 1 (34). London, UK: Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science; 2003
- [13] Ashour O. The de-radicalization of Jihadists. London and New York: Routledge; 2009
- [14] EL-Said H, Harrigan J. Deradicalization Violent Extremism: Countering- Radicalization and Deradicalization Programs and their Impact in Muslim Majority States. New York: Routledge; 2013
- [15] Dhami MK, Murray J. Male youth perceptions of violent extremism: Towards a test of rational choice theory. The Spanish Journal of Psychology. 2016;**19**:E51
- [16] Ali MB. Militant revisionism in Egypt: The case of Al-Gamaa

Al-Islamiyya and Al-Jihad Al-Islami. In: International Case Studies of Terrorist Rehabilitation. London: Routledge; 2018. pp. 47-63

[17] Ibrahim MAA. Ideological transformation of Egypt's largest militant groups [thesis]. The University of Edinburgh; 2017

[18] Wickham CR. Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in. Egypt: Columbia University Press; 2002

[19] Sullivan DJ. Private Voluntary Organizations in Egypt: Islamic Development, Private Initiative, and State Control. Florida: University Press; 1994

[20] Tammam H. The Subjectivity in Studying Islamic Movements. Shoruknews; 2011. Available from: <https://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=07112011&id=2c38935a-75d1-498c-b532-93ba5753be6c> [Accessed: April 20, 2025]

[21] Quandt WB. Democratization in the Arab world? Algeria's Uneasy Peace. Journal of Democracy. 2002;13(4):15-23

[22] Ashour O. Islamist de-Radicalization in Algeria: Successes and Failures. Middle East Institute. Online Publications; 2008

[23] Boukhars A. The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2012. Available from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/10/the-paranoid-neighbor-algeria-and-the-conflict-in-mali?lang=en> [Accessed: March 23]

[24] Hafez MM. Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers; 2003

[25] Al-hammadin E, Hartley J, Abdalla M, Jones C. Trust-building in countering violent extremism programs: A Muslim youth perspective. Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism. 2025;20(1):63-82

[26] Krzyżanowski M. Pre-2001 Taliban religious ideology–context, roots and manifestations. Studia Religiologica Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. 2021;54(4):307-325

[27] Brahimi A. The Taliban's Evolving Ideology. 2010LSE Global Governance Working Paper WP 02/2010. July 2010

[28] Akbari F, True J. One year on from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan: Re-instituting gender apartheid. Australian Journal of International Affairs. 2022;76(6):624-633

[29] Pantucci R, Basit A. Post-Taliban takeover. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses. 2021;13(4):1-7

[30] Asatryan G. Talibanland: Paradise Under the Shadow of Sabers in Afghanistan. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2025

[31] Azzahrah AK, Yumitro G. Analyzing the role of the United Nations in facing Taliban restriction on women's education in Afghanistan 2021. Journal of International Relation. 2025;9(1):97-115

[32] Ayalon A, Raz IG, Amiel B. The United States withdrew from Afghanistan after two decades of a global war on terrorism. A Multidisciplinary Journal on National Security. 1 Nov 2022;25(1):36

[33] Aggarwal NK. Exploiting the Islamic state-Taliban rivalry for counterterrorism messaging. Journal of Policing,

Intelligence and Counter Terrorism.  
2017;**12**(1):1-15

[34] Aldadoo M. Collection of Sheikh Mohammad Aldaddo Lectures Online. The Inclusive Library; 2022. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnX588ZCpP8> [Accessed: April 22]

[35] Edgar IR. The 'true dream' in contemporary Islamic/Jihadist dreamwork: A case study of the dreams of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. *Contemporary South Asia*. 2006;**15**(3):263-272

[36] Hussain E. Taliban 2.0 and Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*. 2022;**9**(3):462-474

[37] Snow DA, Rochford EB Jr, Worden SK, Benford RD. Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *Benford American Sociological Review*. 4 Aug 1986;**51**(4):464-481. 18 p

[38] Tarrow S. *The New Transnational Activism*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2005

[39] Edwards B, Gillham PF. Resource mobilization theory. In: Snow DA, Della Porta D, Klandermans B, editors. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Greenville, NC: East Carolina University; 2013

[40] McCarthy JD, Zald MN. Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1977;**82**(6):1212-1241

[41] Wiktorowicz Q, Kaltenthaler K. The rationality of radical Islam. *Political Science Quarterly*. 2006;**121**(2):295-319

[42] Sageman M. *Understanding Terror Networks*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press; 2004

[43] Tarrow S. Charles Tilly and the practice of contentious politics. *Social Movement Studies*. 2008;**7**(3):225-246

[44] Clausewitz C. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1984. DOI: 10.1515/9781400837403-toc/pdf

[45] Shapiro SP. Agency theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2005;**31**(1):263-284

[46] Tilly C. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change. New York: Routledge; 2017. pp. 71-91

[47] Keser A, Fakhoury F. Hay'at Tahrir Al-sham (HTS) from an insurgent group to a local authority: Emergence, development and social support base. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2025;**48**(1):46-66

[48] Carenzi S. A downward scale shift? The case of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 2020;**14**(6):91-105

[49] Aljulani AM, Aljulani AM. This is our plan. In: Mansour A, editor. *No Borders*. YouTube Aljazeera; Aljazeera Channel; 2015

[50] Aljulani AM. The first interview with the leader of Jabhat Alnusra. In: Alloni T, editor. *Aljazeera*. YouTube Aljazeera Channel; 2013. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/12/19/al-Qaeda-leader-in-syria-speaks-to-aljazeera>

[51] Qaser A. The survival strategies of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: The triad of governance, militarization, and

discourse. Harmon for Strategic Studies.  
2023

[52] Al-Mahdi AR, al-Mahdi SAR.  
A former HTS religious scholar and  
co-founder of HTS. In: Faisal MB, editor.  
Al An documentaries. Online Youtube;  
2025. Available from: [https://www.  
youtube.com/watch?v=-WteE12nOjs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WteE12nOjs)

[53] Syria TV. HTS and Hurras  
Aldeen Disagreement. YouTube,  
Syria TV Channel; 2020. Available  
from: [https://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=gO31zySdiQc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gO31zySdiQc) [Accessed: May  
15, 2025]

# Perspective Chapter: Global Islamist Terrorism in Non-Muslim Terrain – A Moral and Rational Analysis of ADF-ISCAP Violence Dynamics in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

*Francis E. Lomami*

## Abstract

This chapter examines the evolution of Islamist violence from its local entrenchment to global intricacies within the context of the non-Muslim-dominant Great Lakes region of Africa. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an insurgency group originating from Uganda and based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, serves as the intractable centerpiece of this peculiar dynamic of Islamist violence. Since its formation and subsequent transformation into an Islamic State (IS) affiliate, the group has exploited opportunities to inflict harm on countless innocent individuals and has resisted multifaceted military pressure. These events have unexpectedly turned the region into a lasting hotspot for brutal Islamist terrorism, set against a backdrop of predominantly Christian culture and a relatively passive Muslim minority. Various circumstances and factors have fostered the entrenchment and persistence of this violence. ADF-ISCAP's dynamics have had a significant impact on community livelihoods, social cohesion, regional stability, and security, with broader implications for international relations and counterterrorism efforts. State collusion and failure, recurring armed conflict, and security porosity, coupled with complacency, have enabled immoral and irrational elements and actions to sustain this phenomenon. The chapter uses a moral and rational framework to clarify how these factors, together with their immoral and irrational aspects, contribute to the persistence of incongruous global Islamist terrorism in the region. It seeks to support the development of a balanced and contextualized counterterrorist perspective that integrates both moral and rational dimensions underlying the local, regional, and global dimensions of ADF's Islamist violence.

**Keywords:** political violence, African armed conflicts, Islamist violence, jihadism, allied democratic forces, global terrorism, moral and rational inquiry, counterterrorism

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Delineating the problem**

The Islamist violence of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) has resolutely evolved from local to global terrorism. ADF's Islamist violence is an atypical example of the recurrence of terrorism [1], as it emerges, reemerges, and continues to engage in harmful activities in a non-Muslim-dominant environment. Despite multiple counterterrorist responses, the group has remained adaptively and expansively resilient in geography, ideology, and operationality [2]. The group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and rebranded itself as the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), with supplementary goals as part of its ongoing evolution [1]. In 2024, it accounted for one of the two most effective IS provinces alongside the one in Syria [3]. Its large-scale and systematic violence against civilians has made it more visible in the global Islamist terrorism barometer. Its international jihadist connections, which employ coercive conduct and terrorizing violence, are the elements that qualify it as global terrorism [4]. What was localized Islamist violence has become globalized.

The mutual understanding of global Islamist terrorism views it as the transnational manifestation of violent acts committed by individuals or groups based on a radical interpretation of Islamic teachings. Violence is, therefore, a necessity to achieve a radical or jihadist Islamist project [5]. This violence extends beyond a single and confined national space. It aims to attain religious, ideological, and political objectives on a larger scale. It involves resources and territories in different locations worldwide. Presented as a struggle for Islamic salvation, it randomly harms individuals and entities to communicate its goals. Secular governments, non-Muslim communities, and even moderate Muslims are its targets.

No one can comprehend ADF-ISCAP's new threats without understanding its evolving ideology and violence. The rise of the IS group is the latest manifestation of a radical interpretation and implementation of jihadism with a declared global ambition. From its initial activism of empowering Sunni Arab Muslims to create a caliphate, the Islamic State has evolved into an international movement advocating for those who share its beliefs [6]. As Lohlker put it, "It has become much more a global Jihadi subculture stretching as an organization from Central Africa to the Philippines – leaving aside its influence on individuals and small groups through its theologically imbued communication – online and offline" ([6], p. 139). Compared to other jihadist groups, the IS's theology is described as apocalyptic because it frames its struggle as part of a cosmic war for salvation, underpinned by an exclusivist understanding of Islam [6]. Its crucial aspect is the necessity of violence as a sign of the end of times [6]. The fight is against anyone who opposes this belief. This IS theology has found some success in the Middle East, where Islam is the dominant religion. Africa offered it a fertile ground for growth, like other fringes of Islam.<sup>7</sup> By integrating into IS, ADF becomes one of the African representations of a global jihadist identity and form.

The problem lies in the terrain of ADF's violent activism and its moral-rational grounds. Beyond the Muslim world, Western nations are the primary non-Muslim societies targeted for historical and political reasons. Many perceive the West as a threat to Islam [7, 8]. This perception makes some geopolitical sense since targeting Western entities aims to compel them to abstain from interfering in jihadist objectives within Muslim societies. At this juncture, the moral and rational foundations of Islamist hostility toward Western nations have some basis due to negative aspects of Western-rooted universal ideologies, such as capitalism and communism [7].

In Africa, this logic resonates favorably in numerous Muslim-majority countries. Their demography makes good population tranches sensitive to the Islamist rhetoric of violence and terrorism. In these nations, Islamist militancy has also found some moral and rational justification in the socio-economic and political grievances of the local population [9].

However, the legitimacy and validity of Islamist violence in the Great Lakes region of Africa are questionable. The region is predominantly non-Muslim Christian and socially and politically at peace with its Muslim minorities. Therefore, ADF is a unique case in the emergence and entrenchment of Islamist terrorism. Primarily, Islamist or jihadist violence serves as a means to control Muslim-majority countries. Yet, a large majority of Muslims do not support it, not even against non-Muslims [8]. Despite its religious, demographic, and political conditions, the Great Lakes region has experienced ADF's Islamist violence and is now experiencing IS-based visceral jihadist ideology. How can one morally and rationally explain this radical Islamist violence in a primarily non-Muslim space?

ADF is currently the driving force behind IS's ambitious strategy in the region. IS has built on the group's proven momentum of Islamist violence. For years, the group has exploited political rivalries and local socio-economic vulnerabilities to sustain its terrorist activities. The effects of its actions are felt socially, economically, and politically within Congolese society and, to some extent, in Uganda. They are multifaceted and far-reaching [10]. With its new ideological identity, the threats the group poses present significant challenges to the region's peace and security [2]. Its demonstrated obstinacy and resilience over the past two decades, despite multiple setbacks, calls for a reevaluation of perspectives. How are the immoral and irrational features related to the persistence of Islamist violence in a region less favorable to Muslims?

The study in this chapter is crucial for several reasons. First, the chapter attempts to analyze ADF's violence morally and rationally by exploring its contextual circumstances and dynamics. The analysis offers insights into the broader study of global Islamist terrorism, utilizing a contextualized approach. Second, it examines the connections between immoral and irrational features in the rise, persistence, and resilience of this Islamist violence. Its transnational nature, along with ongoing humanitarian crises, poses a genuine threat of destabilizing the Great Lakes region. The ethical and rational considerations surrounding the ADF's Islamist violence and state responses highlight the need for clear strategies that go beyond security measures to address the underlying determinants. Finally, the chapter investigates how the intersection of local contexts and global jihadist narratives can inform policymakers and practitioners in developing effective counterterrorism strategies. The use of a moral-rational framework is intended to highlight immoral and irrational features that have contributed to the phenomenon in a non-Muslim region. Subsequently, it emphasizes the necessity for a comprehensive counterterrorism that integrates moral and rational dimensions.

## **1.2 The moral and rational approach<sup>1</sup>**

This chapter uses moral and rational perspectives through a qualitative and constructivist analysis of ADF's Islamist violence, from its beginning to its globalization. Although ADF lacks a solid sociological foundation, the group has aimed to achieve

---

<sup>1</sup> This framework is adapted from the author's doctoral dissertation: Lomami [11].

political and religious goals through armed violence. It has consistently engaged in war against state actors, thanks to geostrategic, social, and economic factors related to its location [12]. The approach is based on a minimal normative morality that, independently of cultural mores, emphasizes what is right and wrong, as well as care and harm, in a manner universally understood.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, immorality is the violation of a universal moral standard with negative impacts on the rights or welfare of others [13]. In this context, what is immoral harms others, intends to do so, or causes undue harm physically, psychologically, or emotionally. Harm involves inflicting damage or disrupting the well-being of individuals who are not liable.

Conversely, the approach views rationality as involving a grounded, objective, logical, and coherent evaluation of human interactions based on shared interests and benefits. In the context of armed conflict, rational assessment seeks to reduce the negative impacts on the human community. What is irrational is any act that is falsely and adversely conceived at the expense of a large community's interests or well-being [11]. It overlooks or misuses accurate and relevant facts in solving a community problem.

In line with these broad meanings, the chapter's conceptual approach summarizes dialogs about essentiality, nature, and the relationships between moral and rational determinants in a nonempirical way [11]. The approach relates immoral and irrational features of the ADF-related violence to contexts and actions. This includes terrorist attacks, government responses, and their expected connections with the development of harmfulness. The moral determinants are ethical cognizance and enforcement [11]. Moral motivation, discourse, and education in the moral reasoning of ADF and government agents serve as indicators of ethical cognizance. These indicators inform the analysis of the principles of right or care they engage in, the goals of right or care they aim to achieve, and the values of right and care they are educated in. On the contrary, ethical enforcement involves a step-by-step process for addressing moral violations. This enforcement process starts with checking for an ethical breach, investigating the facts, and then reprimanding the violator [11]. The phases reveal how authorities on both sides strive to stop harm caused by their agents' actions. Because terrorism conscientiously defaults on universal morality, the chapter emphasizes the examination of governmental ethical enforcement.

The rational determinants include critical thinking and acting. Critical thinking sets criteria for evaluating actions during conflict development by examining their supported factual assumptions, arguments, and conclusions. These three indicators of the substance of logical reasoning inform whether actions are factually grounded or not. In contrast, critical acting that complements this thoughtful process considers two key indicators: collective benefit and practical sensitivity, as means to ensure substantive rationality in the face of groups' interests and emotional characteristics. Actions that disregard these elements tend to jeopardize achieving a greater common good. The approach predicts that weak cognizance and enforcement of ethics, combined with impaired critical thinking and acting, significantly prompt harmful actions and lead to widespread negative effects during armed conflict [11].

The chapter methodically employed content and cross-analysis of existing literature about the ADF phenomenon to capture the dominant themes conveying moral and rational issues. It examined the formulations and consequences of ADF's actions, as well as governmental responses. However, it is crucial to note that this framework is not applied linearly to the sets of variables and indicators but rather through emerging indications from content analysis. The author constructs a perspective to render the data analysis. Less orthodoxly, the sections below present the analytical

inferences. It covers the conceptual dialogs between demographic and ideological conditions of violent Islamism, the context of its existence, and the actions of both violent Islamists and uncritical officials in the region. Organically, the first section discusses the Great Lakes region's religious characteristics in the context of Islamist violence, its unfitness for success, and its socially sensitive dangers. The second section examines the region's contextual immoral and irrational features that contribute to the development and resilience of Islamist violence. The third section analyzes terrorist actions and governmental responses, considering their moral and rational implications.

## **2. Situating geographically and ideologically the Islamist violence dynamics**

Geography and ideology are essential factors that help situate and assess the motives and rationale of political violence. One can consider them to question the value and relevance of ADF's Islamist violence. The group is a Uganda-originated and Congolese-harbored phenomenon with extensive connections and implications. However, it has long ceased to be solely a Congolese-Ugandan threat, expanding into regional and global dimensions. The rise of radical Islamism in East Africa and the adoption of IS jihadism are its transformers. ADF has oddly turned into the Islamic State Central Africa Province. Yet, the use of the Central Africa designation by the Islamic State is an inappropriate geographical delimitation. The African political and historical landscape within which the phenomenon has evolved is differently configured.

This chapter focuses on the Great Lakes region as the most suitable location for the phenomenon. It reflects its localization more accurately in terms of mobility, membership, impacts, and direct threats. The Great Lakes region is viewed here in its most ontological and widespread sense, encompassing the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda. Kenya and South Sudan are included in this five-state configuration as Connex Zones due to their direct ties to the region. Even though it is a critical Islamist pole in Eastern Africa, Somalia is not part of this configuration because it is a Muslim-dominant country and far from the epicenter of the ADF phenomenon.

Some ADF-related facts sustain this geographic configuration. The IS's new propaganda videos are in regional, widely spoken languages, including Kiswahili, Luganda, Arabic, French, Lingala, and Kinyarwanda, and feature primarily people from several nationalities in the region [14, 15]. The group's recruitment network has stretched in the region and includes Congolese, Ugandans, Burundians, Tanzanians, Kenyans, and Somalis. The Congolese intelligence services arrested 75 people of different nationalities associated with the group in eastern Congo between 2018 and 2019 [16]. These elements demonstrated the Great Lakes region-focused transnational nature of the group.

Consequently, the moral and rational examination of ADF's violent Islamism needs to be logically put within the social, political, and economic dynamics of the Great Lakes region. Indeed, this entire region has a drawn-out and bouncy history of violent conflicts. Most states have experienced complex, recurring, and protracted struggles [17]. This conflict-prone environment primarily fuels the battle for control of political power among local, national, and regional entities. The humanitarian panorama and convolutions that transcend national boundaries are crucial in these

regional conflict dynamics. The ethnic stresses, cultural strains, socialization modes, and human densities across borders foster land disputes, economic imbalances, and political grievances, all of which indicate a potential for conflict [17]. Nevertheless, religious emphasis is not a significant cause of tense political violence that impacts a large population. It is unusual in the region, even though there have been Muslim-based claims in some countries.

ADF's Islamist violence has evolved within these regional complexities, which are genuine attributes that inform assumptions and deductions. These critical geographic perspectives serve as a source of the chapter's moral and rational reasoning regarding ADF-related terrorism and counterterrorism [18]. The Great Lakes region is statistically one of the non-Muslim predominant areas of Africa and holds Islam as a lesser societal concern. Therefore, situating the dynamics of Islamist violence demographically is the first step in highlighting its moral and rational questions. The ideological aspect is the second step, as the chapter questions its geographical relevance. The section organizes the analysis under three points: the regional Islamic demographic distribution, the regional Islamist ideological outlook, and the evolution of localized violence into global terrorism.

## **2.1 Regional Islamic demographic distribution**

The religious demographics in the Great Lakes region are largely Christian. Islam is numerically less significant, except in Tanzania. Islam arrived centuries ago from the eastern African coast with Arab merchants and traders. Local conversions and the foreign Muslim assimilation made it spread [19]. Despite its long-standing presence, the Islamic faith and culture have remained demographically limited. Less than 3% of the population in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi identifies as Muslim. Approximately 6.2% of the population in South Sudan is Muslim. Only Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania have significant Muslim minorities, with 11.5% of Ugandans, 9.7% of Kenyans, and 35.2% of Tanzanians [20]. Some Muslim sources dispute these statistical figures [21]. Within this demographic distribution, Muslims constitute a vital minority in many of these countries after Christians. This religious vitality explains some of the Muslim community's social confidence and political activism. However, the dominant Christian influence is a crucial consideration for any Islamism-based political militancy at the national level.

Additionally, Muslim populations in the region are clustered in specific areas within each country. They are scattered among the numerous ethnic groups to which they primarily identify and regionally dispersed [10, 22]. Some places have a high majority of the Muslim population. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Muslims are mainly located in Maniema Province, with notable concentrations in the cities of Kasongo and Kindu. In Uganda, they are located in the eastern and northwestern parts of the country [23]. In Tanzania, Zanzibar and Pemba Islands are largely Muslim [9, 22]. In Kenya, Muslims primarily reside in the coastal areas, including Mombasa, Lamu, and Malindi, as well as in the northeastern regions, such as Mandera, Garissa, and Wajir [9, 22]. However, the entire area where the ADF has sent its frequent violent waves has more than 90% Christians and other believers. It surrounds the Rwenzori Mountains, stretching from Beni, Butembo, and Ituri province in DR Congo to Kasese and Bundibugyo districts in Uganda. The area clustering, the physical dispersion, and the tribal preeminence of Muslims are premises to consider for a rational formulation of transnational Muslim-based activism.

In contrast, the Muslim clustering can be relevant if it is directly the target of an Islamist retrenchment and experimentation. A jihadist ideological objective of

establishing Islamic governance over civilian communities can only be envisioned in these Muslim concentrations and considerations. However, ADF has yet to develop significant local support in any of these concentrated Muslim areas. It has recently attempted to build ties with the Mai-Mai Malaika, a rebel group operating in a Muslim-majority area of Congo's Maniema province [15]. The geographic and ideological distance between their operations remains an obstacle. Nevertheless, this prospect is frightening, as it can enable ADF to cover its weakness of missing a favorable Muslim-based social context.

Another factor to consider in this demographic perspective is the characteristics of Muslims in the region. The Great Lakes region has a long history of Islam's warless penetration and cultural influence [19, 21]. Unlike nations in North and West Africa, the region has not witnessed the establishment of Islamic political entities, states, and empires [19]. This general apolitical history has undoubtedly contributed to the tolerant nature of Muslims in the region. Additionally, although most are Sunni, many follow the *Shafi'i mazhab*, its Africanized version [21, 22]. Its superficial conformity to Islam distances it from its extreme interpretations. It cohabits well with Sufism, which has historically served as a basis for social structuring and, in some cases, even political agency [22]. This social and political dynamism is limited despite the notable involvement of worldwide Muslim organizations with a charitable dimension. This might be related to the modest growth of modern Islam in the region compared to the shifts among Christian denominations. Overall, Muslims in the region remain politically discreet and unassertive.

Nevertheless, Muslims play a role in developing local and national communities by establishing schools and healthcare facilities. This local and national participation does not encompass the limited Muslim demographic and culture. Islamist groups have limited opportunities to attract recruits, build popular support, and further entrench themselves within a large local milieu through either acts of *Dawah* (proselytizing) or governance projects [15]. A few Muslim communities in the region, notably in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya, implement some aspects of Sharia law for Muslims. They primarily address specific issues, including succession, personal status, and inheritance. Despite this religion-based accommodation and the official secularism of most states, Muslims have sometimes expressed feelings of discrimination.

However, like any other religion-based citizens, Muslims are exposed to political and socio-economic disparities. The region faces significant moral challenges, including authoritarian rule, systemic corruption, and persistent poverty that impact all citizens. Unemployment, food scarcity, and a lack of access to education and healthcare are general concerns that foster widespread discontent [9]. Thus, individuals from various religions have always been part of popular movements opposing forms of injustice and immorality, such as colonialism and authoritarianism [21]. There are no consistent facts that Muslims have been singled out as targets of a deliberate policy of disenfranchisement.

Considering the demographic distribution and the characteristics of Muslims in this region, any Islamist militancy or insurgency is expected to require solid popular grievances. They must be grounded in historical, political, and economic factors, such as political oppression and socio-economic discrimination. Any appeal of an Islamic militancy that suggests immoral and irrational actions of jihadism must find legitimacy. Otherwise, it is a political and religious tool that can only attract a small Muslim band in the countries of the region [9]. Logically, it is not easy to make Islam a reliable factor for a viable insurgency.

The demographic landscape and the Muslim characteristics only serve as barriers to any political aspirations linked to specific Islamist interpretations, especially those that advocate for jihadism. A jihadist ideology is a blend of theological beliefs and political objectives that requires some popular support to make an impact. Muslim communities in the regional countries are not marginalized to the extent that they can easily turn to extremist groups. Only the government's human rights violations in response to instances of Muslim militancy and violence have the potential to promote further radicalization [19]. They are likely to incite feelings of community persecution and heighten religious tensions.

The unfavorable demographic distribution and the overall political profile of Muslims in the region are significant barriers. However, they do not stop modern Islamist teachings and demands from infiltrating some mosques and communities. Since the late twentieth century, Islamism's external influence has been at work in the region. Radical teachings and networks are the roots of Islamist militancy in some Muslim communities, especially in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Funding and educational support from Muslim-majority nations, notably in the Middle East, introduced some radical thoughts and practices. The presence during the 1990s of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in Sudan is associated with the growth of sub-regional Islamic militancy [9]. The al-Qaeda bombings of the US Embassy in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in August 1998, killing and injuring hundreds, set the path [24]. The Islamist ideological outlook in the region may help explain the connections that have developed between the Muslim communities and the emergence of Islamist violence in the Great Lakes region.

## **2.2 Regional Islamist ideological outlook**

Muslims on the eastern coast of Africa continue to maintain long-established ties to the Arab world. These historical, cultural, linguistic, and trade connections facilitate various Islamic networks [9]. As with all religions and everywhere, they are exposed to puritanical preachings and beliefs. The individual's level of religious commitment influences Muslim radical views and interpretations of Sharia, the main driver of Islamism [25]. This radical interpretation reaches the community level when the principle of Sharia law becomes the focal point for claims to regulate Muslim actions and interactions [5].

Local and standard Muslim networks have faced the invasion of global whims. Globalization has facilitated the spread of radical Islam worldwide, primarily through technological innovations. Islamists have exploited anti-Western sentiment from geopolitical issues outside Africa, particularly those in Muslim-majority regions, such as wars in Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq, to make their radical arguments for political and religious agendas [9]. This streaming influence has induced the emergence of Islamist militancy within typically tolerant Muslim communities in the Great Lakes region.

However, to fully understand Islamist militancy in the region and how it transformed ADF from a localized dimension of Islamist violence to global jihadist terrorism, it is essential to agree on some key meanings and events. Broadly, Islamism is an ideological claim of a return to the basics and primitive roots of Islam [7]. It emphasizes the religious, cultural, social, and political aspects of Islam as a societal imperative and the primary determinant of private, public, and collective life. Therefore, it provides a motivational foundation and means that lead movements seeking to establish a structure and governance for human society based on Islamic legal and

Middle Eastern-like traditional formulations. Through it, believers radicalize their views and positions regarding societal issues.

As a political ideology, Islamism is a twentieth-century phenomenon observed in various regions where Islam is the dominant religion [7, 26]. Its supporters believe Muslims must defend Islam, even through jihad against non-Muslim targets [27]. They promote broad political and social reforms, reject secular lifestyles, and oppose Western influence or interference in the affairs of Muslim communities [7]. With their ideological extremism, Islamists exhibit authoritarian traits [7]. They seek to override all human-made systems and impose a so-called divinely ordained and absolute order. Far from Middle Eastern realities, ADF leaders, including Jamil Mukulu and Musa Baluku, have often highlighted the ideological assertion of Islamic governance and Universal Umma [15]. The group has dreamed of fulfilling it from the Great Lakes region.

Islamism's religious and political beliefs have moral inferences. Its moral arguments offer a comprehensive ethical framework that claims to align with the Quran and Hadith. Islamists interpret these sources to force all Muslims to follow Islamic principles such as divine pleasure, as well as balance and proportion in virtues, along with a collective duty to uphold morality. They view Islamic ethics as the only means to promote good and prevent evil. In its jihadist view, violent actions to enforce this goodness are seen as a Just War [24]. Their moral particularism undermines universal morality by eroding the concept of goodness and care applicable to all people, regardless of their religious culture and beliefs.

Various currents and movements differ in their ideological premises, geographic focus, and strategic methods. However, they all share the belief that ideologies other than Islam bear moral misgivings [27]. Salafi and Tablighi schools are particularly radical, claiming to be the true Muslims. They advocate for commitment to thinking and acting only based on a literal and orthodox understanding of the Quran and the Sunnah (the actions and sayings of the Prophet) [19]. Salafis claim to be *Tabi'un*, or successors of the first three generations of Muslims. They consistently reject any understanding different from that of their "pious ancestors" (al-Salaf al-Salih). Meanwhile, Tablighi preaching mainly targets grassroots Muslims to purify their faith through the Sunnah [19]. This Islamist interpretation drives many Muslims toward violence and terrorism with its awful actions. The teachings of both schools primarily shaped ADF's theological understanding of Islam. This Islamist stance opposes the universal sense of morality found in a liberal-based order and many African tradition-based moral systems.

Conversely, IS has tragedized Islamist views. In a more apocalyptic way, its moral narratives emphasize the eschatological defense of the Muslim faith or identity. The establishment of an ideal Islam-based society is a divine mandate. IS's violence is a legitimate means to the implementation of its holy mission [6]. The moral understanding in jihadism is around the return to the earliest days of Islam [26]. What is good, rightful, and caring is what is done for the promotion of the early form of Islam. This ideological radicalism makes Islam a serious threat to secular societies [28]. The ADF's integration into the IS identity and infrastructure leaves no doubt today about its deep conviction in violent political Islamism. Through it, the IS's eschatological interpretative theology came to resonate in the Great Lakes region of Africa, despite the lack of a dominant Muslim population and Islamic culture. Therefore, the region with its Christian majority and tolerant Muslim minority is at risk.

Historically, Islamism is not a new phenomenon in the Great Lakes region. Much like across Africa, the initial signs of Islamism appeared within the historical context of colonialism, alongside significant socio-economic disruptions, cultural

displacement, and political repression. These experiences fostered resentment toward colonial powers and their local collaborators, ultimately leading to various liberation movements. However, Muslim and Christian moral discourses found support in the concept of ethical universalism. Christian ties to colonialism did not cause African Christians to convert to Islam. During the postcolonial period, many African countries faced governance challenges, economic hardships, and ethnic conflicts. International geopolitical issues exacerbated some of the African conflicts, generating a sense of neocolonialism. The failure of postcolonial governments to address the grievances of marginalized communities created fertile ground for the growth of radical ideologies. Like other religious and secular militant groups, Islamist activists did not base their struggles against perceived neo-colonial influences from Western nations or corrupt local regimes solely on religion. The imported Islamist ideologies from the Middle East and South Asia further transformed this militancy into a more aggressive Islamist form.

However, this trend has limited effects in countries in the region, except for Uganda. In this country, the rise of Islamist political activism in the 1970s is mainly linked to the Islam-oriented policies under the leadership of Idi Amin Dada, a Muslim, and the hostile reaction from some Christians. Muslim political engagement grew as an effort to restore the position of Islam within Ugandan society. Addressing what he saw as a religious imbalance against Islam created by colonial history, Idi Amin supported establishing the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) in 1971, an umbrella organization bringing together all Muslim groups [10, 12, 19]. The UMSC took advantage of Idi Amin Dada's presidency to become a significant social and political force. Yet, the Salafis and especially the Tablighis injected a particular form of Islamism into the Muslim community organization [15, 19]. The Islamic Deobandi movement's missionary work, the Tablighi Jama'at, emerged in 1926 with an ideological focus on studying hadith, strict adherence to Sharia law, and promoting non-state-sponsored Islamic *Dawah* [29]. Its Islamic education, enforcement of strict Islamic norms, religious intolerance, and strong commitment to global Islamic proselytizing are routes to violence [29]. Despite officially maintaining a reserved stance on jihad, Tablighi Jama'at remains somewhat passively supportive of jihadism.

Initially, the Islamist faction represented a small minority within the Ugandan Muslim community. Still, its influence grew over time, particularly among a younger generation of clerics who had returned from theological education offered by Muslim countries, notably Saudi Arabia [9, 10]. After the fall of Idi Amin in 1979, the Milton Obote and Yoweri Museveni governments perceived UMSC as politically motivated and sought to secure its obedience. But the Islamists who gained prominence in the Ugandan Muslim community in the 1980s opposed traditional clerical elites and government involvement [10]. With financial support from Sudan, Islamists recruited more Muslim youth and engaged in opposition against the established Ugandan Muslim authority [12]. Although they referenced Muslim persecution after the fall of Idi Amin as a grievance, their political militancy initially surfaced out of religious zeal and political resentment. The Salafi and Tabligh assertiveness marked the beginning of Islamists' transformation from a radical group to a violent movement. It would later form the core of ADF and ultimately turn into ISCAP, the manifestation of global jihadism in the region.

### **2.3 From localized violent Islamism to global jihadism**

Three stages mark the evolution of ADF's violent Islamism: local uprising, regional entrenchment, and global takeover. Moral and rational reasoning can help explain

each phase of this violence through its causes and circumstances. From an ethical perspective, the motivation, discourse, and education surrounding the behaviors of Islamists shape their moral understanding. Meanwhile, different calculations regarding their religious and political ambitions reveal the logic guiding the involved actors.

The local uprising originated from the Ugandan Islamists' opposition to the established UMSC and Museveni government. Salafi and Tablighi Islamists aimed to control the UMSC, which they viewed as morally flawed due to their theological views. They opposed and conflicted with other Muslims. On March 22, 1991, they mobilized hundreds of Muslim youths who clashed with police in Kampala. Five people, including four police officers, died in this incident [12, 19]. The Ugandan government responded quickly, imprisoning some Islamist leaders between 1991 and 1993, including Jamil Mukulu, who led the youth movement [12, 19]. This repression strengthened their belief that they were being unfairly treated and denied their rights.

After their arrest, they decided to settle in Hoima, Western Uganda. They established the Ugandan Muslim Freedom Fighters Movement (UMFF), also known as the Muslim Liberation Army of Uganda (MULA), in 1994 [12, 19]. They claimed to fight against Muslim persecution and for Muslim rights, citing incidents against Muslims in the country after Idi Amin's regime and because of his religion-based policies that angered the Christian majority. Despite immediate support from Sudan's regime under Al Turabi, the Ugandan government quickly and forcefully shut down the movement's training camp in 1995 [12, 15, 19]. This movement failed to gain popular support and could not grow domestically because its moral discourse was limited and its logic biased. Its rejection by other Muslims and hostility from Christians, upset by Idi Amin's rule, doomed the movement.

The second phase, or regional entrenchment, followed the destruction of the UMFF base in the remote Ugandan forests of Buseruka in Hoima District and the crackdown on Islamist militants. Many reputed Islamist leaders chose to flee to Kenya and Tanzania [19]. Those who escaped the Ugandan army's assault crossed the border and sought refuge in the Congolese border town of Bunia, where they claimed they would continue fighting [19]. In September 1995, UMFF, represented by Yusuf Kabanda, a comrade of Jamil Mukulu, and the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), led by Commander Ngaimoko, who had been in hiding in the Beni area since 1988, decided to unite their efforts [12, 19]. Thanks to NALU's ethnic and political ties in the region, Ugandan Islamists found a supportive environment. The two leaders combined their forces to establish the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), often referred to as ADF-NALU.

This union between the two previously unconnected movements, ideologically and operationally unlike, was a strategic alliance aimed at strengthening their opposition to the Ugandan government following setbacks in Uganda [12, 15]. Even though the moral motivations of the two groups differed, this united movement broadened its moral discourse to capture national grievances. Logically, the Islamist combatants had to forsake their religious upholding for a democratic label to adapt to a secular political struggle in a predominantly Christian space. They incorporated societal and political considerations into their reasoning. This shift definitely convinced the Congolese government to support the ADF enterprise. With Congolese help, the Islamist fighters previously in Bunia joined NALU members in Beni. They built regular religious links with local Muslim communities in Beni and nearby areas, where they openly recruited new supporters [12]. The fact that Jamil Mukulu became the group's military leader allowed Islamists to gradually instill their violent approach. The goal was set to return to Uganda and take power by force.

However, the new group was inherently flawed by two issues that questioned the legitimacy of its insurgency: the minority inclination and atomistic views. The NALU component was closely linked to the Bakonzo minority and was originally formed to seek independence for the Kingdom of Rwenzururu. Similarly, the Muslim component was associated with Tabligh Jamaat Islamists and their efforts to spread their religious beliefs. These flaws undermined the representativeness and credibility of their claims. Nonetheless, these initial issues did not stop the Congolese government from using the group as a geopolitical tool amid security threats from the Rwanda-Burundi-Uganda axis. Later, when the first Congolese war erupted in 1996, the ADF fought alongside the Congolese army in Beni, battling Rwandan, Ugandan, and Burundian troops in support of the new Congolese insurgents of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo, AFDL) [12]. The Congolese strategy aimed to use the ADF to destabilize its Ugandan enemy government.

Subsequently, it was during the first Congolese war that ADF began infiltrating and attacking locations in Uganda from Congolese territory. Its first military operation took place at the end of 1996. On November 13, 1996, the group overran the Mpongwe-Lhubiruha border post and took control of Mbwera town in the Kasese district [12]. They attacked police stations and administrative buildings in the Ugandan districts of Kabarole, Bundibugyo, and Kasese. The group showed brutality against Ugandan civilians, which angered them [10]. Facing a skeptical population, the moral justification of their fight was questioned. Soon, the movement moved into the realm of political terrorism. It carried out sporadic attacks in the capital, Kampala, from 1997 and launched a bombing campaign in 1998. These terrorist acts are estimated to have killed 50 people and injured more than 200 between 1997 and 2001, prompting the US to list the group as a terrorist organization in 2001.

These initial violent and terrorist attacks carried out by ADF diminished the legitimacy of its insurgency. Instead, they only succeeded in drawing significant attention to its existence and provoking a strong response from the Ugandan government. The destructive nature of its attacks enhanced the moral discourse of Uganda's counterinsurgency efforts. In 2001, utilizing troops stationed in certain Congolese areas during the Second Congo War, the Ugandan army seized control of the ADF headquarters in Kaminbyo. They killed several leaders, including Kabanda's aide-de-camp Wilson Kireru, known as Kilama, who led the reconnaissance teams, and Muloberyo Mukyeza Watoto, the intelligence chief [12]. A broader campaign by the Ugandan army against its rear bases in the Rwenzori Mountains weakened the group's ability to carry out violent actions.

The spree of morally indefensible acts by ADF reinforced its reputation as an illegitimate enterprise. In an effort to promote regional peace and with support from the UN peace mission, the Congolese army was forced to begin attacking and destroying the group's main camps. The assault led to the death and capture of several ADF fighters, dispersed the group, and even partially forced them to relocate to the Ituri region [12]. The Congolese turnaround and counterinsurgency against the group caused the NALU faction to reconsider their alliance around 2007–2008. They ultimately ended their alliance with the Islamists. Seven group members, believed to be the last NALU leaders, surrendered and joined MONUC's Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Resettlement, and Reintegration (DDRRR) Program after the extension of the amnesty [12]. The Ugandan president's recognition of the Kingdom of Rwenzururu on March 17, 2008, also reassured NALU members. This recognition was one of their original political grievances. These key events demonstrated to the

Islamists the irrelevance of continuing an unsupported and unpopular insurgency, yet they chose to stand alone and fend for themselves.

The third stage marks the formalization of its global connection that began around 2017, although ADF's ties to global jihadism date back to its inception. Al-Qaeda supported the group in various ways to help it establish itself, including setting up training camps for fighters in Sudan and later in Afghanistan for explosives handling [9]. Before formalizing its connection with IS, signs of the group's reclaiming of Islamism started to appear around 2007 and during its silence period until 2010. Jamil Mukulu, the military leader at the time, affirmed his sole authority and revived the Islamist identity of the group. Its commanders began reinstating the group's regional Islamist ambitions [15]. They implemented a mandatory conversion to Islam for all ADF fighters and strengthened ties with other radical Islamist groups in East Africa. The group renamed itself "Madina at-Tawhid wa-l-Muwahideen" (MTM), with a new flag displaying the Arabic shahada (testimony of Islamic faith) [30]. Subsequently, the Islamist agenda replaced the purely political insurgency alliance under which Islamists were forced to operate, as Musa Baluku, Jamil Mukulu's successor, once declared [15]. Through their messages, ADF boldly committed to creating in the region a polity devoted to the true monotheist belief and practice of Islam.

The group's claimed terrorist actions thus convinced many international institutions, including the UN Security Council in October 2011 and the European Union (EU) in December 2012, to designate it as a jihadist organization and add its leader to the sanctions list. Individual countries, such as the US with its Treasury Department, followed suit in 2014. This series of international responses drew more attention to the group and led to the arrest of Jamil Mukulu in Tanzania in 2015 [30]. The intensified military efforts against the group, mounting international pressure, and the arrest of its charismatic leader offered new reasons to understand the collapse of their enterprise. Despite losing significant positions and experiencing reduced mobility, the group chose to stand its ground. A more radical faction emerged, took control of the group, and transformed it into a global jihadist branch.

The makeover of ADF into a branch of the Islamic State became official in April 2019, after IS leaders in Syria publicly acknowledged it as ISCAP. In July 2019, IS released a video of its new leader, Musa Baluku, pledging allegiance to the IS leader [30, 31]. The opposition from the former leader, Jamil Mukulu, while in prison, and other members did not prevent this shift. Desperation and financial hardship might have driven this decision. However, a closer look shows that it logically follows from a shared ideological tradition common to Salafism and jihadism [26]. As a result, ADF committed to adhering to IS's strict interpretation of Islamic law and expanding its self-declared caliphate into this part of Africa [31]. Since then, the Islamic State Central has coordinated training and tactical, strategic, and financial support from the end of 2020 [32]. It has also started claiming many of ADF's attacks under the regional banner of ISCAP. The group increased its membership and became the deadliest militant group in the region. In March 2021, the US added it to its list of designated foreign terrorist organizations [33].

The ADF shift revealed different reasoning within the group. There is a clear indication that the new leadership overlooked several unfavorable factors that impacted the group's social and political significance. One could doubt whether this change in status was caused by the free will of most group leaders, who knowingly take on the possible consequences of their decisions. The question is whether they understand that being part of global jihadism under the IS means vowing to impose a caliphate on

a Christian-majority environment and facing the world's counterterrorism efforts in their challenging social setting.

The factors surrounding the dynamics of Islamist violence in the region significantly decrease the likelihood of the ADF-turned-ISCAP achieving meaningful goals. On a global level, the group's teachings focus on the obligation to wage jihad and kill all who oppose the Islamic conversion until the entire world becomes Muslim [15]. Its developed ideological foundations indicate the brutal massacres some of its fighters have committed against local communities [15]. Suppose jihadism is regarded as defending the Muslim faith or identity and fighting for an ideal Islam-based government. In that case, the Islamist violence carried out by ADF in the region is, in every way, a horrific crime against Christian identity and faith. It cynically dismisses universal moral values and disregards the fundamental principles of sound reasoning. It reveals a significant lack of ethical awareness and critical thinking, marking it as unjust violence.

Like other examples of religion-based violence and terrorism, ADF's ideological or political narratives are presented in a way that blindly challenges universal ethical standards and raises questions about their mental stability. There is no justification for defending the Muslim faith or identity, resisting Western oppression, or trying to create an ideal Islam-based society in a predominantly Christian culture. The so-called divine Islamist mandate thus becomes a harmful lure in an era when religion is seen as a personal, family, and cultural choice. In terms of moral setting, the default of ethical cognizance is most crucial. Besides its nonconformity to universal values, the group operates outside the dominant belief and moral system of the people it aspires to govern. Its Islamist violence, therefore, risks provoking religion-based cultural hostility. On the critical thinking side, the group's attitude toward political development in the region showed a rational impairment. Over the years, the group has encountered numerous opposing facts that have provided logical premises for it to lay down their arms, embrace peace, and adopt the region's religious tolerance. The resilience and boldness of Islamist violence, along with its harmful effects in the region, are justified mainly by various immoral and irrational factors rooted in local and regional experiences. The regional context and the actions of those involved offer additional insights into understanding the moral dilemmas surrounding Islamist violence.

### **3. Context-based assessment of Islamist violence**

ADF's Islamist violence has long been primarily a Ugandan and Congolese security challenge influenced by regional dynamics. The security history of the Congo provides a crucial contextual backdrop to its evolution. Nevertheless, the complexity, recurrence, and protraction of conflicts in the region have revealed intricacies that transcend national boundaries. The regional context is specific, characterized by an illiberal state's polity and a challenging socio-economic environment, which continually influences the power struggle. As political and security crises profoundly characterize the region, managing the ensuing conditions of insecurity and instability is a permanent conundrum in the various states.

Additionally, the impact of globalization has shaped the development of the region, as some subnational and local African groups tend to access resources through global networks. In a related vein, local Islamist circles have nourished their sentiments and dreams until some have allied with global jihadist movements in their imagination of defeating perceived enemies of Islam and establishing Sharia governance worldwide. The struggle of the ADF is today an uncharacteristic exhibition

of this trend. Notwithstanding, the contextual factors remain the significant determinants of its dynamics, which have been shaped immorally and irrationally. The Congolese state's collusion and deficiency, regional conflict and instability, and security porosity and complacency are the primary contextual conditions that have contributed to these immoral and irrational features. This section explores how these elements and the Islamist violence have interacted in the region.

### **3.1 State collusion and deficiency**

The role of the Congolese government in the inception of Islamist violence is undeniable. The formation of the ADF on Congolese soil in September 1995 was a result of geopolitical calculations at the time. The state rivalry motivated the Congolese initiative to reinforce a military insurgency against the Ugandan government of Museveni [34]. The alliance between the Ugandan Islamists and the NALU fighters, two groups with different historical and ideological backgrounds, would not have survived without the Congolese blessing and assistance. Following the Ugandan army's assault on their Hoima camp, the remainder of the Ugandan Islamist insurgents who crossed the Congolese border were severely weakened. The Congolese government permitted them to join the anti-Museveni alliance, which includes the NALU component, in Beni and to settle in Rugeti. They established ties with the local Muslim community and openly recruited from among them. The Congolese strategy primarily aimed to serve pragmatic political interests, disregarding moral considerations related to Islamist ideology. ADF would use this context of collusion between the Congolese authorities, the Congolese population, and the Ugandan insurgents to build its moral permissiveness.

Subsequently, ADF leveraged this Congolese support and the first full-blown Congolese war against Rwandan, Ugandan, Burundian, and AFDL forces. Its combatants infiltrated the Ugandan border districts of Kabarole, Bundibugyo, and Kasese to launch their first attacks in November 1996. The Congolese government's rational choice was individualistic, viewing the ADF merely as a means to an end. However, this first collusion did not last long enough to establish moral responsibility for the group's initial human rights violations, as the coalition of Rwandan, Ugandan, and AFDL forces completely expelled the Congolese army from Beni territory at the beginning of 1997. The ADF remained confined to the Rwenzori Mountains for a brief period until the Rwandan-Ugandan grip on the new power of Laurent-Désiré Kabila waned and the Second Congo War broke out and quickly intensified.

This new interstate hostility replaced ADF at the core of realist politics. The Congolese government, threatened by Rwandan and Ugandan territorial occupation, regained interest in the ADF's insurgency. This could explain the increase in its armed attacks in Ugandan territories between 1998 and 2000. They killed approximately 1000 Ugandans and displaced 150,000 individuals, including 85% of the population in Bundibugyo district [12]. The Congolese government did not seem particularly interested in officially rebuking the group, even when it crossed the line into pure political terrorism with its sporadic attacks in the capital Kampala starting in 1997 and during its bombing campaign in 1998. This active support and passive tolerance of ADF's terrorist violence against a rival state inflicted harm and imposed costs on Ugandan civilians [34]. Even the US's designation of the ADF as a terrorist organization in 2001 did not prompt a notable shift in Congolese attitudes toward the group. The direct and deadly military intervention of the Ugandan army in the Congo against the Congolese government justified its moral insensitivity toward the ADF's violence across the border.

However, since Kinshasa did not control its eastern borders during the Rwandan and Ugandan occupation of its territory until 2003, one might question the effectiveness of the collusion between the Congolese government and the ADF during its violence in the Ugandan bordering towns. Nonetheless, the Congolese state's failure was a key factor in the continuation of the ADF's violence and terror. Wars and political instability in the DRC have therefore created an ideal environment for the group's operations. Fragile and susceptible to various security issues, the Congolese state has been powerless to prevent its eastern region from becoming a Gray Zone. The government's inability to ensure safety and protection, coupled with socio-economic challenges, has led to uncontrollable insecurity. Armed groups, local militias, and criminal gangs along ethnic lines have multiplied into the hundreds, embodying the face of the Congolese Gray Zone. State authority has collapsed. Ill-equipped and poorly paid, Congolese security forces cannot maintain security in remote areas and along approximately 6835 miles of land, lake, and river borders shared with nine countries. For example, the Congolese border authority, the Directorate General of Migration, uses the IOM Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) at only a small fraction of the country's official border crossings [12]. Despite support from the UN and later the Ugandan army, the Congolese military continues to struggle with enforcing security. As seen in other cases of rising Islamist terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa, a weak Congolese government has created a conducive environment [35]. The deficiency in state authority has been a significant factor in fueling ADF violence.

From a moral standpoint, the Congolese state's moral setting failed to acknowledge the ethical inconsistencies and violations committed by the ADF insurgency. The initial collusion provided the group with a safe environment to strengthen its Islamist mental roots and structure. From a rational perspective, Congolese support was based exclusively on a realist premise of survival, rather than on Islamist harm projections. The Islamist group served as a proxy in a state-based political and military conflict [34]. The fact that the DRC has long viewed the ADF as a mere nuisance has allowed its violence to persist. In 2010, the ADF claimed to have a Congolese government agreement permitting it to harbor in the DRC and accused President Joseph Kabila of breaching it [12]. In contrast, the Ugandan government expressed public concern regarding the Islamist threat while its army got involved in many incidents on Congolese soil against Congolese civilians. Its repeated involvement in Congolese conflicts shaped the Congolese government's carelessness about the ADF.

Finally, the two countries have long ignored a bilateral assessment of Islamist violence. The focus on geopolitical and strategic security interests has greatly hindered honest cooperation between the two parties. It has stifled moral and rational concerns about the real Islamist threat. It especially undermined the Congolese government's ability to think long-term and recognize the threat against its nation and region sooner. Additionally, the Congolese government has not shown prompt determination to restore state authority in areas affected by ADF violence against civilians. As a result, despite lacking popular support, moral legitimacy, and clear justification for their political struggle, the ADF has continued its violence. However, the chaos of local conflicts has added another layer to the situation.

### **3.2 Conflict and commotion**

The Great Lakes region features a conflicted setting primarily driven by the struggle for control of political power among local, national, and regional forces [17]. The presence of numerous armed groups along ethnic lines reflects this conflictual

landscape. Armed groups have continuously emerged for various reasons, including local grievances, national political disputes with established authorities, or plunder for natural resources. Some regional and global entities, private and public, exploit these conflict dynamics to promote their geopolitical and economic agendas. In the mid-1990s, nearly all countries in the region confronted armed insurgencies supported by neighboring nations. For example, the Ugandan government faced challenges from several armed insurgencies, including the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF-NALU), the West Nile Bank Front (WNBK), and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) [12]. However, the eastern Congo has been the hotbed of an armed violence cycle. This cycle has demonstrated a remarkable range of moral insanity and irrationality. It has, therefore, eased and increased the ADF's cross-border and within-border violence [10]. This conflicting and silly landscape helped the Islamist forces establish their armed networks. They have used the Congolese insurgency conflicts, inter-insurgent disputes, and microcommunity hostilities.

First, the ADF has identified opportunities for service and collaboration with armed forces that require its assistance during the Congolese insurgency wars. When the first Congolese war broke out in 1996, the group naturally fought alongside the Congolese army as the troops of the AFDL moved into Beni territory [11]. After the Congolese army was defeated, the group withdrew with military supplies and, along with a large portion of the local population, retreated to the Rwenzori Mountains [12]. Since then, the area has been plagued by recurring insurgency conflicts against the Congolese government and the resulting turmoil.

The resurgence of armed conflict with a national dimension over the past three decades has hindered the achievement of durable peace initiatives and effective military operations against the ADF. For instance, between 2008 and 2009, the Ugandan government and the ADF considered negotiating an end to their crisis. However, this prospect did not progress due to the emergence of a new Congolese rebellion led by the National Congress for the Defense of the People (Congrès National Pour la Défense du Peuple, CNDP). Similarly, the outbreak of the M23 rebellion in 2012 and 2022 prompted the Congolese government to ease its grip on the ADF. President Joseph Kabila suspended the 2012 military Operation Radi Strike against the ADF as the M23 became more threatening. Amid state suspicions, the ADF's violence became a lesser concern.

Nonetheless, the Congolese insurgency is rarely a solo effort. Rivalries among leaders and ethnic groups create fragmentation and division. Various armed groups compete for political dominance, control of territories, and access to natural resources. Therefore, they do not hesitate to resort to any means and utilize any available armed support against one another. The ADF has been willing to offer its services, and its alliances with insurgent factions have predominantly come at their expense, making them reliant on it. The group has collaborated with various and opposing armed groups in the area. This collaboration included the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Goma (Rassemblement Congolais Pour la Démocratie-Goma, RCD-Goma) in North Kivu and the Congolese Revolutionary Movement (Mouvement Révolutionnaire Congolais, MRC) in Ituri, both of which were supported by Rwanda [12]. It also established contact with the Democratic Forces of Liberation of Rwanda (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda, FDLR), a rebel group opposed to Paul Kagame's government [12]. This armed collaboration has strengthened the group's ability to harm. For example, its fighters launched a joint attack on April 25, 2010, with a local Mai-Mai group targeting the Congolese military camp at Niyaleke near Beni.

Furthermore, the ADF has exploited microcommunity conflicts along ethnic lines. Local tensions, disputes, and rivalries among tribes, clans, chiefs, and militias

have served it well. By manipulating community divisions, the ADF could align with specific groups to generate sympathy and recruit new combatants. The group has long used the Bakonzo origin of its NALU component to connect with the Nande. The two ethnic groups are part of the Bayira cross-border ethnic lineage and maintain privileged cultural and business relations [11]. The ADF collaborated with local leaders of the ethnic Vuba minority in northern Beni territory, offering its military strength against their enemies [10]. In its ISCAP form, the ADF has exploited intercommunal tensions between two minority ethnic communities, the Nyali and Banyabwisha (Congolese Hutu migrants from Rutshuru and Masisi), in the Boga and Tchabi areas of south-eastern Irumu [15]. ADF fighters have partnered with both communities to attack one another and have persuaded them to enlist in their ranks. They managed to recruit hundreds of Banyabwisha youths [15]. This overlap of the ADF with local conflicts creates uncertainty and prolongs the Islamist terrorist threat [36]. Its unfiltered collaboration with local militias amplifies its criminal violence against civilians based on ethnicity.

In the context of ongoing hostility and fighting, moral and rational perspectives are examined across various and complex belligerences. According to ethical considerations, moral values were not a criterion for judgment. As long as an armed group wants to resist or win battles, ethical enforcement becomes irrelevant. Meanwhile, ADF's local presence has intensified armed tensions and violence within communities. This turbulent environment has fostered a moral permissiveness that allows individuals and groups to harm each other. From a purely rational perspective, the fragmented reasoning of political and community factions has driven ADF's activities by creating opportunities for cooperation with armed groups and local militias. It has prevented belligerents, insurgents, factions, and militias from critically engaging in a mutually beneficial peace process that could isolate the ADF. Their irrationality has kept ADF at the core of manipulative strategies. Every one of ADF's military collaborations has fueled Islamist violence and kept the area in a state of upheaval.

By significant accounts, the chaos of local conflicts has positively contributed to the group's ability to overcome its weaknesses. Despite operational and material limitations, it has resisted government military interventions and international pressure, sometimes with the support of local allies. Without the cycle of conflict and commotion, ADF might not have lasted as long. Security porosity and complacency are additional contextual factors that have significantly contributed to the group's persistence and resilience.

### **3.3 Security porosity and complacency**

As in many parts of Africa, the Great Lakes region and its connected countries face challenges related to the security conditions along their borders. The security porosity is both territorial and material, as borders in the region are complex, poorly guarded, and easily permeable. These borders feature natural barriers, such as rivers, mountains, or dense vegetation, which necessitate significant and consistent material control. This border porosity is exacerbated by security complacency. Ineffective security policies and policing of trans-border issues render the region vulnerable to terrorists' movement and camouflage. The moral and rational implications manifest at the individual and interstate levels.

At the individual state level, border security infrastructure and enforcement are limited. They have facilitated the transboundary activities of ADF members. Poorly enforced state borders often lead to corrupt and inefficient government officials, whom ADF networks have successfully bribed and easily pass off as part of their

movement and concealment [9]. The security apparatus of Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania had even individuals providing ADF with arms, ammunition, and protection in exchange for economic and financial benefits [16]. Consequently, ADF networks have found easy avenues to smuggle weapons and engage in various forms of illegal trafficking. With its global jihadist scope, the ADF has become more assertive in its cross-border activities, as shown by the expansion of its membership to multiple nationalities [30]. Ugandan and Congolese security forces have arrested ISIS-related suspects from Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, and other countries [2]. New fighters and international jihadists from different countries have infiltrated the eastern Congo jungle.

As this border's porosity has supplied ADF with fighters, materials, and money, one can relate it to security complacency. Many states in the region have long been indifferent to the ADF Islamist phenomenon, as the physical threat is remote from them. They viewed the ADF's Islamist violence primarily as a localized issue in Congo and Uganda. Relatedly, they have not recognized the group's potential dangers within their borders and remain entrenched in comfortable complacency. They could not invest sufficient attention and effort in the surveillance of ADF-suspected mobility despite its terrorist violence spree. Its leaders, such as Jamil Mukulu, had been moving freely between major cities in the region, outside Africa, and even the United Kingdom, using different identities [15].

This security complacency enabled the group to operate in several countries within the region, organize external support, and conduct fundraising efforts [15]. Some members who sought refuge in their territories engaged in covert activities and kept networks with radical Islamist circles locally. The attitude of security agencies in different countries contributed to this complacency [16]. The case of the Kenyan Muslim Youth Council (MYC), revealed after the arrest of Jamil Mukulu's son in Nairobi in 2011, demonstrated this networking ability [30]. This complacency in security is due to a lack of moral awareness about the phenomenon among security agents. They fail to connect their permissive behaviors to the distant yet harmful impact of the ADF. The absence of moral education about the threat and harmlessness of Islamist violence is probably the reason for inattentive and permissive security attitudes.

At the interstate cooperation level, this security complacency is evident in how regional bodies have handled the issue of Islamist violence. The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the East African Community (EAC) have discussed ADF-related issues multiple times as a direct result of the crisis in eastern Congo. In 2012, the ICGLR adopted a series of resolutions concerning the situation in North Kivu, treating the ADF in the same manner as any other armed group in the region [12]. The military approach recommended for all armed groups would also have applied to the ADF [12]. However, it was later abandoned due to regional security complexities. This regional approach did not include intelligence-based operations focused on tracking the ADF as an Islamist threat. Later, the Joint Verification Mechanism ICGRM deployed in Goma overlooked the ADF's cross-border illegal activities, military logistics, and support networks [12].

Without an effective regional mechanism, the group has continued to benefit from its assets throughout the region and from abroad, with an active diaspora membership worldwide [32]. The arrest in October 2011 of two British citizens of Ugandan origin on suspicion of working with the ADF raised questions about its outside network [12]. On August 17, 2019, at the 39th Southern African Development Community summit in Dar es Salaam, Congolese President Tshisekedi called for a regional counterterrorism coalition modeled on the US-led Coalition [10]. The chiefs of staff of the

militaries of Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi launched discussions regarding the Islamist violence threat. These discussions, suspended in September 2019, have struggled to progress due to new interstate tensions [10]. Additionally, the regional force deployed by the East African Community (EAC) in eastern DRC, from April 2022, targeted the ADF as part of a comprehensive effort [2]. Regional bodies did not dare to address ADF as a serious and standalone Islamist threat.

Overall, security porosity and complacency lead to several moral and rational consequences. Weaknesses in border control are linked to limited resources, and security complacency comes from a lack of deep understanding of the danger posed by the ADF phenomenon. Individual states in the region have indeed delayed taking decisive action against ADF's mobility and networks. The group has exploited the porous borders and intelligence gaps of these states due to an overly relaxed approach to the violent Islamist threat. This attitude has fostered a tendency to overlook or respond mildly to ADF's Islamist threats, neglecting vital security measures. Despite the increasing frequency of their terrorist acts, states in the region have failed to adequately fulfill their security responsibilities. The lenient and limited counterterrorism efforts currently in place have allowed IS to blend into the region's Islamist dynamics.

Focusing specifically on the moral context, corrupt agents enabled the ADF's activities due to a moral lapse. The moral understanding of the ADF could have supported their moral motivation and education against the group. Conversely, enforcing ethics regarding violations in favor of the ADF is a relevant factor in this context. Considering the harm caused by Islamist violence, moral enforcement would have been most effective earlier on. Connecting this moral aspect to a rational view reveals that complacency toward the ADF is linked to weakened security reasoning. If security and intelligence agents at the local and regional levels had critically considered the ADF's remote harmful actions and their significant ground impact, they would have reached sound conclusions. As their thinking defaulted, Islamist violence increased and led to deadly outcomes. The examination of direct actions is the chapter's last dimension of studying moral and rational considerations in the ADF phenomenon.

#### **4. Action-based assessment of Islamist violence**

Throughout its history of violence, ADF has conducted different types of actions that have significantly harmed civilians in the Great Lakes region, particularly in Congo and Uganda. The Congolese and Ugandan governments, with the support of the UN peace mission in Congo, have undertaken efforts to eliminate this Islamist violence. These actions, involving the behaviors and decisions of each party, can be assessed both morally and rationally to evaluate their impact on the dynamics of Islamist violence. The action-based assessment reviews the harmful actions perpetrated by ADF as an insurgent, terrorist, and jihadist group, along with the illicit activities that accompany them. It also examines governmental responses, including their deviations, ambiguities, and dilemmas. This section discusses the connections between these actions, their immoral and irrational characteristics, and the escalation of Islamist violence in the region.

##### **4.1 ADF harmful actions: Insurgency, terrorism, and jihadism**

Before becoming part of an IS substructure, the ADF had already been a killing and terrorizing machine in the region. The group had been lethal and destructive

since its first military operation against the Ugandan border post of Mpongwe-Lhubiriha and its control of Mbwera town in the Kasese district [12]. In the mid-1990s, ADF was the only armed opposition to the Ugandan government that employed active political terrorism [12]. After its first failure in 1997, the group successfully carried out an urban terrorist campaign by attacking Kampala, the capital, in 1999. Its bombing campaign and sporadic attacks, involving grenades and homemade bombs, continued until 2001 [12]. These actions caused numerous civilian casualties. Global jihadism found ADF already involved in senseless Islamist attacks against civilians in communities along the DR Congo-Uganda border. Its many harmful actions earned the group a notorious reputation.

Under its regional banner of ISCAP, the group became the most ruthless and deadly militant organization in the region. Its surprise attacks, killings, and abductions continued through the years 2020, 2021, and 2023. Its operatives attacked several villages in Beni and even displacement camps near the towns of Boga and Tchabi in Ituri Province [37]. Congolese military offensives seemed to intensify their aggressive actions against civilian communities in response. The group improved its improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for attacks, incorporated suicide bombings, and used mobile units as part of its decentralized operations to avoid direct military confrontations with government forces. Leveraging the Islamist martyrdom teachings, the group has attempted, since June 2021, at least eight suicide bombings in both Congo and Uganda [15, 36].

However, Islamist violence has also targeted Congolese and Ugandan military and administrative personnel, as well as UN peacekeeping staff. Ambushes and surprise attacks against administrative, military, and peacekeeping outposts are their noted tactics. For example, the group carried out an attack on the UN base in Semuliki in 2017, resulting in the deaths of 15 Tanzanian peacekeepers [12], and an attack on a UN position in Kididiwe in November 2018, killing 7 Malawian peacekeepers [10, 12]. In this last attack, 14 Congolese soldiers stationed at the same camp were also killed [10].

The group employed different categories of harmful actions: objective, subjective, proactive, and extreme harming [38]. Concerning the objective of harming, where the harm is caused with specific goals in mind without personal perceptions or circumstantial emotions toward the victims [38], the group has applied women's rape, child abuse, inhumane treatment, forced service, and property spoiling (looting and destruction). Through their abduction technique, they force abducted individuals to become combatants, laborers, and sexual slaves. Children are abused through indoctrination, military training, and combat participation. The group's propaganda videos have often featured children, mostly abducted [14]. For example, the group abducted 30 children after attacking a Seventh-Day Adventist College at Mitandi, Western Uganda, in June 1998 [12]. One of its cruel incidents was the attack on the technical institute in Kabarole District in 1998, where they abducted 150 students after burning dormitories with 50 students inside [12]. The group combatants have spoiled properties and destroyed health centers, schools, and worship buildings.

Relating to the subjective harming that displays intentional causation of harm due to hostile resentment or a desire for self-fulfillment, the group mostly used casual violence and punitive brutality. In these cases, they attack and kill according to their moral perspectives and emotional responses [38]. Their retaliatory violence is intended to punish suspected government collaborators and avenge assaults by the Congolese and Ugandan armies [14, 15]. For example, the group's operatives employed a bomb during a service at a Protestant church in Kasindi, North Kivu Province [37]. In December 2021, the group used its first vest-suicide bombing at a bar, indiscriminately killing seven people

and wounding about a dozen others [37]. They opened fire on a crowd of Christians in Iringite, a city near Beni, killing 10 individuals [16]. In June 2023, they allegedly attacked Mpondwe Lhubirha Secondary School in western Uganda, near the border with the DRC, killing around 41 people, including 38 students [37].

Some of the groups' killings represented both proactive and extreme harm. In its proactive harming, the group targeted and assassinated several Muslim leaders opposed to its ideology [15]. It allegedly killed 12 prominent Muslim scholars in Uganda between 2011 and 2016 [19]. This trend has continued as they assassinated in May 2021 two prominent imams who had spoken out against IS. They have justified this targeted killing with the contemporary jihadist ideological teaching of *takfir* (excommunication) [15]. Similarly, the group shows no mercy to its defectors. Victims of trickery, deception, abduction, and fear, many of its combatants attempt to flee at the first opportunity [15]. However, defection is considered a breach of *sabr* (patience or endurance). ADF clerics have emphasized it as a pillar of the Islamic faith amid constant military pressure from Congolese and Ugandan armies [15]. On the other hand, its extreme harm is when they use edged weaponry, such as machetes and knives, against Congolese villagers to mutilate their bodies. Also, in extreme cases, they burn down entire villages and exterminate whole families [16].

From the perspective of war morality and international humanitarian law, most of the ADF's harmful actions constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes because they are carried out against non-labile individuals, mainly civilians. As an insurgent, terrorist, or jihadist force, one can assess ADF-ISCAP's moral and rational considerations based on its geographic and demographic context. The moral judgment of the group is that harming more innocent people is more about spreading terror and instilling fear than achieving ideological or territorial objectives. Between 1998 and 2000 alone, its attacks in Uganda are estimated to have killed about 1000 people [12]. From 2015 to 2018, its actions harmed 781 civilians, including 336 women and 217 children in Beni territory [16]. From January 2019 to June 2020, they killed 1066 civilians, wounded 176, and abducted 717 others in North Kivu and Ituri provinces [16]. The total number of victims from 2014 to 2020 is approximately 4000 Congolese civilians, a figure that increased by 52% in subsequent years [16]. In 2021, they killed around 1120, injured at least 257, and abducted 1129 [16]. In 2024, more people were killed—500 in January and 260 civilians in May and June in North Kivu [16]. Additionally, this terror violence has often caused massive displacement. For example, between 1998 and 2000, about 150,000 people, mainly from the Bundibugyo district in Uganda, were displaced due to the attacks [12].

ADF-ISCAP continues to harm many civilians, most of whom are non-Muslims and do not want an Islamic-based society. Therefore, the key question about its harmful actions relates to their moral value, considering its promise of perfect Islamic governance. What societal wrong justifies this Islamist violence? ADF's violence has severely damaged social peace, human life, and community well-being. Its ideological claims do not match the value of social peace and human life that its reckless violence destroys. Rationally, the creation of their perfect world is not a sufficient reason for their deliberate and systematic violence against civilians. Their flawed reasoning has worsened human conditions. Their jihadist agenda of forcing disbelievers to adopt their extremist ideology in a predominantly Christian area is a misguided vision. ADF's Islamist-driven actions are likely to increase religious tensions and provoke resentment from the Christian majority and unease among the Muslim minority.

The extremist nature of the ADF contributes to its harm. The group naturally lacks ethical awareness and enforcement, which would otherwise give moral value to its

actions. ADF fighters are driven by flawed beliefs rooted in their radical interpretative theology. The rise in harmful incidents reflects their irrational mindset. Critical thinking might have helped them better understand the local geographic and religious context of their Islamist aspirations. Jamil Mukulu possibly practiced critical leadership by advising the group to consider local sensitivities. However, under its ISCAP structure, the group shows grave moral carelessness and rational decline, which could have led to violent reciprocity and moral chaos if it had been closely tied to a local identity. The group's harmful actions are also driven by economic greed, criminality, and banditry.

#### **4.2 ADF-economic greed, criminality, and banditry**

ADF has thrived on lawbreaking, like most terrorist groups worldwide [39]. Even before adopting its IS format, the group relied on criminal activities for its operations, a pattern typical of armed groups in the Great Lakes region. It has oscillated between various illicit activities, including a conditional trade system, taxation, extortion, and trafficking in natural resources. Its cross-border dealings have involved local traders, regional trade networks, and even administrative and military authorities on both sides of the border. These illegal activities have enabled the group to establish a substantial funding network in the Beni and Butembo areas of the DRC [12]. While some members might have genuine motivation in attempting an Islamist revolution in a religiously unfriendly region, others have engaged with the ADF's violence for economic greed, regular criminality, and banditry. Three principal axes reveal the combination of these immoral activities.

First, ADF's conditional trading model has proven to be a significant business entity in the region for many years, engaging in various revenue-generating activities. For example, it established shops in Beni, Erengeti, and Butembo [12]. It employs intermediaries to procure manufactured goods and make purchases on behalf of the group. ADF has created a trading system that allows it to generate revenue and reinvest it. However, this trading system has operated like a mafia organization. Partners are threatened and coerced into complying with the conditions set by ADF. Those who refuse become targets for sabotage and kidnapping, tactics used to pressure individuals whose businesses can benefit the group.

Specifically, retaliatory actions based on trading, notably abductions, target individuals who are noncompliant, disobedient, or recalcitrant, as well as their families. For instance, 40 people were abducted in the first half of 2012 for this purpose [12]. Another method of applying pressure is the use of road barricades and curfews. For example, the group sets a travel schedule with specific hours on roads between Erengeti and Nadui, excluding its partners. Group combatants do not hesitate to harm those who violate this curfew [12]. Whether they use abductions or road barricades, it all comes down to ransom and extortion.

Second, the group imposes taxes in the areas under its control. For example, it once levied a \$300 tax on all chainsaws used for felling timber and fines of up to \$500 for those who do not pay [12]. Additionally, the group has collected illegal taxes on logging activities in the DRC, particularly in Erengeti, and controlled gold mines along the Lesse River and in other parts of the Beni territory [40]. This taxation system strengthened the group's financial networks, mainly due to its integration into the local environment. This practice became more common as the group turned to local gangs to replenish its ranks, following the loss of many fighters and the departure of its NALU component. By 2007, its armed forces consisted of approximately 60% Congolese fighters seeking money-making opportunities [10].

Third, the group has engaged in illicit trafficking along the border. It has sustained a long-standing trading history in the border economy to fund its activities. The group has illegally exported minerals such as coltan, timber, gold, wolframite, and cassiterite [40]. Its other cross-border dealings encompassed coffee, ivory, drugs, and arms with local traders and regional trade networks. The group has trafficked timber, agricultural products, and other commodities along the northern corridor [12, 16]. Like other terrorist groups, the diversification of trafficked products has assisted them in safeguarding and continuing their funding [41]. These illicit cross-border transactions have fluctuated between primary illegal activities, including the illicit trade and tax systems. Due to these activities, ADF is not only a terrorist organization but also a transnational organized crime group [40].

Morally, it is hard to reconcile these illegal activities with the Islamic ethics promoted by the ADF. It appears that when it comes to profit, the immorality of nonbelievers is overlooked. The group even enforces its moral deviation on its non-Muslim partners. Furthermore, the group has taken a more cynical and violent stance toward individuals suspected of exposing its illegal financial activities. In the realm of immoral manipulation, the primary concern is the impact on moral values within the community. Relatedly, the ADF has not only harmed trade interactions in its operational areas but has also become a corrupting influence in local communities.

Consequently, many Congolese and Ugandan businessmen, officials, and military personnel have lowered their moral barriers to profit from the ADF's criminal system. They have helped the group launder money from its illegal activities [40]. For example, in 2021, three Ugandan businessmen in the real estate and petroleum industries were arrested for funneling USD 114,000 and USD 400,000 to ADF on separate occasions through middlemen, either in person or *via* wire transfers, into the DRC [2]. Arrests in 2011 revealed the scale of ADF's financial networks and the benefits it gains from embedding itself into the local environment [12, 16]. Some trade and trafficking of essential goods between the DRC and Uganda could not happen without the complicity of officials [12]. Corruption at this level helps facilitate Islamist violence in the region [41]. The economic greed offered by the group led many to ignore its Islamist threat and violence.

In a rational context, there has been a direct link between some profit-driven individuals' reasoning about ADF's illegal activities and the harm caused by Islamist violence in the region. ADF's illicit and criminal actions have led many to ignore their conscience and become either explicitly or implicitly involved in the group's harmful actions. Motivated by opportunistic gains, businessmen, public officials, and military officers in the area have sought to profit from the ADF criminal environment. While the ADF earns revenue, launders money, purchases weapons, and continues its harmful actions against innocent civilians, those involved are accomplices and morally reprehensible. Their moral failure has helped sustain Islamist violence. The next point analyzes the Ugandan and Congolese governments' actions in response to ADF's Islamist violence, along with their ethical and rational considerations.

#### **4.3 Governmental actions: Repression, violations, mercantilism, and dilemmas**

Ugandan, Congolese, and international officials have responded to the ADF's security disturbances and harmful activities. The group has undergone several unilateral and joint military operations but has successfully maintained its violent activism. In contrast, local communities and civilians, already subjected to ADF violence and

terror, have faced ill-trained and underpaid security and military personnel. Multiple reports have alleged that governmental security forces have engaged in immoral and irrational actions. Local, national, and international organizations have noted numerous incidents that demonstrate these harmful actions against civilians. Efforts to suppress ADF forces were carried out with extreme severity, resulting in serious human rights violations, which undermined counterterrorism operations. In addition to excessive repression and human rights violations, reports have accused some security agents, on both the Congolese and Ugandan sides, of engaging in illegal business with ADF-affiliated partners. However, governmental actions, caught between the desire to end ADF's violence and the need to repress its agents, face moral and rational dilemmas.

The offensive against ADF forces in their Congolese camps began in the early 2000s, led by the Ugandan army, which occupied part of eastern Congo. Its first major operation, Operation Mountain Sweep, occurred in 2001 and resulted in the capture of the ADF headquarters in Kaminbyo. The group lost some of its leaders, including Kabanda's aide-de-camp, Wilson Kireru, known as Kilama, who was the head of the reconnaissance teams, and Muloberyo Mukyeza Watoto, the head of intelligence, both of whom were killed [12]. The military campaign extended to its rear bases in the Rwenzori Mountains, weakening its capacity for violent action. The Ugandan government captured three very senior officers, including Balao Isiko, the group's second-in-command [12]. Following this initial operation, Ugandan military pressure continued until the group's command structure was dismantled later. Between April and June 2005, they killed nine ADF commanders [42]. The Ugandan army declared the group no longer a significant threat. However, these Ugandan operations did not eliminate the ADF from Congolese soil.

Following a cautious approach and Uganda's military retreat from Congo, the Congolese army decided to confront the ADF directly. Its first operation, Operation North Night Final, occurred in December 2005, destroying the group's main camps and killing several of its combatants. The second major operation, Operation Rwenzori, took place in June 2010 [12]. Two years later, in March 2012, the Congolese army announced Operation Radi Strike. Successive Congolese military offensives culminated in the devastating Operation Sukola I in January 2014, which severely damaged the ADF's rear bases and headquarters in Madina [10]. All these operations were conducted in collaboration with and supported by MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC. They enabled Congolese troops to achieve results, such as capturing ADF camps and cutting their supply lines [12]. The joint Operation Shujaa, between the DRC and Uganda, which has been ongoing since 2021, has reduced the ADF's high mobility.

However, the counterterrorism operations conducted by Congolese and Ugandan forces have faced significant criticism and accusations. Some operational officers from Uganda and Congo were suspected of engaging in trade with the ADF through intermediaries. Ugandan officers, along with local authorities in neighboring towns, relied on their Congolese armed group allies, particularly the RCD/KML, in their dealings with the ADF [12]. Nonetheless, research from Human Rights Watch indicated serious human rights violations during Ugandan counterterrorism operations, specifically identifying the Joint Anti-terrorism Task Force (JATT), established in 1999 to address the threat posed by the ADF, as an abusive entity [43]. Importantly, Ugandan counterterrorism efforts are viewed as complacent, with the ADF threat being a compelling rationale for seeking security assistance from foreign partners. Some Ugandan government reports attributing certain attacks to the ADF have raised

skepticism due to their lack of strong evidence. UN experts and US investigators discovered that evidence did not support some of the Ugandan government's claims, such as the July 2010 bombing of several restaurants in Kampala that killed 65 people [14]. Uganda's counterterrorism efforts have received financial aid, with the US contributing \$100 million as part of its East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative [42]. In 2012, this aid accounted for 17.3% of Uganda's defense budget, particularly after its army became involved in Somalia [12].

On the Congolese side, the army has regularly faced allegations of human rights abuses. Ironically, the ADF also once condemned the Congolese army's atrocities in pamphlets distributed on July 31, 2010, in Beni [12]. Congolese security forces are accused of various harmful actions, including arbitrary arrests, extortion, looting, and harming or killing civilians. For example, during the 2019 military operation, Congolese security forces were responsible for the deaths of 14 civilians and looted the general hospital in Kamango [16]. Additionally, 109 incidents of human rights violations have been reported since the start of the Congolese military operations in October 2019 [16]. Several individuals suspected of being ADF combatants have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, and subjected to extrajudicial killings [16]. Congolese military and civil authorities are frequently accused of colluding with the ADF in the region [12]. Some officers have exploited military operations as opportunities to engage in trade with the group through intermediaries. Senior officers are accused of intimidating local traders to monopolize certain trades and extorting money from the population during anti-ADF operations [12]. Military operations have created opportunities for the profitable enrichment of officials, officers, and their intermediaries.

Moreover, governmental offensives present significant moral and rational dilemmas involving the local population and individuals coerced into joining the ADF. The local population regards them as a source of their troubles due to forced mass displacement, ADF retaliatory attacks, and human rights violations by soldiers. Between September 2019 and mid-March 2020, military operations compelled nearly 432,692 civilians to leave their homes [16]. In response to these operations, the ADF frequently punishes nearby communities in remote villages and on the outskirts of larger towns, particularly along the roads bordering their forest strongholds. Its small, mobile bands of combatants have systematically killed hundreds of civilians through regular massacres [10]. The peak of massacres around Beni began in early 2015, following the Congolese army's 2014 offensive [14]. This illustrates how a repressive approach can backfire, leading to more victims, community discontent, and the stalling of counterterrorism operations [1, 44]. Conversely, as its military capabilities weakened, the ADF began forcing women and children, often family members of combatants or coerced recruits, to participate in the fighting or transport looted goods [16]. The presence of women and children somewhat restrains the army from eliminating enemy targets [16]. As victims of the ADF's harmful actions, individuals subjected to forced labor are severely exposed to counterterrorist operations. Between November 8 and 10, 2019, soldiers arrested local farmers at the ADF's Mwalika training and transit camp [16]. Government operations and resulting human rights violations have eroded trust in the Congolese forces and MONUSCO, as the ADF has continued its destruction.

Nevertheless, the ADF withstood all of these Ugandan and Congolese military operations despite losing its NALU component, lacking a base of popular support, and facing significant setbacks. Some complicity from government officials and the military has contributed to this resilience. During Operation North Night Final in 2005, the group's leaders narrowly escaped into the Rwenzori Mountains following

a tip-off and relocated some of their forces toward the Ituri region [12]. During the Radi Strike operation, the group successfully displaced Congolese troops from their strongholds by taking the initiative [12]. Military orders later released several ADF members who had been arrested in Beni and transferred to Kinshasa [12]. Although the results were promising, the 2014 Sukola I operation strangely slowed down. Emphasizing moral and rational perspectives on the ADF's harmfulness to civilian communities and livelihoods would not have tolerated such continuous relapses in counterterrorist efforts.

The ambiguity surrounding military operations, the human rights abuses committed by the military, and the mercantilism practiced by officers and officials have challenged the morality and rationality of counterterrorism policies and actions. Despite some flagrant cases of military human rights violations being prosecuted by the Congolese justice system, which indicates an effort at ethical enforcement, the local population remains distrustful of military operations, creating a significant barrier to their effective participation in the fight against the ADF. If these ambiguities had not arisen, the ADF under Musa Baluku would not have had a reprieve or rebuilt its forces after the Sukola I operation and the arrest of its longtime leader, Jamil Mukulu [2]. The immoral and irrational aspects in the regional context and actions contribute to the ADF's harmful persistence, negatively affecting the already struggling civilian population.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to understand how Islamist violence in the Great Lakes region, a predominantly non-Muslim area, has persistently evolved from insurgency and political terrorism to global jihadism. The harmfulness associated with this violence has proven that Islamism-based terrorism and jihadism in the region are, in every respect, a reprehensible crime against non-Muslim identity and faith. No moral and rational justification holds for barbarically defending any Muslim interest or attempting to establish an ideal Islam-based society within a deeply Christianized culture and community. The so-called divine Islamist mandate is thus a demonic lure in an era when religion is considered a matter of personal, family, and cultural choice. The fact that this unique case of Islamist violence in a non-Muslim terrain has endured for decades has required a deeper understanding and a proper counterterrorism strategy.

Using a moral and rational framework based on ethical cognizance, ethical enforcement, critical thinking, and critical acting [11], the chapter constructively examined the extent to which moral and rational considerations have influenced the dynamics of Islamist violence in the region. It highlighted the ways that immoral and irrational elements have contributed to its evolution and globalization, with adverse effects primarily affecting the Christian majority. As a continuous geopolitical game in the region and the regional socio-economic layers surrounding the phenomenon, terrorists have found immoral and irrational grounds to exploit. Therefore, despite the regional geographic and religious distribution making any Islamist or jihadist enterprise seem incongruous, the ADF has remained resilient due to the harm-prone context and harmful actions in which many local actors participated. State collusion and failure, recurring conflicts, and commotion, along with security porosity and complacency, have enabled the group to maneuver persistently. The ADF's harmful activities, economic opportunism and criminality, and governmental responses and abuses have all been the anchors of these violent dynamics.

This moral and rational examination of the ADF's Islamist violence in the Great Lakes region offers insights to consider in counterterrorism strategies. Immoral and irrational aspects add complexity and boldness to Islamist terrorism, particularly in poverty-affected areas. Fostering community resilience and addressing sociopolitical grievances are, in themselves, insufficient. Both military and nonmilitary approaches must focus on elements that promote ethical awareness and enforcement on one side and critical thinking and action on the other. Islamist violence remains a lurking threat at the heart of the Great Lakes region and surrounding countries. Considering the geographic and religious dimensions of the region, the ADF-ISCAP terrorist phenomenon can be annihilated or is likely to die out if national, regional, and international responses reinforce the moral and rational perspective of counterterrorism. A comprehensive counterterrorist strategy must emphasize the importance of moral values and rational principles in the geopolitical interests of regional states, local governance, and governmental operations in the fight against Islamist terrorism. This moralization and rationalization will help regional states address individual security complacency, foster regional cooperation, and tackle the foundations of Islamist violence resilience.

## **Author details**

Francis E. Lomami

Visiting Researcher-Boston University African Studies Center, Salve Regina  
University, Newport, RI, United States

\*Address all correspondence to: [eliame2000@gmail.com](mailto:eliame2000@gmail.com)

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Goldman S, Neubauer-Shani M. The recurrence of terrorism. *International Politics*. 2024;1-30
- [2] Wario HA. Countering Daesh/ ADF in Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. *The HORN Bulletin*. 2023;5(2):3-12
- [3] Institute of Peace and Economics. *Global Terrorism Index 2025*. Sydney, Australia: IPE; 2025
- [4] Bassiouni MC. *International Terrorism and Political Crime*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Pub. Ltd; 1975
- [5] Tibi B. Changing Islamism: From jihadism to institutional Islamism, a moderation? *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 2015;98(2):146-162
- [6] Lohlker R. New jihadi theology 2.0: The theology of violence IS style. *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes*. 2021;111:137-152
- [7] Black A. *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*. NED-New ed. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press; 2011
- [8] Singer M. The Islamist war against the west. In: *Militant Islam's War against the West*. Ramat Gan, Israel: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies; 2018. pp. 10-16
- [9] Haynes J. Islamic militancy in East Africa. *Third World Quarterly*. 2005;26(8):1321-1339
- [10] Warner J. *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield*. Kindle ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 2022
- [11] Lomami FE. *The moral and rational inquiry of Sub-Saharan Africa's armed conflicts: Wars and peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo [dissertation]*. Newport (RI): Salve Regina University; 2024. Available from: <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/moral-rational-inquiry-sub-saharan-africa-s-armed/docview/3129251660/se-2?accountid=185765>
- [12] International Crisis Group. *Eastern Congo: The ADF-NALU's Lost Rebellion*. Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group; 2012
- [13] Blair RJ. A cognitive developmental approach to morality: Investigating the psychopath. *Cognition*. 1995;57:1-29
- [14] Congo Research Group. *Inside the ADF Rebellion: A Glimpse into Life and Operations of a Secretive Jihadi Armed Group*. New York: Center for International Cooperation; 2019
- [15] O'Farrell R, Weiss C, Candland T, Poole L. *Clerics in Congo: Understanding the Ideology of the Islamic State in Central Africa*. Washington, DC: Hudson Institute; 2024
- [16] United Nations Joint Human Rights Office, OHCHR-MONUSCO. *Report on Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law by the Allied Democratic Forces Armed Group and by Members of the Defense and Security Forces in Beni Territory, North Kivu Province and Irumu and Mambasa Territories, Ituri Province, between 1 January 2019 and*

31 January 2020. Geneva, Switzerland: OHCHR/MONUSCO; 2020

[17] Lemarchand R. *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; 2009

[18] Bahgat K, Medina RM. An overview of geographical perspectives and approaches in terrorism research. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 2013;7(1):38-72

[19] Abdulhakim N. Uganda's militant Islamic movement ADF: A historical analysis. *The Annual Review of Islam in Africa*. 2016;12:30-39

[20] Pew Research Center. *The Global Religious Landscape*. Washington, DC: Pew; 2012

[21] Lodhi AY. Muslims in eastern Africa- their past and present. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 1994;3(1):88-89

[22] Rabasa A. *Radical Islam in East Africa*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation; 2009

[23] US Department of State. *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom*. Washington, DC; 2023

[24] Alvi H. *Terrorism in Africa: The rise of Islamist extremism and jihadism*. Insight Turkey. 2019;21(1):111-132

[25] Pew Research Center. *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*. Washington, DC: Pew; 2013

[26] Adraoui MA. Salafism, jihadism, and radicalisation: Between a common doctrinal heritage and the logics of empowerment. In: Pektas S, Leman J, editors. *Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow*. Leuven: Leuven University Press; 2019. pp. 19-39

[27] Cook D. *Understanding Jihad*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press; 2015

[28] Stith CR. *Radical Islam in East Africa*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 2010;632:55-66

[29] American Foreign Policy Council. *Tablighi Jamaat*. American Foreign Policy Council: *World Almanach of Islamism*; 2011

[30] Githing'u BM, Hamming TR. *The arc of Jihad: The Ecosystem of Militancy in East, Central and Southern Africa*. London, UK: International Centre for Studies of Radicalisation; 2021

[31] Candland T, Finck A, Ingram HJ, Poole L, Vidino L, Weiss C. *The Islamic State In Congo*. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism at George Washington; 2021

[32] Weiss C, Farrell R, Candland T, Poole L. *Fatal Transaction: The Funding behind the Islamic State's Central Africa Province*. Washington, DC: Program on Extremism at George Washington-Nexus Report; 2023

[33] US Department of State. *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*. [Online]. US Department of State: Washington; 2021. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terroristorganizations> [Accessed 9 April 2025]

[34] Findley M, Piazza J, Young J. Games rivals play: Terrorism in international rivalries. *Journal of Politics*. 2012;74(1):235-248

[35] Minteh BS, Banerjee AP. *Terror groups in Sub-saharan Africa*. In: Minteh BS, Bacigalupo J, Borgeson K, Valeri RM, editors. *The New Phase of Global Terrorism*. Kindle edition. New York: Routledge; 2025. pp. 99-111

- [36] Doxsee C, Palmer A, McCabe R. Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024. Africa: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); 2024. pp. 5-27
- [37] US Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism 2023. Washington: US Department of State; 2024
- [38] Lomami FE. Grounded immoral and irrational features of armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Journal of Conflict Management*. 2024;4(4):37-63
- [39] UN Security Council. Resolution Forces Should Worry East Africa. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies; 2022
- [40] Daghar M, Chelin R, Haji M. Expansion of the Allied Democratic Forces Should Worry East Africa. Institute for Security Studies; 2022
- [41] Shelley LI. Illicit trade and terrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 2020;14(4):7-20
- [42] McGregor A. Oil and Jihad in Central Africa: The rise and fall of Uganda's ADF. *Terrorism Monitor*. 2007;5(24). Available From: <https://jamestown.org/program/oil-and-jihad-in-central-africa-the-rise-and-fall-of-ugandas-adf/> [Accessed: May 2, 2025]
- [43] Human Rights Watch. Open Secret: Illegal Detention and Torture by the Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force in Uganda. New York, NY; 2009
- [44] Piazza JA. Repression and terrorism: A cross-National Empirical Analysis of types of repression and domestic terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 2017;29(1):102-118



# Securitising Terrorism in Nigeria: A Thematic Analysis of Political Rhetoric and Counterterrorism Policies (2021–2025)

*Shalom Kolawole and Andrew Enaifoghe*

## Abstract

This study rigorously analyzes the securitisation of terrorism in Nigeria *via* a thematic examination of political discourse and counterterrorism strategies. Utilising the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory, the research examines how Nigerian political figures frame terrorism as an existential danger, hence justifying the exceptional measures and influencing public opinion. The study uses qualitative content analysis to examine speeches, policy papers, and official declarations by the prominent political individuals and institutions from 2009 until 2024. Principal discoveries indicate that political discourse continuously characterises terrorism as a menace to national cohesion and sovereignty, frequently employing religious and ethnic themes. Counterterrorism policies are predominantly militarised, with less focus on human rights or community-oriented strategies. The securitization narrative has led to the marginalisation of some communities and areas, especially in the northeast. There exists a disparity between professed democratic principles and the authoritarian inclinations in policy execution. The research underscores the ramifications of securitisation for democratic government, civil freedoms, and regional stability. This research elucidates the discursive and policy aspects of Nigeria's counterterrorism framework, enhancing comprehension of the interplay between security, politics, and rhetoric within a precarious democratic environment.

**Keywords:** securitisation, terrorism, Nigeria, political discourse, counterterrorism strategy, national security, democratic governance, human rights

## 1. Introduction

Terrorism remains a major security challenge for Nigeria in the twenty-first century, as the Boko Haram insurgency and other extremist operations undermine the nation's socio-political structure. From 2021 to 2025, Nigeria saw a significant transformation in its counterterrorism efforts, characterised by heightened securitization *via* political discourse and legislative reforms. This is notably a reaction to the changing threats presented by Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province

(ISWAP), and other violent extremist organisations [1, 2]. As Africa's most populous nation and a regional power, Nigeria's internal security dynamics significantly impact the stability of West Africa and the whole continent. The securitisation of terrorism has become a fundamental subject in Nigeria's political discourse and policy development.

This chapter conducts a thematic analysis of Nigeria's political language and counterterrorism tactics throughout this time, emphasising the portrayal of terrorism as an existential threat that requires extreme measures. It investigates the interaction of political narratives, security necessities, and policy responses, while also analysing the impact of regional and continental security frameworks, notably those of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

This chapter seeks to elucidate Nigeria's counterterrorism initiatives within the context of the overarching African security framework, highlighting the interplay between national and supranational factors in the battle against terrorism. It also rigorously evaluates the ramifications of securitisation for democratic government, human rights, and regional cooperation in West Africa. Ike et al. [3] contend that a substantial disjunction exists between government-led counterterrorism activities and community viewpoints, hence compromising the viability of these operations.

Despite the complex interactions of variables, terrorism has no doubt inflicted severe consequences on the nations, resulting in extensive displacement, fatalities, and economic turmoil [4]. While it is widely acknowledged that non-state actors are perpetuating acts of terror on citizens and the country, the role of the political figures and their rhetoric in shaping effective counterterrorism policies receive little or no attention.

The gap has motivated this research. Different national security problems may arise from emotionally charged rhetoric from political figures on terrorist attacks, such as:

1. Misguided policy decisions [5],
2. Extremists' empowerment through narratives [6],
3. Decline or withdrawal of international cooperation [7].

These problems, especially in the Nigerian context, have led to a decline in public trust, which motivated this research and the approach taken to conduct this study. The research problems have also shaped the research questions, which are described in the next section. The purpose of this research is to conduct theoretical research on how terrorism has changed the political rhetoric in Nigeria, to determine the perspectives on terrorism that are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 that contributed to counterterrorism policies. The study answers two central questions;

- How has terrorism been securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?
- What perspectives on terrorism are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 that contributed to counterterrorism policies?

It is envisaged that by answering these two central questions, this research would enhance understanding of securitisation by placing Nigeria within the context of global security discourse. Findings from the research question inquiry process incorporate an African viewpoint into a theory that Western political experiences have mainly influenced.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Historical foundations of Nigerian terrorism discourse**

The return to democracy in 1999 did not resolve structural grievances, particularly in the north, where poverty, lack of access to education, and state neglect created conditions ripe for radicalisation [8]. These conditions allowed groups like Boko Haram to gain traction by exploiting public disillusionment. Although violent extremism in Nigeria dates back several decades, it reached global prominence with the emergence of Boko Haram in the early 2000s [8]. Boko Haram is commonly known as “Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati Wal-Jihad”, a jihadist terrorist group located in northeast Nigeria.

The group adheres to Islamist beliefs and rejects statutory laws ([4], p. 481). Boko Haram was designated the world’s most lethal terrorist organisation by the Global Terrorism Index, surpassing the Islamic State group (ISIS) [9]. The group, which has operated in various iterations since the late 1990s, had significant defeats in July 2009 when confrontations with Nigerian government forces resulted in the deaths of hundreds of its members, including the previous leader Muhammad Yusuf [10].

The actions of Boko Haram in recent years have led to the widespread insecurity throughout northern Nigeria, intensifying ethnic tensions, hindering growth initiatives, and discouraging investments [4]. This background shows the layers of problems and the need for a better understanding of how terrorism motivated political rhetoric has changed or contributed to the counterterrorism policies.

Non-state actors like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have dominated and conducted terrorism activities in recent years, in the process undermining the stability of the Nigerian state in the Northeast and beyond [11, 12]. Terrorism, including the acts of terror by the Boko Haram, is challenging to manage in the country due to the complex interaction of variables such as poverty, inequality, political marginalisation, and religious extremism [13]. Such variables have been leveraged by different terrorist groups in the past, especially by the Boko Haram and ISWAP groups.

## **3. Concept of terrorism, counterterrorism, and their different perspectives**

The context for terrorism, counterterrorism, and different perspectives is identified from academic conversations and studies and critically discussed to identify gaps. By doing this, a clearer picture of terrorism issues in Nigeria is presented to provide context and to ensure that this research does not duplicate but contributes to knowledge in the field of study. Beyond its immediate impacts on victims and their families, it shapes national security, political discourse, and counterterrorism policy. Therefore, it is pertinent to answer the research questions to determine how terrorism has been securitised in the country. To achieve this goal, this research employs a critical evaluation process, critically examining academic studies, theory, and political discourses. Academic articles and books on terrorism and securitisation theory in general are examined. Speeches, documents, and media statements, as well as press releases on terrorism in Nigeria, are also critically evaluated to determine themes and changes to political rhetoric.

### **3.1 Overview of terrorism**

Terrorism has been explained in different ways, and different authors have varied views on what constitutes terrorism. For example, authors like Meisels [14] suggest that terrorism is a method of “intentional random murder” of vulnerable civilians aimed at spreading fear among such victims to achieve political aims ([14], p. 348). This explanation presents terrorism as a method which anyone may use to commit murder. While the killing of civilians would be considered a crime anywhere in most societies, the explanation by Meisels also suggests that the victims might have been targeted because of their vulnerability or that politicians who may have arranged for the murder of opponents may be terrorists.

Though not the intended goal of Meisels, this definition of terrorism is somewhat limited and problematic because it positions terrorism as a crime of murder, which can be solved or understood through criminological theories. Other authors also share the view that terrorism is a political tool or has criminal intent. According to Garrison [15], terrorism may be viewed as the notion of “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” ([15], p. 259). This perspective on terrorism has resulted in the inaccurate conclusions that the definition of terrorism is a subjective practice of attributing negative connotations to an opponent, as well as positive connotations to proponents.

Moving away from the political domain to wider societal issues, Jackson et al. [16] posit that terrorism represents a social construct. It is a lexical form of expression that is assigned to definite actions through a series of defined forms of violence that may lead to legal processes ([16], p. 3). This definition does not offer much in terms of the impact, method, and actor involved in terrorism. Although it does suggest that terrorism is a real issue, it is further viewed as a multifaceted set of social and political behaviours that help in naming and grouping events ([16], p. 3). This may have informed other similar views on how terrorism should be perceived.

The notion that terrorism should be viewed based on the history, terrorists’ actions, the terrorists themselves, the psychology of terror, and the type of violence other than the terrorist violence [17]. This view, while broad, omits the victims of terrorism, what constitutes terrorism itself, and how it should be generally conceived. Though unintended, it may be wrongly implied that terrorists perceive terrorism as an effective and acceptable method of applying force and violence within society to frighten a broader population to enforce changes. While the review of studies indicates different positions on what constitutes terrorism, there appears to be a consensus on the notion that terrorism is the use of violence against people in a society.

According to Agashi [18], the term terrorism suggests the act of coercing people into accepting particular beliefs and viewpoints, like acts of “violence, terror and threat” ([18], p. 48). The motivation for adopting this definition is that it may be used to understand the scope of terrorism as intended in this research, based on the research questions that need to be answered.

## **4. Terrorism and counterterrorism measures**

The overview of terrorism provided in the previous section indicates that it involves the use of coercion as well as acts of instilling fear and violence. Such a range of actions warrants a range of measures considered by different governments as counterterrorism. The concept of counterterrorism is a range of efforts effected by the

state to eliminate terrorism ([19], p. 139). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which significantly raised concerns about terrorism and its potential widespread impacts beyond the immediate audience in a country, there has been a considerable increase in efforts to counter terrorism [3]. Such an increase in efforts leads to a commitment to improve countries and the international community's responses to terrorism.

While countries like the United Kingdom enacted various counterterrorism strategies such as "CONTEST", Nigeria, on the other hand, has established laws such as "Terrorism Prevention and Amendment Act 2013" ([3], p. 288). The counterterrorism strategy "CONTEST" was initiated in the year 2003 as a means for extensive strategic planning due to the increasing threat of international terrorist actions targeting the United Kingdom ([20], p. 43). The strategy provided a foundation for "law enforcement agencies, judiciary and related support agencies" involving both the civilian and military sectors and the intelligence community and how they can align with core objectives of the existing government and security sector ([20], p. 43). The Organisation of African Union (OAU), which is now known as the African Union (AU), in an effort to combat terrorism in Africa in 1994, refused all kinds of extremism and acts of terror like religious, ethnic, and sectarian beliefs [21].

Subsequently, the organisation of the African Union (AU) strengthened its efforts against terrorism and insurgency by implementing the "Algiers Plan of Action" to fight against and prevent the threat of terrorism in Africa [21]. Several counterterrorism strategies have been adopted and implemented in Nigeria. One major counterterrorism strategy enacted by the Nigerian government as a reaction to the increased terrorist activities, especially in the North-eastern part of Nigeria, is locating and blocking the sources of funding for Boko Haram [22]. This measure may be considered as an action of last resort since there is no well-defined legal framework for asset recovery and funds confiscation in the country [23].

According to Olujobi and Yebisi [23], their studies, which compared anti-money laundering legislation in Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, China, and Nigeria, found lessons for Nigeria to learn to improve its anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism financing laws, which include blocking of funds that support terrorism. Research indicates that terrorist organisations are unable to maintain their activities and operations without the financial support of local and external entities, as it is perceived in Nigeria that Boko Haram carries out its operations through illegal means of funding [22].

The Boko Haram group has developed different ways to fund their operations, such as kidnapping for ransom, illicit trading, trafficking of weapons and drugs, illegal use of agricultural produce for their funding, etc. [24]. Given this, the Nigerian government initiated effective measures to eliminate Boko Haram's financial resources so that the group's operations could be terminated [22]. Some of the measures include restricting financial access of alleged financial sponsors, heightened security around financial institutions to stop constant robberies, and elevating security tactics to curtail the payment of ransoms for victims [22]. However, terrorism activities were not eliminated, nor did the political discourse abate.

Although these counter measures taken are commendable, they were not sufficient enough to stop Boko Haram and its operations in north-eastern Nigeria [22]. All these attest to the impacts of terrorism on families and society, which research has also shown to be significant. For example, Dami [25] researched the impact of terrorism on

human security and identified that the forceful removal of children traumatises families and the community.

Chiu [26] also explained that terrorist acts affect family structure and sense of belonging to society, which further hinders engagement in terrorism and counterterrorism measures. Therefore, it is understandable why a unified effort by the Nigerian government was directed towards the procurement and advancement of adequate military equipment in response to the terrorists' deployment of highly sophisticated weapons. The government believed that to combat the issue of terrorism successfully, it must acquire more advanced military equipment than the terrorist groups [22]. While some may argue against such extensive military acquisition to act as deterrence, as counterterrorism may be ineffective in the long-term and counterproductive in the short-term [27], a country still needs to act in some form or shape.

Thus, the Nigerian government, over a considerable period, has made substantial investments towards providing its military with advanced equipment to combat terrorist groups [22]. Such military provisions have led to a substantial military agenda and missions, which some may describe as extraordinary counterterrorism measures. The state of continuous military actions and missions between 2021 and 2025, with some of the missions overlapping, has generated different perspectives on terrorism and counterterrorism in Nigeria.

## **5. Perspectives on terrorism and counterterrorism in Nigeria**

Terrorism and the measures taken to address it in Nigeria can be explained through different perspectives such as religious-ideological, socio-economic, structural, political-grievance, ethno-religious, identity-based, security-driven, counterterrorism, criminal, and crime among other perspectives. This section discusses some of these perspectives and how they have been used to explain the occurrence of terrorism in Nigeria. First, the religious-ideological perspective is one of the most dominant lenses, particularly in the study of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These groups are driven by radical Islamist ideologies that reject secular governance, Western education, and pluralistic democracy.

### **5.1 Religious-ideological view**

The religious-ideological view emphasises how extremist theology motivates violence in Nigeria [28]. While research has shown the relationship between religious-ideological views and how they motivate and inspire actions, according to Koehler [29], it is the extreme nature of certain ideologies that creates the sense of dying for the cause, as observed in extreme right-wing ideologies spreading across Europe and the United States of America. Due to the extreme nature of certain ideologies, critics may argue that embracing religious-ideological perspectives in Nigeria is an attempt to downplay the socio-economic or structural perspective.

Socio-economic or structural perspective attributes terrorism in Nigeria to poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, and social exclusion, particularly in the north [30]. It stresses that young, marginalised individuals are more susceptible to radicalisation when the state fails to provide basic services or opportunities [31]. It is further explained that Boko Haram flourished and expanded in Nigeria due to the country's poor socio-economic environment, which is one of the root causes of

violence across the country [32]. Decades of a weakened economy and the fractured social networks between people have created an enabling environment for different radical groups to thrive through violence [32].

There might be an element of truth in this, a critical thought of this statement might motivate one to ask why every group in Nigeria have not joined or taken to terrorism, and what about other poorer countries in Africa where terrorism is yet to be as prevalent as in Nigeria. Though the socio-economic perspective may be strongly challenged or debated, the ethno-religious and identity-based perspective is ever-present. Nyiayaana [33] perceives Boko Haram as one of several identity-based battles arising in contexts of diminished state legitimacy. The legitimacy of a single state over multiple states based on different ethnic groups in the country has been questioned for several decades in Nigeria.

For example, Titus and Ogundiya [34] wrote about ethnic and identity crises, which is the acknowledgement of the diversity within the country, but also as a national question. Titus and Ogundiya [34] explain how identity crises in Nigeria may be underpinned by the unresolved questions of acknowledging different ethnic groups. While ethnic diversity and the need for recognition may elucidate the intersecting dimensions of cultural identity in Nigeria, it is perceived by some as a threat to their identity and survival. This is because different groups believe their ethnic group is superior to others and as such should not be governed or ruled by a representative from a less superior ethnic group. Having one state is also considered a threat to, and a lack of acknowledgement of, other ethnic groups.

Thus, Nigeria's deep ethnic and religious divisions are often cited as drivers of terrorism and conflict. For example, this perspective interprets terrorism as a manifestation of identity politics, where communities perceive attacks by or on insurgents as part of broader ethno-religious hostilities [8]. This is particularly salient in communal violence in the Middle Belt and insurgency in the northeast. It is, therefore, not surprising that Loimeier posits that Boko Haram and other radical Islamist movements, like the Gumi-inspired 'Yan Izala', are manifestations of persistent socio-political and generational processes within the broader context of northern Nigerian extreme Islam ([35], p. 138). However, the religious and identity-based perspective does not distract from the security-driven dimension.

## **5.2 Security-driven and counterterrorism perspective**

The security-driven and counterterrorism perspective is a state-centric view which sees terrorism primarily as a security threat requiring military and policing responses. It focuses on neutralising terrorist actors, protecting critical infrastructure, and enhancing intelligence capabilities [10]. This is the dominant policy approach in Nigeria, which is often criticised for excessive force and human rights violations [36]. The security-driven perspective is a major driver for political discourse in Nigeria, where different terrorist activities have motivated direct responses, many with their challenges [37]. This pattern of attacks and responses, along with the dynamics of counterinsurgency challenges, is researched by Omenma et al. [37] over a 10-year period.

Their findings show that while terrorism perspectives are predominantly security-driven with counterterrorism measures, some doubt whether the military and policing responses are sufficient or counterproductive in the country. This is because terrorist

groups are also engaging in criminal activities, which is the motivation for the next perspective dominating how terrorism is viewed in Nigeria.

**5.3 Criminological perspective views**

Criminological perspective views terrorist groups like Boko Haram and bandits as engaging in criminal economies, using ideological rhetoric to justify actions like kidnapping, smuggling, and extortion [38]. While some criminal groups exist in Nigeria without any ideological pursuits, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria’s eastern region is well-known for the use of violence, extortion, and other criminal activities to impose their ideologies on victims and the immediate community [38]. The weapons and arms used are smuggled into the country and region, suggesting the scale and scope of the criminal economy of the terrorist groups in the country [38].

The perspective presents terrorism as a profit-driven enterprise rather than a purely ideological or political phenomenon, as observed in the case of Boko Haram over 10 years. All perspectives are summarised in **Table 1**. The table includes a description of the perspectives that are used to analyse political rhetoric and discourse in the analysis chapter.

Discussions from existing studies have shown that terrorism is a widely researched topic and one that gains attention among scholars, practitioners, and the international community due to the widespread activities of Boko Haram and their impact on victims, their families, and society. While this cannot be denied, the first research question, which aims to determine how terrorism is being securitised in Nigeria, remains unanswered. Studies are either vague or fail to address research question one, exposing gaps in existing research. There are different perspectives on terrorism in Nigeria. This question remains unanswered because studies are not focusing on, nor applying securitisation theory to evaluate or examine the varied perspectives on terrorism in the country especially during the period examined in this research. Therefore, these gaps in both research questions have motivated the methods adopted and the need for data specific to this research scope to answer the two research questions.

| Theme/perspective                  | Description                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Religious-ideological              | Terrorist groups use extremist Islamic ideologies to justify violence [28].                                                |
| Socio-economic/structural          | Poverty, unemployment, and inequality are some of the root causes and drivers of terrorism and violence that follows [32]. |
| Ethno-religious and identity-based | Deep ethnic, religious, and identity divisions fuel intergroup conflict and terrorism [8, 33, 34]                          |
| Security/counterterrorism          | Focus on military-led responses to neutralise threats or counter terrorism activities [37]                                 |
| Criminal/crime                     | Groups engage in kidnapping, trafficking, and banditry alongside terrorism [38].                                           |

**Table 1.**  
*Terrorism perspectives and description (created by Author).*

## 6. Methodology and theoretical framework

This section explains the study's design, data sources, and analytic framework.

### 6.1 Research design

The design for any research provides a structured process for understanding a study [39]. Being a theoretical study, the design for this research is a structured plan chosen to investigate the concepts and relationship between themes in order to determine the appropriate analysis methods and to ensure the validity of conclusions. Based on this understanding, the research design is important; this research is theoretical and interpretive. It is a conceptual analysis of political rhetoric on terrorism and terrorism perspectives in Nigeria that provides answers to two research questions:

- RQ1: How has terrorism been securitised in political presidential speeches in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?
- RQ2: What perspectives on terrorism are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 that contributed to counterterrorism policies?

Using these questions as a guide, rather than using primary data, which is the data collected directly by the researcher for the specific purpose of a study [40], secondary data is considered more appropriate. Secondary data is the data type that has already been gathered or collected by other people for a range of reasons or purposes using different data collection strategies [40, 41]. While critiques explain that secondary data may not be suitable for the needs of other studies other than the purpose of its initial collection [39], it provides an opportunity for researchers investigating sensitive topics such as terrorism to access a wider range of data which may not be possible to collect directly due to the nature of the topic.

### 6.2 Data sources

Materials selected are news articles and presidential speeches (2021–2025), especially inaugural speeches and Independence Day addresses. These are secondary sources used to gather a range of data relating to the research questions. These sources are less problematic, less challenging to access and with fewer ethical issues to contend with. For example, it may be challenging as well as present ethical issues to interview or find a sufficient number of terrorist groups willing to be interviewed or surveyed. Topics relating to terrorism and security present ethical challenges and may be dangerous, as observed from the nature of studies on terrorism in Nigeria. Therefore, ethics issues in this research are limited, given that it is a theoretical research that used secondary data available online and in open sources.

All data are publicly available and involve no human subjects. Sources used are cited according to Harvard referencing style in compliance with academic integrity and university policy. In terms of neutrality, using a well-known theory ensures that the analysis is unbiased and not politically motivated or charged. Thus, secondary data is considered most appropriate for this research. Choosing secondary data and sources also offers the opportunity to examine the broader perspectives on terrorism and

political discourse, which may not be present in one source. To facilitate this process and research design, which follows a desk-based study using secondary sources, it is further decided to conduct theoretical research based on a specific theory.

## 7. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis approach is adopted by applying themes from securitisation theory to interpret political rhetoric and information between 2021 and 2025 in Nigeria. Thematic analysis is the analytical method that may be used to identify, analyse, and explain patterns or themes by making sense of qualitative information or data from a range of sources [39]. Since the goal of extracting or identifying data is to make sense as well as derive meaningful themes that represent or are similar to datasets and the scope of inquiry, the analysis process is informed by key elements of the securitisation theory. **Table 2** shows the key elements that relate to each research question and the themes that will be analysed for each research question.

**Table 2** shows that a total of four themes are derived from securitisation theory elements using the research questions as a basis for the construction of the themes. Therefore, analysing the themes would help to answer the research questions. Theme 1 is linked to securitising speech act and referent object, while Theme 2 is linked to audience acceptance, which focuses on determining how securitisation has become effective with the acceptance of the speech act to the extent that it supports exceptional measures. Theme 3 is the one linked to extraordinary measures, which focuses on tracing the types of terrorism that are being treated as existential threats which warrant extraordinary measures.

Lastly, theme 4 is the reframing and normalisation of terrorism discourse, which aims to determine the perspectives not considered or the move away from the securitised framework. This theme may reveal any bias, evolving threat perceptions, and/or political calculations. While the goal is to answer the two research questions, the sources must be relevant to the topic and scope of study. **Table 3** represent the data search, source, and collection process driven by themes.

| Securitisation theory elements | Research questions                                                                    | Themes to analyse                                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Securitising Speech Act        | RQ1: How has terrorism been securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?             | Theme 1: Construction of Threat through Discourse                 |
| Referent Object                | RQ1: How has terrorism been securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?             | Theme 1: Construction of Threat through Discourse                 |
| Audience Acceptance            | RQ1: How has terrorism been securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?             | Theme 2: Legitimation and Social Acceptance of Security Measures  |
| Extraordinary Measures         | RQ2: What perspectives on terrorism are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025? | Theme 3: Institutionalisation of Threat and Use of Exceptionalism |
| De-securitisation              | RQ2: What perspectives on terrorism are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025? | Theme 4: Reframing and Normalisation of Terrorism Discourse       |

**Table 2.**  
*Link between securitisation elements, Research questions and themes (created by Author).*

| Securitisation theory elements | Themes                                                    | Data Sources                                                                           | Materials Reviewed                                            |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Securitising Speech Act        | Construction of Threat through Discourse                  | Presidential speeches (2021–2025), especially inaugural and Independence Day addresses | 18 speeches                                                   |
| Referent Object                | Construction of Threat through Discourse                  | Presidential speeches (2021–2025), especially inaugural and Independence Day addresses | 18 speeches                                                   |
| Audience Acceptance            | Legitimisation and Social Acceptance of Security Measures | Newspapers; The Guardian. Punch. The Nation, PM News                                   | Four newspapers with evidence of public/ political acceptance |
| Extraordinary Measures         | Institutionalisation of Threat and Use of Exceptionalism  | Counterterrorism briefings, Terrorism Prevention Amendment Act                         | Six sources with evidence of extraordinary measures           |
| De-securitisation              | Reframing and Normalisation of Terrorism Discourse        | Presidential speeches (2021–2025), international observer reports                      | Evidence from 5 out of 18 speeches                            |

**Table 3.**  
*Data sources for securitisation theory and themes (created by Author).*

The overall goal of analysing these themes is to determine answers to the research questions in the Nigerian context of terrorism and the prevalent terrorism perspectives.

## 8. Justification for the theoretical approach and limitations

To conclude this chapter, framing terrorism as a critical danger in Nigeria from 2021 to 2025 necessitates the adoption of targeted counterterrorism programs. Political discourse, community attitudes, and the overarching socio-political environment shape this process [42]. While studies like that of Mgboyenbi and Efeurhobo [42] may confirm this much, how and to what extent terrorism is securitised is yet to be determined, justifying the approach, methods, and focus of this research. Although not without its limitations, the use of secondary data and sources makes terrorism in Nigeria problematic and challenging to conceptualise, making the application of securitisation theory particularly helpful.

Terrorism in Nigeria is frequently characterised as a complex danger including religious fanaticism, ethno-political discontent, and socio-economic disenfranchisement [18]. The Copenhagen School's securitisation theory offers a valuable framework for comprehending how political actors frame terrorism as an existential danger, thereby justifying exceptional actions. Buzan et al. [43] assert that securitisation is a "speech act" in which a problem is framed as a threat to national survival, necessitating emergency measures that go beyond standard political protocols. It is important to determine how the speech act of the political elite is shaping the object, acceptance, measures taken, and if any form of de-securitisation exists in the country. The next two chapters shed more light on these questions.

## 9. Analysis of securitisation of political speeches and discourse

This chapter presents the findings from the themes generated from the sources explained in the previous chapter. The first and second themes are interpreted, analysed, and discussed to answer the first research question. The first part of this chapter presents the findings, while the latter part discusses the findings.

## 10. Findings and interpretation

### 10.1 Theme 1: Construction of threat through discourse

This theme is linked to securitising speech acts and the referent object. The Securitising Act looks at the extent to which terrorism is framed as an existential threat. To determine this, it is important to identify and analyse the languages, rhetoric, and narratives used by the state actors to portray terrorism as a unique and urgent danger. The state actors whose languages, rhetoric, and narratives are examined are the two presidents who served the country during the examined period. First, President Buhari is observed to continuously use languages and narratives that match securitising acts and the overall theme that constructs threat through discourse. For example, in 2021, he regularly referred to terrorism using words such as:

*“... the infection is spreading further afield and reaching into the heart of Europe and France is not being spared the malignant, with innocents murdered on its streets” (State House, May 18, 2021).*

*“Boko Haram terrorist group, though fragmented by internal strife and weakened by our defence forces, is still active and preying on soft targets” (State House, September 24, 2021).*

*“... we are taking the fight to our enemies from all angles – who threaten our national security” (State House, October 1, 2021).*

These statements reflect a dual strategy in Nigeria’s securitisation rhetoric—acknowledging the persistent, though diminished, threat posed by groups like Boko Haram, while simultaneously projecting a posture of proactive and comprehensive military engagement aimed at neutralising all perceived threats to national security.

*“... we are lobbying our Western allies aggressively for partnership, investments and support in other areas such as proscribing Boko haram, bandits and IPOB as terrorist groups, which would severely dent their funding; and to help with technical assistance, advanced weaponry, intelligence and ordinance” “... But our dedicated soldiers are working around the clock to keep Nigerians safe” (State House, December 12, 2021).*

Throughout this period in 2021, President Buhari started rhetoric that acknowledged the existence of a problem and quickly went on to name Boko Haram and terrorism activities as *“our enemies – who threaten our national security”* in October of the same year. The use of these phrases indicates that terrorism is being framed as a threat to the national security of the country. Subtle during this year, the discourse went from merely implying about the enemies, to the use of stronger words and language in 2022, where it became evident that terrorism is framed as an existential

threat. For example, the president started linking terrorism to a threat to national security and terrorist activities as criminality that violates the law of the country.

*“Today **insecurity is one of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria’s existence**, ...”  
“... confront the criminals head-on” (State House, April 21, 2022).*

*“... **we will not rest until we rid the nation of the menace of money laundering, terrorism and other financial crimes**”. “... we fully conscious of the fact that many families in **our country are in a state of fear and anxiety on account of the many captives held by terrorist against their will**, including those taken away after the tragic bombing of the Abuja-Kaduna train” (State House, May 12, 2022).*

*“... we will continue to demonstrate zero tolerance for crime and criminality. Those who take laws into their hands, who bear arms illegally and who seek to profit from a climate of fear and insecurity will be decisively dealt with” (State House, June 16, 2022).*

These declarations further illustrate the government’s expansive framing of terrorism—not only as a violent threat but as a systemic menace encompassing financial crimes, public safety, and national trauma. By linking terrorism to money laundering and the psychological toll on citizens, particularly in the wake of high-profile incidents like the Abuja-Kaduna train attack, the state reinforces a narrative that legitimises robust and far-reaching security interventions.

*“For those who have lost their lives, we will continue to seek justice for their families against the perpetrators.” ... “I and the security are doing all we can to free those unfortunate countrymen and countrywomen safely” (State House, June 12, 2022).*

*“I believe that matters of security have become the business of all nations as these challenges go beyond the abilities of any single country to effectively contain” (State House, August 2, 2022).*

As observed in 2022, the narrative continued with President Buhari associating terrorism with other crimes and atrocities that threaten the peace and stability of the country. The use of zero tolerance in June 2022 and the use of phrases promising justice for affected families position terrorism as an urgent danger to national security and society. The phrases such as *“we will continue to demonstrate zero tolerance for crime and criminality”* and *“we will continue to seek justice for their families against the perpetrators”* used throughout June 2022 were also attempts by the president to seek audience acceptance. While the pattern of speeches and languages used by the President became more lucid between 2021 and 2022 about the existential threat that terrorism posed to the country, it gave the incoming president, Tinubu, the basis to advance the narrative.

Unlike his predecessor, President Tinubu started his political discourse about terrorism in a very clear and assertive tone from the beginning. The scope of the threat terrorism posed to the country was wider than that of President Buhari. Terrorism is seen as a threat to the state, society (within and beyond Nigeria), and national identity, including a threat to ethnic groups within the country.

*“...Terrorism is not unique to Nigeria alone. It is across the world, and we have to fight it. we have to eliminate it completely” (State House, June 5, 2023).*

*“You have to do more because **terrorism is an effective danger to democracy; terrorism is also an effective danger to development** ....” “... **Growth and prosperity cannot be achieved until we banish terrorism**” (State House, September 1, 2023).*

*“We have and will continue to take bold steps forward in safeguarding our nation and wider region” (State House, April 22, 2024).*

These statements reflect a consistent narrative in which terrorism is portrayed not only as a threat to national security but also as a fundamental obstacle to democratic governance and economic development—thereby justifying increasingly assertive state actions both within Nigeria and across the West African region.

*“You must therefore **step up and intensify your efforts at conclusively ending the multi- dimensional security challenges** facing our dear country” (State House, May 16, 2025).*

*“As we continue to **defend the territorial integrity of Nigeria**” “... Let it be said plainly: **these evils do not discriminate by tribe or faith**” (State House, July 7, 2025).*

When interpreted, the political speeches by the two presidents are not dissimilar. However, that of President Tinubu was more distinct in framing terrorism as an existential threat to national security, democracy, and the development of the country. While both presidents pledged to do more in fighting terrorism within the country, their political discourse continuously framed terrorism as a global problem which requires international collaboration to fight. Framing terrorism as a threat to international security and peace is peculiar, as this exceeds the scope of securitisation theory. Regardless of this, political discourse in Nigeria appears to seek audience acceptance desperately.

## **10.2 Theme 2: Legitimisation and social acceptance of security measures**

This theme is linked to Audience Acceptance, which is an important aspect of securitisation. For securitisation to be effective, the audience needs to accept the speech act and support exceptional or extraordinary measures undertaken by the state actors. There was an extensive search for evidence among policymakers to determine the legitimisation of security measures undertaken in the country during this period, but none was found. State House documents, policy framework, policy paper, and brief and other relevant documents did not yield any positive outcome or evidence of legitimisation of extraordinary measures. As shown in **Table 3**, public documents and newspapers were searched and reviewed to derive phrases, narratives, and rhetoric by the public to indicate audience acceptance. Evidences from different sources suggest audience acceptance was minimal and almost not present between 2021 and 2022, except for the commendation in PM News:

*“As Nigeria marks its 62nd independence anniversary, some residents of the Northeast have **commended the military and other security agencies over the successes recorded in the campaign against Boko Haram insurgency and criminal activities**” (P.M. News, 30th September, 2022).*

After this, acceptance varied but was strong between 2023 and 2025 and was from different members of the society. For example, the National Leadership of the Muslim

Congress (TMC) commended the leadership of President Buhari and the armed forces of the country for their efforts in decimating Boko Haram/ISWAP fighters and bandits, but also encouraged further actions by the government until **“every remnant of the Boko Haram and ISWAP is decimated and the Nigerian government is controlling every inch of its territory”** (The Guardian, 28 April 2023). Another religious establishment/personnel and citizens’ forum also commended the actions of the current president (Tinubu) and pleaded for further actions:

*“The Bishop of Ijesa North Diocese Anglican Communion, Ijebu-Jesa, Osun State, Dr. Issac Oluyamo, **pleaded with President Bola Tinubu and the leadership of the security agencies in the country to go after more sponsors of terrorism in the country**” (Punch, 25th January 2025).*

*“The Arewa Concerned Citizens Forum (ACCF) has urged President Bola Ahmed Tinubu to make the full modernisation of the Nigerian Armed Forces a top national priority. **The group pledged to mobilize one million volunteers from across Northern Nigeria to support ongoing counterterrorism operations and help eliminate all forms of terrorism**” (The Nation May 15, 2025).*

Although there is little evidence on speech acceptance, the discourse found is from public figures and religious leaders with followers who are most likely to share the views of the leaders. Furthermore, associations and religious figures in places like Nigeria are known to have huge followers, which may be representative of certain groups of people in the country. Please see Appendices A and B for links to data sources analysed for themes 1 and 2.

## 11. Discussion of themes 1 and 2 findings

It can be implied from the findings presented in the previous sections that, between 2021 and 2025, terrorism is being securitised and framed through speeches of the two presidents as an urgent danger, those who threaten our national security (President Buhari) and an **effective danger to democracy** (President Tinubu). Findings from the themes also reveal that terrorism is constructed as a threat through discourse, starting with President Buhari in a more generic and subtle manner, grouping terrorism along with other criminal activities in 2021, to President Tinubu, who was more assertive and clearer in his narratives by 2025.

The perception and approach to terrorism by both presidents, as demonstrated through their rhetoric, are quite different from those of their predecessors. For example, President Goodluck Jonathan’s era (2010–2015) witnessed the rise of Boko Haram, which initially downplayed the threat and labelled Boko Haram as opponents motivated by a political tool against the national unit [44, 45]. This weak rhetoric and passive approach contributed to the lack of action, which contributed to the expansion of Boko Haram. The transition between him and President Buhari (2015–2023) saw him make gains to reclaim territory. However, these gains were offset by prolonged stagnation, during which factions of Boko Haram persisted [46].

Deriving themes that match the construction of Boko Haram’s activities as threats to national security and danger to democracy by two consecutive presidents is the first time such has been done since the insurgence of terrorism in the country. Although it

| Timeline/period | Military operations        | President(s)                          |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2021–2023       | Operation Tura Taikaibango | Initiated by Buhari                   |
| 2021–2025       | Operation Hadin Kai        | Initiated by Buhari, Tinubu continues |
| 2023–2025       | Operation Fasan Yamma      | Initiated by Tinubu                   |
| 2023–2025       | Operation Udo Ka           | Initiated by Tinubu                   |
| 2023–2025       | Operation Delta Safe       | Initiated by Tinubu                   |

**Table 4.**  
*Evidence of extraordinary counterterrorism measures mobilised by presidents (created by Author).*

is too early to assess the impact of President Tinubu’s actions, the unified perception of Boko Haram’s impacts and the framing of activities as a threat to the country contributes to knowledge in the Nigerian context, as previous consecutive presidents have either downplayed or rejected Boko Haram as a threat.

Acknowledging a problem is often the first step to a solution, which may explain the extraordinary measures taken by both presidents over the period examined in this study (see **Table 4**, next chapter, for evidence of extraordinary measures). As observed in the narratives presented and interpreted in this chapter, the changes from subtle, vague to assertive, lucid may be the attempts of the presidents to legitimise counterterrorism measures and seek acceptance of the people and the international community. Further analysis of themes aligns with the explanations by Jackson et al. [16] that terrorism represents a social construct, which is a multifaceted set of social and political behaviours that helps in naming and grouping events (see overview of terrorism in the literature review chapter).

While the narratives of the two presidents helped to construct terrorism as a threat and helped to identify the referent object as national security and democracy, the social construct process has helped to gain acceptance and accolades from the public for counterterrorism and the extraordinary measures taken by the two presidents. It can be said that terrorism is securitised in political presidential speeches in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025, with prominent audience acceptance among religious leaders (National Leadership of the Muslim Congress, Bishop of North Diocese Anglican Communion) and the regional citizen union (Arewa Concerned Citizens Forum). All audience acceptance came between 2023 and 2025, indicating that the construction of threat through discourse was not quickly legitimised, nor was the social acceptance of security measures rapid.

Therefore, in relation to “*How has terrorism been securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025?*” it can be said that terrorism has been securitised in political presidential speeches using subtle to more assertive words in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025. The rhetoric of the two presidents who served during this period both acknowledge that terrorist activities carried out by Boko Haram are threats to national security and dangerous to democracy. Such narratives coming from the leadership were used to construct terrorism as a threat, and Boko Haram as the threat to the referent object, with national security and democracy being endangered. Overall, it can be observed that during this period, the two political leaders played significant roles in initiating the securitisation process, which was unprecedented by previous leaders.

The framing of Boko Haram activities and other terrorism activities in the country paved the way for audience reception and the way terrorism is interpreted in

securitising speech. Accolades and encouragement from the public, especially from religious groups and leaders, were gained through mechanisms. However, it appears the presidents had already internalised the threat narrative to legitimise the extraordinary measures adopted (discussed in the next chapter).

Results from the two themes analysed and discussed in this chapter are significant because there were several extraordinary measures undertaken before 2023. This means that extraordinary measures were already adopted and used by the political leaders before audience acceptance was gained. The implication of this is that securitisation of terrorism was not completed through audience acceptance of the political rhetoric; it occurred through social acceptance of the extraordinary measures, which already started before the presidents gained audience acceptance.

## 12. Analysis of perspectives on terrorism in Nigeria (2021–2025)

This chapter is a critical review and analysis of political discourse to determine the perspectives on terrorism being securitised. To achieve this aim, the first part of the chapter presents the findings, and the latter part discusses the findings. The overall goal is to answer research question two. Research question two (RQ2) aims to determine the perspectives on terrorism that were securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 and contributed to counterterrorism policies.

### 12.1 Theme 3: Institutionalisation of threat and use of exceptionalism

When compared to themes relating to the construction of threat through discourse, legitimisation, and social acceptance of security measures, fewer themes were found to measure institutionalisation of threat and use of exceptionalism. Like themes 1 and 2, theme 3 is equally important as part of the securitisation process because it is the theme that justifies the preference for the use of military and surveillance practices and measures instead of normal legal and political processes. Findings discussed in the previous chapter have shown that terrorism is being securitised through political speeches, and its narratives were subsequently accepted.

However, data that matches this theme was found to help determine how the state responds to terrorism, and how responses to terrorism activities may not be classified as normal crime measures, but as unique and extraordinary ones. This analysis process also helps to determine the type of terrorism or the perspectives on terrorism that are being prioritised for extraordinary measures over others. In Appendix A, Speeches 1, 2, 5 and 9, as well as findings discussed in the previous chapter, reveal that the activities of Boko Haram Islamic terrorists were the trigger for exceptional responses during the period commencing 2021 until 2025. Starting with President Buhari's tenure, political speeches were characterised by narratives linked to extraordinary measures, some of which were:

*“... ..as a government, we are ready to arrest and prosecute all persons inciting violence through words or action ....”, “... .. But we remain **ready to take decisive actions against secessionist agitators**” (State House, October 1, 2021).*

*“.... we will continue to **demonstrate zero tolerance** for crime and criminality. Those who take laws into their hands, who bear arms illegally and **who seek to profit from a climate of fear and insecurity will be decisively dealt with**” (State House, 2022).*

These official pronouncements—ranging from the 2021 Independence Day address warning against incitement and secessionist agitation, to the 2022 reaffirmation of a zero-tolerance stance on criminality—collectively underscore the Nigerian government’s evolving securitised discourse, which frames internal dissent and insecurity as existential threats warranting firm, and often militarised, responses.

*“... we have acquired advanced equipment for our armed forces and police to strengthen their capacity to confront terrorism and banditry”* (State House, 2022 April 21, 2022).

*“Our cyber security and surveillance systems are being upgraded to further enhance our ability to track and trace criminal elements”* (State House, June 12, 2022).

The speeches presented above indicate that a zero-tolerance approach is adopted, while equipment is also acquired to ensure responses match the zero-tolerance claim by the president. The mention that surveillance systems are being upgraded to be used is evidence of extraordinary practices peculiar to zero tolerance towards terrorism during this period, which is unprecedented in the country since Boko Haram started its malicious actions. However, this rhetoric by President Buhari between 2021 and 2022 suggests that the targets were both terrorists and criminals based on his use of the term banditry. His extraordinary measures appeared directed at both Islamist terrorist groups and criminals. While political narratives focusing on terrorism may justify the erosion of civil liberties in certain instances, it does not justify the use of extraordinary measures against bandits. Therefore, the institutionalisation of threats and use of exceptionalism between 2021 and 2022 are somewhat confusing.

Between 2021 and 2022, President Buhari’s discourse often intertwined terrorism and criminality. During this period, a series of attacks in the country were overtly attributed to and claimed by Boko Haram [22, 24]. Inference can be made based on the acquisition of advanced equipment and the upgrade of security and surveillance systems to trace and track, among other factors, that political narratives were used to justify the erosion of civil liberties. Deflem and McDonough [47] explain that erosion of civil liberties is a culture that accompanies fear of counterterrorism and surveillance, which has started since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. This culture is seen to transfer to President Tinubu’s era, which is evident in speeches in Appendix A - numbers 4, 5, and 7.

*“To confront emerging threats and effectively combat crime ....” “.... we will invest more in technology and take over the forest”* (State House, May 3, 2025).

*“We will continue to invest in cutting-edge defence technologies and provide our military with the resources needed to counter both conventional and asymmetric threats”* (State House, May 16, 2025).

It was also observed that, similar to President Buhari, President Tinubu justified the use of advanced equipment and technology to address the emerging threats and crime. While it is clear that both presidents are determined in their use of extraordinary measures, the types of terrorism being referred to, concerning extraordinary measures, are often vague and mostly implied. Even though terrorism activities were rampaging the country between 2021 and 2025, the narratives to justify the use of extraordinary measures continued, while the types of terrorism targeted remain vague

in the speeches. Beyond the speeches, more pronounced evidence of institutionalisation of terrorism threat and use of exceptional measures may be found in the series of military operations initiated and run by the two presidents between 2021 and 2025. (See Appendix C for the full table with links to sources.) **Table 4** shows that President Buhari started two military operations, which President Tinubu continued.

Evidence provided in Appendix C.

On the other hand, President Tinubu appears to have started three military operations since his tenure started in 2023, in addition to continuing the ones initiated by President Buhari. It is quite extraordinary to see five military operations running simultaneously within a country that is not at war with another country. Military operations may be launched to prevent conflict, protect national interests, maintain regional stability, respond to threats (terrorism) and aggression, protect allies, provide humanitarian aid, and advance geopolitical influence, and other international peace and security-related reasons. In the case of Nigeria, five military operations within 5 years, all overlapping to counterterrorism of Boko Haram and ISWAP, may be classified as extraordinary.

For a country that maintained operations and had a peaceful transition of democratic power to another, with no collapse of economic, political, or social functions, terrorism is truly securitised. Evidence of its institutionalisation is demonstrated through the number of military operations deployed during the period examined. Also, the findings analysed and discussed in the previous chapter have shown that there is audience acceptance of these extraordinary measures, especially those from 2023 to 2025. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is institutionalisation of terrorism threat and the use of exceptionalism in Nigeria between 2023 and 2025.

Furthermore, Boko Haram and ISWAP (Islamist terrorism) are the only types of terrorism being targeted. Regarding Theme 3, which examines the types of terrorism treated as “existential threats” through extraordinary responses, findings indicate that Boko Haram and ISWAP pose existential threats during the period of focus. Findings further highlight how measures and responses to terrorism activities may be considered as extraordinary, given that a specific terrorism type and specific group is the sole target of such extraordinary measures.

## **12.2 Theme 4: Reframing and normalisation of terrorism discourse**

It is difficult to imagine that extraordinary measures during 2023–2025 would also include reframing and normalisation of terrorism discourse, which is the case with Nigeria. Analysis of narratives and data for Theme 4, which is about reframing by identifying the perspectives which are omitted or moved away from a securitised framework, shows that there were attempts to move away from securitising Islamic terrorism. Theme 4 is also about normalisation of terrorism discourse, focused on identifying and analysing potential biases, political calculations, or evolving threat perceptions. Interestingly, 2021–2025 presidential speeches provided some evidence to analyse reframing and attempts by political leaders to normalise terrorism discourse by moving away from the security agenda to a more socio-economic one. For example, (In Appendix A, speeches numbers 7 and 11), President Buhari on two occasions made remarks that:

*“..... we know that military gains do not provide the whole solution. Without security, economic opportunity remains fragile. Without economic opportunity, the propensity for conflict grows”* (State House, May 18, 2021).

*“The economic instability that the pandemic has wreaked has proven an effective recruitment tool for bandits and terrorists across the continent” (State House, December 12, 2021).*

Though not an attempt to blame the pandemic of 2020 as Boko Haram activities had existed prior to the pandemic, it shows the subtle attempt by the president within a year (as compared to 2.5 years of securitising speeches) to associate terrorism with socio-economic issues. President Tinubu also attempted to reframe or de-securitise terrorism discourse (Appendix A, speech numbers 1 and 8) to acknowledge that root causes may go beyond the security domain. In his speeches, he emphasised that:

*“... .. while seeking to address the root causes of terrorism, Africa must attack the roots that feed this evil branch, ransom and illegal mining.” “Those who think illegal mining has no connection with financing terrorism are solely mistaken” (State House, April 22, 2024).*

*“Our response to these threats must be multifaceted, while military solutions are indispensable, they must be complemented by strategies that address the root causes of insecurity- poverty, inequality, and the lack of opportunities for our youth ....” “.... Hard power may secure borders, but it is soft power through diplomacy, culture and shared values that builds bridges and binds us together” (State House, January 29, 2025).*

These findings indicate that there were subtle attempts, albeit minimal, when compared to the different securitising act speeches. Despite this comparison, it is evident that two presidents during 2021–2025 acknowledged other reasons for terrorism activities, their expansion and root causes were due to factors other than religious-ideological perspectives. Theme 3 and Theme 4 findings also show that while terrorism is being institutionalised and subjected to extraordinary measures between 2023 and 2025, there were also attempts to reframe or de-securitise terrorism in 2021 (by President Buhari) and between 2024 and 2025 (by President Tinubu). This pattern may also suggest that maybe attempts are made by the presidents to manage any backlash that may result from the institutionalisation of threat and use of exceptionalism.

### **13. Discussion of themes 3 and 4 findings**

Analysis of data that matches Theme 3 have facilitated the process for tracing types of terrorism being treated as “existential threats” through counterterrorism policies in the form of implementation of extraordinary measures. In this instance, extraordinary measures as outlined in **Table 4** were deployed through several military operations that overlap with one another between 2021 and 2025 even though there was change of power and political authority. Measures and responses align with securitisation process through the use of unique military operations, but the several military operations were not differentiated from the non-securitised forms of political actions.

While political narratives were used to justify the measures taken, thus the erosion of civil liberties, the expansion of the country to use surveillance and modern security technology for the purpose of fighting Islamist terrorism remains unjustified in any political speech. With respect to Theme 4, data has shown the perspectives that are omitted in the reframing of terrorism discourse in the reframing and de-securitisation process, while highlighting the main perspectives of focus. From the political

discourse analysed, there were no biases identified in the reframing of terrorism perspectives because both presidents acknowledged the socio-economic perspective of terrorism over a combined period of 2021–2025.

Throughout this period, the religious-ideological perspective [28, 29], the ethno-religious and identity-based perspective [8, 33, 34] and criminal perspectives [38, 48] were not the focus or the perspectives being de-securitised or reframed. The religious-ideological perspective was being securitised, and it became the focus of extraordinary measures, with a security-driven perspective serving as the counterterrorism strategy. These findings show that though there were subtle attempts by the political figures to use the socio-economic perspective to exclude securitisation of terrorism, a stronger series of evidence overlapped with the period of de-securitisation to support religious-ideological perspectives of terrorism were treated as “existential threats” and were met with the implementation of extraordinary measures.

Therefore, it can be said that it is the religious-ideological perspective that is being securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025. This securitisation contributed to the counterterrorism policies adopted, which are the extraordinary measures. Furthermore, religious-ideological perspective remains the main object referent that led to institutionalisation of terrorism threat, which the political leaders or actors used during this period as an alibi to adopt and deploy extraordinary measures through several military operations and use of advanced technology as well as surveillance.

While the finding on religious-ideological perspective as an explanation for prevalent terrorism perspectives in Nigeria is consistent with studies by Abah [28] and Koehler [29] examined in the literature review chapter, the contribution to knowledge is the finding that socio-economic perspectives appear to have dominated the de-securitisation and reframing narrative in 2021, and between 2024 and 2025. It is peculiar to see or identify multiple terrorism perspectives being used by political leaders or actors to dominate political discourse or speech acts as part of the securitisation process when terrorism is constructed as an existential threat carried out by a major terrorist group. The reasons, *why reframing failed to gain traction*, can be attributed to a lack of institutional reform, entrenched military dependency, for instance.

While Nigeria’s securitisation of terrorism has been shaped by its unique historical and geopolitical context, parallels can be drawn with other African states. For instance, Kenya’s response to the 2013 Westgate Mall attack marked a turning point in its national security discourse, leading to heightened surveillance and militarised counterterrorism measures [49]. Similarly, Ethiopia’s counterinsurgency rhetoric, particularly in relation to the Tigray conflict, has framed internal dissent as a threat to national unity and sovereignty. Unlike Kenya’s externally focused securitisation or Ethiopia’s internal ethno-political framing, Nigeria’s approach has oscillated between internal security imperatives and regional leadership responsibilities, reflecting its dual role as both a frontline state in the war on terror and a key factor in West African security governance.

## 14. Conclusion and recommendations

This research has been a discovery process where the knowns are confirmed and the unknowns are provided empirical explanations through securitisation theory. The topic of terrorism and its themes are not often straightforward, as shown throughout this research, to answer two central questions: 1) How has terrorism been securitised

in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025? 2) What perspectives on terrorism are securitised in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 that contributed to counterterrorism policies? While on one hand, research question one has shown that terrorism, particularly religious-ideological perspective, is securitised in political presidential speeches between 2021 and 2025 continuously by two different presidents, it also showed that the socio-economic perspective on terrorism is being used to reframe terrorism discourse.

Overall findings and results from this research have raised further questions for future researchers and policy and practice in the Nigerian context. The display and use of extraordinary measures in Nigeria over a prolonged period suggest that counterterrorism policy and practice need to improve to prevent the continued erosion of civil liberties. Policy should favour democratic accountability while balancing the national security agenda with upholding individual/group rights [50]. Though Abiade explored the role of artificial intelligence in counterterrorism surveillance, it is the aspect that encourages democratic accountability and the balance that prevents oversurveillance to be incorporated in the Nigerian context to minimise the use of extraordinary measures against a group.

Furthermore, terrorism persists in the country due to the continued and prolonged use of military operations, which are yet to match the severe socio-economic reforms that are required. While the rhetoric of the political leaders and actors has been shaping the public views on the success of military operations as counterterrorism measures, it is recommended that counterterrorism policy is improved to align rhetoric with grassroot engagement, inclusive governance, and the Resource Management Act. This policy recommendation would prevent terrorist groups from adapting their strategies to survive different military operations.

In terms of recommendations for practice, the Nigerian government and stakeholders need to consider a holistic counterterrorism strategy that includes the development of national counterterrorism measures having social, ideological, and economic elements besides military operations [51]. The purpose of this strategy is to prevent radicalisation, while including activities or practices that engage the community to promote peacebuilding projects within the affected communities [51].

Though education can promote peace and help counter extremism [52], the extraordinary measures and level of atrocities by the Boko Haram require stronger rehabilitation and community engagement projects than just education in order to address the root causes of radicalisation by terrorist groups. It is also recommended that future researchers investigate whether diverse perspectives on terrorism can drive both counterterrorism strategies and their de-securitisation in Western countries where terrorism has been prevalent in the recent years.

The recommendation is based on the notion that, while law exists in Nigeria, the counterterrorism strategy is neither as advanced nor driven by a policy framework like *CONTEST* in the United Kingdom, for example. This may account for why different perspectives were driving the extraordinary measures and what may be considered as the excessive military operations.

## **15. Future research**

Future research may also be based on the need to explore other dimensions of securitisation beyond military securitisation to determine how and whether overreliance on military response may aggravate the grievances of affected

communities and terrorist activities. It is unknown whether the military's extraordinary measures have created any form of economic, psychological, political, and/or cultural impacts in Nigeria.

Although securitisation theory does not include the impacts of extraordinary measures on the affected population, these impacts in the Nigerian context or elsewhere warrant critical examination or investigation by other researchers. Other recommendations for future research include comparative studies on Nigeria and other countries in West Africa, as well as the Horn of Africa, such as Somalia or Afghanistan in Asia.

Such a comparative study may offer insights into patterns of extraordinary measures and their impacts on the population, and the extent to which cultural or religious perspectives influence the acceptance of extraordinary measures in some of these countries.

### A. Links to sources for presidential speeches

**Table A1** consists of embedded links to the presidential speeches by President Buhari and President Tinubu, the two presidents of Nigeria between 2021 and 2025. It shows how the political discourse on terrorism and its securitisation evolved over this period by the two presidents.

| State House of Nigeria presidential speeches of Buhari and Tinubu (18 Political Speeches)                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| President Tinubu                                                                                                                                             | President Buhari                                                                                                                                                           |
| 1. President Tinubu Calls for Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre, Says Africa must Address Poverty, Social Injustice – The Statehouse, Abuja (April 22, 2024) | We've Made Impact on Security, Economy, Corruption, Says President Buhari, Urges Police to Deploy More Technology – The Statehouse, Abuja (June 16, 2022)                  |
| 2. Terrorism: UN Charter and not Charity must Undergird Future Partnership – President Tinubu – The Statehouse, Abuja (September 1, 2023)                    | President Buhari's Democracy Day Speech – The Statehouse, Abuja (June 12, 2022)                                                                                            |
| 3. At New ONSA Building, President Tinubu Tasks Security, Intelligence Agencies on Sharing Intel to Counter Terrorism – The Statehouse, Abuja (June 5, 2023) | President Buhari Signs Three Bills into Law – The Statehouse, Abuja (May 12, 2022)                                                                                         |
| 4. We will Secure our Forest and Enhance Surveillance in the Northwest, President Tinubu Assures in Katsina – The Statehouse, Abuja (May 3, 2025)            | Train Attack: Bandits Using Captives as Human Shields – The Statehouse, Abuja (May 2, 2022)                                                                                |
| 5. President Tinubu: We'll Continue to Equip the Military to End Insecurity in Nigeria – The Statehouse, Abuja (May 16, 2025)                                | President Buhari to Religious, Traditional Rulers: You Have Key Roles to Play in Tackling Insecurity – The Statehouse, Abuja (April 21, 2022)                              |
| 6. At Lake Chad Basin Govs' Forum: President Tinubu Demands Multifaceted Response to Security Threats – The Statehouse, Abuja (January 29, 2025)             | President Buhari Calls for more International Collaboration to Tackle Insecurity – The Statehouse, Abuja (August,2, 2022)                                                  |
| 7. At Lake Chad Basin Govs' Forum: President Tinubu Demands Multifaceted Response to Security Threats – The Statehouse, Abuja (January 29, 2025)             | Response from the Office of President Buhari to Today's Daily Trust Editorial: "Life has Lost Its Value Under Buhari's Nigeria – The Statehouse, Abuja (December 12, 2021) |

| State House of Nigeria presidential speeches of Buhari and Tinubu (18 Political Speeches)                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| President Tinubu                                                                                                                                                  | President Buhari                                                                                                                                 |
| 8. At 162 Army Day Celebration: President Tinubu Reaffirms Commitment to Welfare, Operational Capacity of The Armed Forces – The Statehouse, Abuja (July 7, 2025) | Independence Day Speech by President Buhari on the Occasion of Nigeria 61st Independence Anniversary – The Statehouse, Abuja (October 1, 2021)   |
| 9.                                                                                                                                                                | Address by His Excellency, Muhammadu Buhari, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria – The Statehouse, Abuja (September 24, 2021)           |
| 10.                                                                                                                                                               | Post COVID-19 Pandemic, Nigeria and France Must Seize the Chance to Strengthen Military and Economic Ties – The Statehouse, Abuja (May 18, 2021) |

**Table A1.**  
*State House of Nigeria presidential speeches of Buhari and Tinubu.*

## B. Links to sources for audience acceptance

**Table B1** consists of links to sources that show audience acceptance of the political rhetoric about terrorism and the counterterrorism approaches adopted by the presidents and the country over this period investigated.

|                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. TMC applauds FG, military over fight against terrorism   The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News (28 April, 2023, The Guardian Nigeria)            |
| 2. Go after more terrorism sponsors, bishop tells Tinubu, military (25th January, 2025, Punch News)                                                              |
| 3. Arewa group urges Tinubu to modernise military, pledges one million volunteers to fight terrorism - The Nation Newspaper (May 15, 2025, The Nation Newspaper) |
| 4. Nigerians hail military operations against terrorism - P.M. News (September 30, 2022, P.M. News, Nigeria)                                                     |

**Table B1.**  
*Terrorism and counterterrorism approaches.*

## C. Links to sources for extraordinary counterterrorism measures

(see Table C1)

| Timeline/<br>period             | Military<br>operations    | President(s)                             | News articles from reputable news sources                                                                            |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2021–2025<br>(October 19, 2021) | Operation<br>Safe Haven   | Buhari started<br>Ongoing with<br>Tinubu | Troops eliminate terrorists in North East – Army - Vanguard News                                                     |
| 2021–2025<br>(December 9, 2021) | Operation<br>HADIN<br>KAI | Buhari started<br>ongoing with<br>Tinubu | Highlights of Armed Forces of Nigeria Operations between 25 November and 9 December 2021 - Global Upfront Newspapers |

| Timeline/<br>period          | Military<br>operations      | President(s)                       | News articles from reputable news sources                                                              |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2023–2025<br>(July 4, 2025)  | Operation<br>Fasan<br>Yamma | Tinubu                             | Troops kill terrorist kingpins, arrest over 1191, rescue 543 hostages in three months - Tribune Online |
| 2023–2025<br>(July 4, 2025)  | Operation<br>Safe Haven     | Buhari started ongoing with Tinubu | Troops kill terrorist kingpins, arrest over 1191, rescue 543 hostages in three months - Tribune Online |
| 2023–2025<br>(July 4, 2025)  | Operation<br>Udo Ka         | Tinubu                             | Troops kill terrorist kingpins, arrest over 1191, rescue 543 hostages in three months - Tribune Online |
| 2023–2025<br>(July 4, 2025)  | Operation<br>Delta Safe     | Tinubu                             | Troops kill terrorist kingpins, arrest over 1191, rescue 543 hostages in three months - Tribune Online |
| 2023–2025<br>(July 10, 2025) | Operation<br>Hadin Kai      | Tinubu                             | Troops neutralise 24 terrorists in week-long offensive across Northeast                                |

**Table C1.**  
*The counterterrorism measure.*

### Author details

Shalom Kolawole<sup>1</sup> and Andrew Enaifoghe<sup>2\*</sup>

1 School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

2 School of Management Studies, Varsity College, Independent Institute of Education, Pretoria, South Africa

\*Address all correspondence to: [andrewenaifoghe@gmail.com](mailto:andrewenaifoghe@gmail.com)

### IntechOpen

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Onapajo H. Has Nigeria defeated Boko Haram? Appraising the counterterrorism approach under Buhari. *Strategic Analysis*. 2017;**41**(1): 61-73
- [2] Ugwueze MI, Onuoha FC. Hard versus soft measures to security: Explaining the failure of counter-terrorism strategy in Nigeria. *Journal of Applied Security Research*. 2020;**15**(4): 547-567
- [3] Ike TJ, Antonopoulos GA, Singh D. Community perspectives of terrorism and the Nigerian government's counterterrorism strategies: A systematic review. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. 2025;**25**(2):285-314
- [4] Adebayo AA. Implications of 'Boko Haram' terrorism on national development in Nigeria: A critical review. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. 2014;**5**(16):480-489
- [5] Jackson R. Security, democracy, and the rhetoric of counter-terrorism. *Democracy and Security*. 2005;**1**(2): 147-171
- [6] Githens-Mazer J. The rhetoric and reality: Radicalization and political discourse. *International Political Science Review*. 2012;**33**(5):556-567
- [7] Crawford NC. Institutionalizing passion in world politics: Fear and empathy. *International Theory*. 2014;**6**(3):535-557
- [8] Aghedo I, Osumah O. Insurgency in Nigeria: A comparative study of Niger Delta and Boko Haram uprisings. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 2014;**49**(2):208-222
- [9] Pisa K, Hume T. Boko Haram Overtakes ISIS as World's Deadliest Terror Group, Report Says. CNN; 2015. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/17/world/global-terror-report>
- [10] Campbell J, Harwood A. Boko Haram's Deadly Impact. Council on Foreign Relations. 2018. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/article/boko-harams-deadly-impact>
- [11] Akinola O. Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria: Between Islamic fundamentalism, politics, and poverty. *African Security*. 2015;**8**(1):1-29
- [12] Amao OB. A decade of terror: Revisiting Nigeria's interminable Boko Haram insurgency. In: *Ten Years of Boko Haram in Nigeria: The Dynamics and Counterinsurgency Challenges*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland; 2023. pp. 23-41
- [13] Makai CC, Fadola AB, Sholademi DB. Beyond security failures: The complexities of addressing Boko Haram in Nigeria. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews: International*. 2024;**24**(1):503-517
- [14] Meisels T. Defining terrorism—a typology. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. 2009;**12**(3):331-351
- [15] Garrison AH. Defining terrorism: Philosophy of the bomb, propaganda by deed and change through fear and violence. *Criminal Justice Studies*. 2004;**17**(3):259-279
- [16] Jackson R, Jarvis L, Gunning J, Breen-Smyth M. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; 2011. Available from: ProQuest eBook Central
- [17] Pasat AO. Terrorism-methods, types of terrorist activities and trends in the

development of modern terrorism.  
Review of Law and Social Studies.  
2024;1:49

[18] Agashi PGN. Terrorism in Nigeria: A critical analysis. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). 2020;25(3):47-54. Series. 7

[19] Olufunmilade FM. Terrorism and counter-terrorism in Nigeria: An overview of Boko Haram. AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society. 2017;7(1):135-146

[20] Rogers P. Contesting and preventing terrorism: On the development of UK strategic policy on radicalisation and community resilience. Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism. 2008;3(2):38-61

[21] Ehiane SO. Strengthening the African Union (AU) counter-terrorism strategy in Africa: A re-awakened order. Journal of African Union Studies. 2018;7(2):109-126

[22] Ehimate A, Enueme PO. Global war on terrorism in Africa: Rethinking Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies in North-Eastern Nigeria. International Journal of Economics, Environmental Development and Society. 2023;4(4): 458-467

[23] Olujobi OJ, Yebisi ET. Combating the crimes of money laundering and terrorism financing in Nigeria: A legal approach for combating the menace. Journal of Money Laundering Control. 2023;26(2):268-289

[24] Udo O, Agbai E. Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa and the illegal financial inflows: The nexus. Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research. 2024; 10(2):18-36

[25] Dami CD. Impact of terrorism, banditry and kidnapping on human

security in Nigeria. Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. 2021;6(8):299-305

[26] Chiu MM. Fighting future terrorism via sense of belonging at school: Teachers supporting poor students, immigrants, and language minorities. In: Social and Emotional Development for Diverse Learners: The Addition of Asian Perspectives. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore; 2025. pp. 45-63

[27] Ünal MC, Cafnik Uludağ P. Eradicating terrorism in asymmetric conflict: The role and essence of military deterrence. Terrorism and political violence. 2022;34(4):772-816

[28] Abah A. Exploring the Religious Motives of the Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria. Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies. 10698. United Kingdom; 2021. Available from: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/10698>

[29] Koehler D. Dying for the cause? The logic and function of ideologically motivated suicide, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice within the contemporary extreme right. Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression. 2022;14(2):120-141

[30] Olofinbiyi SA. On the Crisis of Boko Haram Terrorism: Causes and Perspectives. Oxfordshire, England: Routledge; 2023

[31] Onuoha FC. Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram? Vol. 5. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace; 2014

[32] Kandissounon JPF. Unstable socio-economic conditions and violent extremism: the case of Nigeria (master's Thesis). United States: The University of Texas at San Antonio; 2023

- [33] Nyiayaana K. State legitimacy and the dynamics of identity-based political conflicts in Nigeria. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*. 2021;14(1):105-114
- [34] Titus UM, Ogundiya IS. The national question and Nigeria's ethnic and identity crises. *African Identities*. 2025; 23(2):415-431
- [35] Loimeier R. Boko Haram: The development of a militant religious movement in Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum*. 2012;47(2-3):137-155
- [36] Amnesty International. Stars on their Shoulders. Blood on their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military. London, United Kingdom: Amnesty International; 2015
- [37] Omenma JT, Onyishi IE, Okolie AM. A decade of Boko Haram activities: The attacks, responses and challenges ahead. In: *Ten Years of Boko Haram in Nigeria: The Dynamics and Counterinsurgency Challenges*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland; 2023. pp. 1-21
- [38] Ojewale O. Shadow of death: The criminal economy of banditry and kidnapping in Northwest Nigeria. *Security Journal*. 2024;37(4):1680-1710
- [39] Maxwell JA. Interactive approaches to qualitative research design. In: *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*. 2nd ed. 2022. pp. 41-54
- [40] Taherdoost H. Data collection methods and tools for research; a step-by-step guide to choose data collection technique for academic and business research projects. *International Journal of Academic Research in Management (IJARM)*. 2021;10(1):10-38
- [41] Cheong HI, Lyons A, Houghton R, Majumdar A. Secondary qualitative research methodology using online data within the context of social sciences. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2023;22:16094069231180160
- [42] Mgboyenbi CV, Efeurhobo DO. Terrorism and political development in Nigeria. *International Journal of Institutional Leadership, Policy and Management*. 2023;5(2):275-283
- [43] Buzan B, Waever O, de Wilde J. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc; 1998
- [44] Bappah HY. Nigeria's military failure against the Boko Haram insurgency. *African Security Review*. 2016;25(2): 146-158
- [45] Walker A. *What Is Boko Haram?* Vol. 17. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace; 2012. pp. 1-14
- [46] Osisanwo A. Delegitimizing the Nigerian State and other anti-Boko Haram in selected messages of Abubakar Shekau. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. 2025;18(1):162-180
- [47] Deflem M, McDonough S. The fear of counterterrorism: Surveillance and civil liberties since 9/11. *Society*. 2015;52 (1):70-79
- [48] Zenn J. *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; 2020
- [49] Balzacq T. *Securitisation Theory. How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*; 2011
- [50] Abiade SF. Artificial intelligence surveillance in counterterrorism: Assessing democratic accountability and civil liberties trade-offs; 2025. *International Journal of Science and Research Archive*. 2025;16(1):89-107

[51] Saraiva R, Erfe A. Preventing violent extremism with resilience, adaptive peacebuilding, and community-embedded approaches. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*. 2023; **61**:101271

[52] Esmailzadeh Y. The role of education in promoting peace and countering terrorism. *The American Journal of Social Science and Education Innovations*. 2023; **5**(4):38-45



---

Section 4

Ethics, Economics, and  
Human Dimensions of  
Contemporary Terrorism

---



# Just War Theory and Non-State Actors: Ethical Dilemmas in Countering Al-Shabaab and Maritime Piracy in Kenya

*Brigid K. Gesami, Jacob Nunoo, Stephen Moore and Joshua Sebu*

## Abstract

The chapter challenges JWT's state-centric framework in asymmetrical conflicts by analyzing non-state threats using the concepts of *jus ad bellum* (justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war), which is also referred to as the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). JWT's reliance upon state sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction is affected by Al-Shabaab, which is motivated by religious ideology, and maritime piracy, which is attributed to systemic marginalization and the disintegration of governance. When coupled with the right to war and just war-making, it forms the aspects international humanitarian law. The degree to which Kenya's maritime interdictions and cross-border military interventions adhere to JWT principles is assessed. The results show that JWT's shortcomings in dealing with non-state actors whose tactics defy conventional warfare paradigms are exposed. Although Kenya's responses fit with *jus ad bellum* approaches, they overlook the structural drivers of conflict. Drawing on critical security studies (CSS), Al-Shabaab capitalizes on local grievances, while piracy flourishes in maritime spaces that have been formed by economic disparities. This highlights shortcomings in JWT's universalist assertions and encourages the synthesis of *jus in bello* safeguards and CSS's transformative justice strategies. Kenya confirms the insufficiency of mainstream JWT to meet the challenge of hybrid threats that involve coordinated actions which use both military and non-military means to undermine a state and the need for ethical frameworks that move beyond state-centered conventions, and that policymakers are required to juggle short-term security needs with the addressing of underlying drivers such as poverty and state collapse.

**Keywords:** Just War Theory, Al-Shabaab, maritime piracy, non-state actors, Kenya

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, interpersonal and intersocietal conflicts have been a persistent phenomenon. Warfare has always been pursued for multifaceted reasons:

expansion of territory, acquisition of resources, retaliation self-defense, and the spread of ideological or religious teachings [1]. Parallel concerns related to the ethical aspects of armed conflict have created ongoing philosophical and pragmatic discussion. Through context of contemporary interstate conflicts, where diplomatic failures can trigger military action, the notion of “just war” necessarily incites stern examination [2]. Modern international law holds that sovereign states are able to resort to armed conflict only when doing so is universally authorized by the principles that guide legitimate use of force. A review of Just War Theory requires double evaluation: *jus ad bellum*, which identifies standards for the ethical rationale for starting conflict, and *jus in bello*, which addresses moral conduct during military operations [3]. These mutually dependent principles together develop the ethical framework for assessing the decision to go to war (*ad bellum*) and the techniques used in its conduct (*in bello*), which act as key benchmarks under international humanitarian law (IHL) and normative political theory.

The reality of modern-day terrorism imposes meaningful complications on traditional understandings of the theory of the Just War and its core principles. With the emergence of new techniques of asymmetrical warfare adopted by non-state terrorist groups, which increasingly threaten global security frameworks, both developed and developing nations face destabilizing challenges to the infrastructure of sociopolitical organization. One of the most critical aggravating factors is the spread of transnational terrorist networks, which enhance their operational capability through increased organizational mobility, cross-country logistical integration, and the illegal acquisition of technologies [4, 5]. This transformation in the threat landscape is testing traditional ethical standards regulating the legitimate conduct of military action, particularly relating to proportionality, differentiation between fighters and non-combatants, and sovereignty considerations [6]. The networked nature of these groups further complicates the operation of *jus ad bellum* criteria—such as just cause and legitimate authority—while simultaneously testing the *jus in bello* imperatives concerning moderation in warfare. Therefore, counterterrorist measures require the redrawing of normative security frameworks to tackle the ethical and functional challenges created by the non-traditional nature of the threat [7].

The predominance of transnational terrorist networks marks a significant new wave of the threat to international security and the modern global system. This is characterized by their capability to exploit structural vulnerabilities of the modern nation-state. These actors operate through decentralization of operations, using delocalized command that allows leadership cadres to blend into civilian populations and escape detection and interdiction by traditional methods [8]. Their operational flexibility, combined with their status as non-state actors lacking territorial sovereignty or accountable governance, poses novel asymmetrical challenges to traditional counterterrorism models. These networks target states with weak institutional capacity, systematically fueling regional instability while pursuing the clandestine acquisition of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) capabilities, which would exponentially increase their destructive potential [9].

The global response to emerging security threats is closely tied to the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of international security policy and military intervention. For Kenya—as for many states—the Just War framework (both *jus ad bellum*

and *jus in bello* principles) offers essential normative frameworks for counterterrorism action [10]. This ethical framework requires strict observance of standards, such as legitimate authority (state-monopolized use of armed force), just cause (response to emergent threats), proportionality (judicious defensive responses), and discrimination (limitation of civilian harm) [11]. The transboundary nature of terror networks, which exploit ungoverned territorial areas and digital communication networks, however, tests traditional understandings of state sovereignty and the *jus ad bellum* requirement of territorial jurisdiction. As a result, Kenya's counterterrorism activities, particularly in cross-border contexts, therefore, face complex ethical dilemmas in balancing the imperatives of counterinsurgency needs with the prohibitions of international humanitarian law on extraterritorial projection of force.

This tension highlights the necessity of new reinterpretations of Just War Theory to reflect the ontological conditions of asymmetrical conflict zones, under which non-state actors specifically blur the distinction between combatant and civilian status. The ethical legitimacy of preemptive action, intelligence-led action, and multilateral security cooperation—as employed by Kenya in regional counterterrorism efforts—must be continually balanced against the need to uphold normative governance structures and protect human rights guarantees. These recalibrations are vital to preserving operational effectiveness and moral legitimacy. Traditional doctrines of warfare are becoming increasingly obsolete in the face of borderless threats.

This chapter examines the relevance of Just War Theory (JWT) to Kenya's dual security threats: the ideologically motivated insurgency of Al-Shabaab and the economically motivated phenomenon of maritime piracy. While Al-Shabaab draws its *modus operandi* from religious and ideational narratives, maritime piracy finds its origins in systemic economy-driven marginalization and the failure of governance in neighboring states. Precisely because these phenomena, though differing in their underlying motivations, offer key case studies for examining the capacity of JWT to grapple with non-state threats that cut across its traditional interstate framework, the chapter applies the dual lenses of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* in an analysis of these threats. Through the ethical critiques of state and international justifications for responding to mixed-security threats, the chapter deconstructs the state-centric obligations and assumptions about territorial sovereignty that underpin JWT. It highlights how the ideologically driven nature of terrorism alongside piracy's roots in economic desperation undermines state-focused obligations and assumptions of territorial sovereignty under JWT. The chapter also appraises whether counter-measures implemented by Kenya and its global allies—including preemptive interventions, maritime interdictions, and cross-border raids—comply with JWT's ethical dictates or contribute to unintended cycles of civil strife in weakly governed states.

## 2. Methodology

This research utilizes the qualitative, theory-based approach to discuss the ethical considerations involved in the use of Just War Theory (JWT) to address Kenya's non-state threats, namely Al-Shabaab and maritime piracy. The study uses the

comparative case design approach and is entirely reliant on secondary data to compare these different threats. Through theoretical engagement with JWT and Critical Security Studies (CSS), the study interrogates the normative and structural dimensions of asymmetrical conflicts. The methodology integrates thematic synthesis, critical discourse analysis, and comparative matrices to evaluate the ethical and practical challenges posed by these actors.

The comparative case study approach contrasts Al-Shabaab, driven by ideological and religious motivations, with maritime piracy, which emerges from economic despair and prolonged institutional collapse. This structured comparison focuses on their divergent motivations, operational strategies, and implications for JWT's state-centric principles. Al-Shabaab is examined through existing scholarly literature on its ideology and Kenya's counterterrorism responses, such as Operation Linda Nchi. Maritime piracy is analyzed using secondary studies on its socioeconomic drivers, including poverty, illegal fishing, and governance collapse in Somalia, alongside international maritime enforcement efforts.

The study critically engages two related theoretical frameworks: JWT [12, 13] and CSS [14, 15]. JWT offers the ethical standards for the assessment of Kenya's counter-measures in its application of *jus ad bellum* (just cause, legitimate authority, proportionality) and *jus in bello* (discrimination, proportionality in conduct) principles. The analysis draws on the structural inequalities and power dynamics by CSS to shed light on global security paradigms. This integrated theory enables the universally ethical assertions of JWT to be contextualized within the paradigm of asymmetrical conflicts. Secondary data sources rely on peer-reviewed academic analyses of the ideological orientation and economic motivations of Al-Shabaab and on policy reports by Kenya's National Security Council and global organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Other data sources include conflict datasets, such as ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data), UN Security Council resolutions and Kenyan anti-terror laws, as well as other legal materials. Data analysis uses thematic synthesis to trace common ethical problems—such as the proportionality of drone warfare and injury to non-combatants in anti-piracy operations. It also applies critical discursive analysis to explore how state actors frame “just cause” in official reports, and how scholars constructively analyze these claims. Comparative analysis is used to highlight differences in how Al-Shabaab and maritime piracy align with, or diverge from, JWT standards.

The ethical considerations are triangulated through minimizing bias through rigorous cross-validation of state-generated accounts with independent scholarly analyses. The study also applies theoretical reflexivity by acknowledging JWT's Western intellectual legacy and critically assessing its relevance to the African security context. Relying exclusively on secondary data only, the study avoids the risks associated with primary data collection, but remains constrained by the depth and validity of existing scholarship. Finally, it adopts a multidisciplinary perspective to explore JWT's malleability to deal with hybrid threats and stimulate discourse on ethical paradigms in the context of cross-border conflicts involving non-state actors.

## **2.1 Methodology table**

See **Table 1.**

| Component              | Approach                                                       | Data sources                                                                | Analytical tools                             | Ethical considerations                                              |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Comparative case study | Contrast Al-Shabaab (ideological) vs. piracy (economic)        | Scholarly case studies, ACLED datasets, AMISOM/EU NAVFOR reports            | Thematic synthesis, comparative matrices     | Contextualizing structural drivers (e.g., poverty, governance gaps) |
| Theoretical engagement | Synthesize JWT literature and CSS perspectives                 | Scholarly texts, UN Security Council resolutions, policy critiques          | Conceptual mapping, framework juxtaposition  | Avoiding Eurocentric bias in JWT application                        |
| Secondary data review  | Examine peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, legal documents | UNODC/World Bank reports, Kenyan counterterrorism laws, IMB piracy datasets | Thematic coding, critical discourse analysis | Cross-verifying state vs. independent sources                       |
| Conflict dynamics      | Analyze attack patterns and state responses                    | ACLED data, Human Rights Watch reports, EU NAVFOR operational reviews       | Trend mapping, proportionality assessment    | Scrutinizing civilian harm narratives                               |

**Table 1.**  
*Methods table.*

### 3. Theoretical framework: Just War Theory and critical security studies

The ethical complexities in combating non-state actors, such as Al-Shabaab and Somali maritime pirates in Kenya, are examined critically through the intersection of Just War Theory (JWT) and Critical Security Studies (CSS), two bodies of thought together addressing the normative and structural aspects of irregular conflicts. JWT, which is primarily concerned with *jus ad bellum* (justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war), offers a moral framework to analyze the legitimacy of state action [16], such as Kenya’s military incursions into Somalia (Operation Linda Nchi) or its engagement in joint international maritime patrols. For example, *jus ad bellum* requirements, such as legitimate authority and just cause, are put to the test when Kenya engages in cross-border counterterror missions without clear United Nations (UN) mandates or conceives of piracy interdiction as protecting global commerce at large, subjecting it to questions of proportionality and military operations other than war (MOOTW); which encompassed more police roles and a focus on CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation), combating Al-Shabaab by winning hearts and minds of the population, training local Somali militias, allegations of military members being involved in smuggling goods in and out of Somalia and raids aimed at cracking down on networks of radical Islamists within the Somali population in Kenya [17]. Likewise, *jus in bello* requirements such as distinction and proportionality are stretched to their limits, by reports of civilian deaths in aerial bombings or radicalization of the community from enforcement-heavy security raids. Yet, JWT’s state-centered, Eurocentric origins are unable to explain non-state actors such as Al-Shabaab, which disavows territorial sovereignty, or pirates, who take advantage of ungoverned maritime spaces—lacunae that demonstrate the theory’s limitations in postcolonial contexts.

Critical Security Studies (CSS) enriches the analysis by subjecting the structural inequities and power dynamics behind Kenya’s security problems to critical

examination. At the heart of CSS is the common presumption that insecurities and security threats are not merely objects of study or problems to be resolved but the result of deeper underlying social and political practice. CSS endeavors to interpret how these practices function and their political and social ramifications [18].

Critical Security Studies critiques the framing of Al-Shabaab as an “existential threat” on the grounds that such discourses legitimize militarized responses, while failing to recognize the grievances of marginalized Muslim populations in Kenya’s Coast and Northeastern provinces. Analogously, it situates piracy as an expression of structural violence and associates it with global capitalism’s exploitation of Somalia’s resources (illegal fishing, by foreign trawlers, for instance) and Kenya’s complicity in regional maritime governance failures. Critical Security Studies (CSS) disrupts the conventional ethical frameworks that reduce ethics to rigid dualisms (e.g., good vs. evil) by highlighting the influence of actors outside the state. It illustrates this, for instance, through the Somali Al-Shabaab (hybrid governance) along with piracy networks, where the description of these actors as exclusively “illegitimate” overlooks their multifaceted natures. This critique uncovers how the universal ethics of the Just War Theory (JWT) conceal the postcolonial histories along with neoliberal policies fostering instability.

Synthesizing CSS and JWT uncovers both points of convergence and tensions. JWT emphasizes ethical restraints on state violence, while CSS attempts to address the root causes of insecurity like poverty, governance failure, and historical exclusion. For example, while Kenya’s counterterror operations may be justified according to *jus ad bellum* norms as measures of national defense, they run the risk of being cyclical and entrenching patterns of violence where they fail to address the structural grievances highlighted in CSS. By contrast, CSS’s critique of structural inequality acknowledges the legitimacy of regulated force to protect the citizenry from terrorist attacks or piracy’s material dislocations, leaving space for a more realistic reinterpretation of JWT. Combined CSS and JWT promote an ethical praxis that aligns *jus in bello* safeguards, such as the protection of civilians, with a transformative response to redress structural inequalities. This two-eyed vision not only criticizes the inadequacies of traditional JWT to respond effectively to the challenge of non-state actors but also enriches discussion of reframing “just war” in an era where ideologically and economically motivated actors subvert traditional moral and legal distinctions. To put this in context, traditional models, even the “20th-century war ethics code,” are outdated and insufficient to deal with the transnational armed conflicts (TACs) of the twenty-first century, particularly the non-state actor and asymmetrical character of the 4th generation or 5th generation war. This type of conflict combines kinetic and ideological dimensions and challenges the existing international law mechanisms to respond to non-state actors and “armed attack” concepts as they are unclear and imprecise. The problem arises in applying the traditional rules to modern practices like using drones to kill individuals in foreign nations as it shows the dissolving of common moral and legal definitions and concepts in this complicated environment [19].

### **3.1 Theoretical framework**

See **Table 2**.

| Theoretical dialog   | Application to Al-Shabaab                                                                        | Application to maritime piracy                                                              |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Legitimate authority | JWT: Kenya's AU-mandated role in AMISOM vs. CSS: Local critiques of "neo-imperial" interventions | JWT: UNCLOS legitimizes naval patrols vs. CSS: Criminalization of poverty-driven piracy     |
| Just cause           | JWT: Defending territorial integrity vs. CSS: Securitizing political dissent                     | JWT: Protecting global trade vs. CSS: Ignoring root causes (illegal fishing, waste dumping) |
| Proportionality      | JWT: Balancing force with threat reduction vs. CSS: Militarization deepening marginalization     | JWT: Risk-averse naval tactics vs. CSS: Overpolicing coastal communities                    |
| Discrimination       | JWT: Avoiding civilian harm in drone strikes vs. CSS: Systemic profiling of Somali-Kenyans       | JWT: Minimizing casualties during hijackings vs. CSS: Dehumanizing pirate "others"          |

**Table 2.**  
*Theoretical framework.*

## 4. Literature review

### 4.1 Legitimacy of non-state actors

The legitimacy of non-state actors according to *jus ad bellum* standards is still controversial, as in the case of groups who justify the use of violence through ideological or resistance-based rationale, such as Al-Shabaab and Somali maritime pirates. Conventional Just War Theory (JWT) as understood through Walzer argues that states and states alone hold legitimate authority to engage in warfare, in effect excluding non-state actors [20]. This means that Conventional Just War Theory (JWT) and the associated legal frameworks were historically designed for and are rooted in warfare between states, viewing war primarily as an "affair of interstate relations." This modern conflict has been referred to as "largely dominated by violent non-state actors," who initiate "threats unimagined by traditional international law." The issue as to whether they are criminals or terrorists (or combatants) is a prime area of ambiguity. The international community has been unable to define and criminalize "terrorism" in international law despite repeated attempts since the 1920s and as a result has no distinct international crime of terrorism. This ambiguity means that transnational armed conflict (TAC) involving such groups "remains sandwiched in a no man's land somewhere between the regimes of law and war." Although groups such as those linked to the global Islamist movement and those that are now commonly referred to as "ISIS" are not legal combatants and as such are unable to be prosecuted for war crimes under conventional humanitarian law (IHL), treating terror as an act of war (as opposed to a crime) has an impact on legal restrictions such as due process. The "quasi-legal character of 'illegal combatants'" arose exactly because it is so hard to apply conventional combatant/criminal categories to such actors [21–23].

Nonetheless, there are scholars who question such rigidity and state that non-state actors within governance voids such as Al-Shabaab's de facto administration of areas in Somalia are able to gain derivative legitimacy through the provision of essential services or filling an administrative vacuum [24]. Al-Shabaab's framing of

its insurgency as a defense of Islam against foreign occupation and “apostate” regimes mirrors historical just cause claims, yet others counter that its transnational jihadist agenda constitutes ideological imperialism rather than legitimate self-defense [25]. Similarly, Orend emphasizes that governance alone cannot satisfy JWT’s right intention criterion, particularly when groups impose authoritarian rule, as seen in Al-Shabaab’s harsh enforcement of Sharia law [26].

In contrast, Somali pirates’ claims of resisting foreign exploitation such as illegal fishing by foreign trawlers in Somali waters invite comparisons to “resource self-defense” [27]. While such economic grievances resonate with critical scholars, JWT traditionally excludes material deprivation as a just cause for warfare, classifying piracy as criminal activity rather than a legitimate conflict. This dismissal, however, overlooks historical precedents of “social banditry” [28], where marginalized communities employ extralegal means to contest exploitation. Pirates’ lack of territorial control further undermines their standing under JWT, though their localized support networks complicate simplistic criminalization.

The spectrum of responsibility for civilian harm reveals further ethical tensions. Al-Shabaab’s deliberate targeting of non-combatants, as seen in the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya, blatantly violates *jus in bello* principles of discrimination. The group’s ideological framing of civilians as “complicit” in state policies reflects a distorted moral agency, extending culpability to non-combatants. Conversely, pirates primarily target commercial vessels, yet hostage-taking and ransom negotiations indirectly endanger civilians [29]. Dua highlights how structural complicity, such as foreign illegal fishing, exacerbates coastal poverty and blurs lines between perpetrator and victim, though JWT holds pirates accountable for proximate harms regardless of root causes [30].

Theoretical debates further expose tensions between state-centric JWT and critical perspectives. Traditionalists like Bellamy maintain that non-state actors lack moral standing to wage war, while critical security scholars critique JWT’s Eurocentric biases, arguing they ignore colonial legacies and neoliberal policies that fuel non-state actor emergence [31]. For instance, Kenya’s counterterrorism operations in Somalia are framed by critics as neo-imperialism, undermining local grievances that groups like Al-Shabaab exploit. Meanwhile, literature on rebel governance complicates JWT’s legitimacy binaries by proposing a continuum of authority in fragile states, where groups like Al-Shabaab gain provisional legitimacy through service provision [32]. Scholars challenge the moral parity of combatants, arguing that non-state actors engaged in unjust causes forfeit protections, a stance critics warn risks legitimizing state overreach, as seen in Kenya’s militarized responses [33].

Gaps persist in addressing economic grievances within JWT frameworks and evaluating the moral agency of non-state actors who blend governance with violence. Moreover, intersectional harms, including gendered effects of counterterrorism or environmental impacts of piracy, are still underexamined in ethical assessments. These shortcomings highlight the necessity of a framework that balances JWT’s *in bello* restrictions with critical analysis of structural violence to provide ethical assessments including consideration of state responsibility and the requirements of transitional justice in weak states.

## **4.2 Ethics of counter-responses**

The ethical aspects of regional and global counter-responses to non-state actors such as Al-Shabaab and Somali piracy have faced intense criticism on the principles

of Just War Theory (JWT). Regional responses, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1744 [34], and global responses such as the anti-piracy activities of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Operation Ocean Shield invoke legitimacy on the standards of JWT's *jus ad bellum* [33]. Williams contends that AMISOM is an example of multi-lateral legitimacy in the post colony, where regional blocs step in to stabilize "failed states" [35]. Its mandate to counter Al-Shabaab and assist the government of Somalia complies with just cause standards of collective defense and humanitarian protection [36]. So too are the anti-piracy activities of the NATO, founded on The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and resolutions of the Security Council formulated as protecting global trade and humanity, though scholars debate whether defense of business interests crosses the line into JWT's "supreme emergency" [37]. Under *jus in bello*, proportionality and discrimination are controversial. AMISOM's employment of heavy weaponry in civilian areas, as in the 2016 Battle of Mogadishu, has faced criticism for causing civilian deaths, with Human Rights Watch [16] recording indiscriminate shelling and sex crimes that contravened the laws of proportionality. Conversely, NATO's emphasis on non-lethal tactics (e.g., disabling pirate vessels) is lauded as a model of restraint [38]. However, incidents like the 2012 Enrica Lexie shooting, where Italian marines killed Indian fishermen misidentified as pirates, reveal persistent risks of collateral damage [39].

Critiques of disproportionate force highlight how militarized responses often exacerbate harm. AMISOM's Afgoye offensive displaced 12,500 Somalis, illustrating failures to discriminate between combatants and civilians [40]. Such tactics led to counterinsurgency failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, whereby overwhelming force radicalized populations. Kenya's Operation Linda Nchi faced similar backlash for collective punishment of Somali-Kenyan communities, blurring counterterrorism with ethnic profiling [41]. *Jus post bellum* concerns regarding due process arise with regard to detention of suspected pirates in facilities like Kenya's Shimo la Tewa prison, often without trial [42]. *Just post bellum* in this case refers to "the body of laws, norms, and principles that apply during the transition from war to peace" [43]. AMISOM's lack of accountability mechanisms, compounded by troop-contributing nations' domestic amnesty laws, erodes compliance with *in bello* norms [44].

Protracted occupation and mission creep (a gradual shift in objectives during a military campaign) also challenge JWT's last resort and reasonable chance of success criteria. AMISOM's 15-year presence in Somalia, initially a short-term stabilization effort, has been criticized as neo-colonial overreach [45]. Its failure to build Somali security capacity due to corruption and institutional weakness perpetuates dependency, violating JWT's emphasis on sustainable outcomes [46]. NATO's anti-piracy missions, though time-bound, face parallel critiques for neglecting root causes like poverty and illegal fishing, prioritizing symptom suppression over structural solutions [47].

Scholars propose recalibrating JWT to address asymmetrical realities. Some advocate for recognizing regional coalitions as legitimate authorities in state collapse scenarios, contingent on multilateral oversight. There is an urge for balancing military necessity with community-centric harm mitigation, as seen in AMISOM's later "hearts and minds" outreach [48]. There is also a call for integrating critiques of structural violence, such as foreign exploitation of Somali resources, to ensure counter-responses address systemic inequities [49].

While AMISOM and NATO interventions invoke JWT principles, persistent issues of disproportionate force, civilian harm, and mission drift reveal gaps between theory

and practice. Ethical counter-responses demand evolving frameworks that prioritize accountability, structural justice, and postcolonial critiques to navigate the complexities of asymmetrical conflict.

#### **4.3 Kenya's framing of its counterterrorism strategy in Somalia**

Kenya framed its counterterrorism initiative, Operation Linda Nchi, as a military strategy launched in 2011 to combat terrorism in the region, specifically targeting Al-Shabaab. This operation was initiated in response to the destabilization of statehood caused by terrorism and specific incidents, such as the kidnapping of tourists [50]. The framing of Operation Linda Nchi as a counterterrorism initiative was built around several key aspects. First, it focused on direct action against Al-Shabaab, identified as the primary terrorist threat, with the goal of fighting and weakening the group. Second, the operation was presented as a necessary response to broader security threats that were destabilizing the region. Third, Kenya emphasized the collaborative nature of the operation, undertaken in partnership with The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and the Ethiopian military, with support from the U.S. Air Force [51]. This regional and international cooperation underscored the collective effort to address terrorism. Additionally, the operation aimed to weaken Al-Shabaab's capabilities, reportedly achieving this through the capture of leaders and the killing of militants. Finally, the integration of Kenyan forces into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) further positioned Operation Linda Nchi as part of a larger regional peacekeeping and counterterrorism initiative in Somalia [52].

Kenya did not directly seek the United Nations Security Council's approval to combat terrorism in Somalia, but rather Operation Linda Nchi was initiated by the government of Kenya in October 2011 as a unilateral military strategy to combat terrorism in the region [53]. The decision to intervene was made quickly by a small group within the Kenyan government by invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, which relates to the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a member of the United Nations [54]. Subsequently, Kenya sought to have its troops integrated into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is a regional peacekeeping mission operated by the African Union (AU) with the approval of the UN in Somalia. The UN Security Council had given a "favorable response" but had not yet provided formal assent [55]. AMISOM requires Security Council "authorization" to increase its force level and to accept a Kenyan troop contribution. Furthermore, the initial UN Security Council Resolution 1725, which established AMISOM, prohibited neighboring states from deploying troops to Somalia, and this prohibition had not been formally lifted by the time Kenya was going into Somalia [30].

Following Kenya's military interventions in Somalia from 2011, "the continuous runaway Al-Shabaab attacks and the proliferation of militant groups in Somalia challenged the conventional wisdom that linked the Kenyan military operation to strong regional cooperation for peace" [56]. This suggests that the initial military response did not effectively curtail the threat posed by Al-Shabaab. This poses the question of whether the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF's) presence in Somalia was genuinely to safeguard Kenya's borders or if it represented a gray zone tactic in pursuit of other hidden national interests, further questioning the primary objective and effectiveness of the military operation.

#### **4.4 Moral ambiguities in fragile states**

Fragile states, characterized by governance collapse, institutional decay, and sociopolitical instability, often become fertile ground for the rise of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), whose emergence is deeply intertwined with state failure and foreign intervention. In Somalia, the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991 left space for Al-Shabaab to build territorial footholds by combining ideological indoctrination with quasi-administrative activities including taxation and the settlement of disputes [34]. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), militias such as the M23 capitalized on mineral areas unclaimed by the state, using illegal extraction to finance insurgencies and tacitly benefiting transnational corporations through resource extraction [57]. Foreign interventions, under the pretext of stabilizing, all too often aggravate fragility. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), for example, set out to disassemble Al-Shabaab but was faulted for indiscriminate warfare in populated areas that dislocated populations and intensified grievances, unintentionally mobilizing the very actors it aimed to disable [55]. These examples reveal how NSAGs become both symptoms and beneficiaries of structural global inequalities.

The ethical consequences of describing NSAGs as "terrorists" or "pirates" disclose an uneasy tension between securitization and structural justice. Calling groups such as Al-Shabaab "terrorists" in the name of UN Security Council resolutions limits policy response to militarized counterterrorism, excluding debate around clan marginalization, foreign intervention, or governance failure [58]. This replicates the "War on Terror" strategy in the case of Yemen, where targeted killings by drone favored gains on the ground but did not address causal politics of political exclusion or poverty, leading to cycles of violence [59]. So, too, Somali pirates, prosecuted as criminals under global law, are seldom understood as actors reacting to the foreign exploitation of the marine resources base. NATO's anti-piracy operations secured shipping lanes but forgot about underlying drivers such as illegal fishing and toxic waste dumping by foreign ships that destroyed livelihoods along the coast [60]. This discloses a moral imbalance where Western states globalize the criminalization of piracy but disregard how the states themselves fuel its causes. Legal concepts enlarge these ethical dilemmas: in international humanitarian law (IHL), NSAGs are not formal combatants and are therefore subject to domestic criminal prosecution, instead of the privileges extended to state militaries [53]. This uncertainty allows states to disregard proportionality, as in Kenya's Operation Linda Nchi, where counterterrorism is conflated with collective punishment of Somali-Kenyan populations, feeding on existing ethnic cleavages [61].

Addressing these normative complexities requires a transition from securitized categories to root-cause responses. The Fragile States Index highlights areas such as "group grievance" and "uneven development" as essential to the analysis of fragility, yet militarized responses tend to disregard these factors [62]. Somaliland's hybrid system combining traditional guurti councils and modern institutions shows how local agency can de-escalate violence without external intervention, prioritizing institution-building at the grassroots level to the exclusion of externally imposed practices [63]. Participatory models provide ethical alternatives: in Mozambique, community-based disarmed demobilization programs confronted ex-combatants' economic complaints, as compared to top-down counterterrorism policies that breed bitterness [41]. In turn, reformulating Just War Theory (JWT) to include accountability for structural violence, for example holding external corporations accountable for the exploitation of resources, recouples ethical assessments of conflict [26].

## 5. Results

This section presents findings from the comparative analysis of Just War Theory's applicability to Al-Shabaab and maritime piracy in Kenya, followed by a critical discussion of theoretical and practical implications for security policy and ethical frameworks.

### 5.1 *Jus ad bellum* considerations in countering Al-Shabaab

The analysis demonstrates the major tensions involved in the application of classical *jus ad bellum* standards to Kenya's counterterror operations against Al-Shabaab. The principle of legitimate authority is seriously compromised in cross-border interventions, where Kenya's military incursions into Somalia (as in Operation Linda Nchi) were conducted without clear UN Security Council authorization. These interventions existed in an uncertain space between preemptive war and self-defense, which makes just cause assessments intricate. Secondary data analysis shows that the Kenyan authorities persistently articulated these interventions as responses to immediate threats to security, including tourist kidnappings and cross-border incursions, and as such appealed to the JWT doctrine of self-defense. Critical security scholarship, however, questions the articulation, proposing instead economic and geopolitical reasons beyond immediate response to threats.

The right intention criterion underscores further ethical nuances. Although official stories stressed defensive safeguarding of Kenyan sovereignty and civilian populations, policy documents and operational trends indicate various intentions, such as buffer zone creation, containment of refugees, and safeguarding of financial interests in prospective infrastructure schemes. These dual motivations complicate the unproblematic JWT applications by introducing possible contraventions of the unitary humanitarian goal long demanded by the theory. Proportionality in military operations is hard to attain. Kenya's border operations against Al-Shabaab in Somalia, especially Operation Linda Nchi (2011), sought to disable the group but instead prompted retaliation. Although Kenyan forces expelled Al-Shabaab from strategic places like Kismayo, the group shifted its strategy and began to conduct intensified attacks within Kenya; for example, the 2013 Westgate Mall massacre in Nairobi, the 2014 Mpeketoni village massacre, and the 2015 Garissa University terror attack where 148 students died and security agents injured. Far from delivering a "mortal blow," Kenya's intervention escalated the violence, revealing how foreign military missions can aggravate local security threats [64]. This indicates possible failures in fulfilling the reasonable chance of success criterion, as military interventions seem to have deepened, instead of reducing the threat to security.

### 5.2 *Jus in bello* violations in Al-Shabaab conflict

Findings regarding *jus in bello* principles indicate systematic violations on the part of both Al-Shabaab and state forces. Al-Shabaab habitually violates the requirements of discrimination by intentionally targeting civilian populations through assaults on shopping centers, universities, and infrastructure for transportation. Their ideological construct specifically repudiates JWT's normative limitations as it posits violence directed at non-combatants as religiously ordained and tactically essential, or entirely outside the ethical limits of standard warfare morality.

Also, of particular concern are abuses from state security forces. Counterterrorism activities in Kenya's northeast have been found to demonstrate

patterns of discriminatory actions against Muslim and ethnic Somali populations through arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions against the *jus in bello* norm of proportionality and against the norm of discrimination [65]. These actions, albeit justified through rhetoric that frames them as requirements of security, functionally undermine the moral authority JWT seeks for legitimate actors at state level. The proportionality principle in the use of force is hardest to determine since the asymmetrical character of the conflict obscures the standard benchmarks. Secondary sources from human rights agencies record scores of civilian deaths at the hands of Kenyan air raids along Somalia's Gedo area and pose the question of whether military necessity ought to include such collateral harm. This proportionality question is the very essence of the dilemma: how to quantify proper use of force in fighting an enemy that systematically inserts itself into civilian societies.

### 5.3 Maritime piracy through the JWT lens

#### 5.3.1 Economically driven violence and just cause

The application of *jus ad bellum* to maritime piracy poses very different dilemmas than are found with ideologically motivated terror. Analysis shows that piracy arises largely out of desperate economic rather than political grounds, which hinder just cause assessments for pirates as well as counter-piracy missions. Pirates tend to justify what is done as legitimate economic defense against illegal fishing and the dumping of toxic wastes by other nations' ships in the form of a distributive justice claim beyond the scope of JWT. On the other hand, piracy is a codified crime under customary international law and UNCLOS, defined by acts committed for "private ends," whereas terrorism lacks a universal definition and is driven by political or ideological objectives, meaning actions like hijacking for political ends do not strictly constitute piracy under UNCLOS. Despite this lack of a specific international crime of terrorism, the international community, through binding Security Council resolutions like 1373, places obligations on states to prevent and suppress terrorism, including actions involving their flag vessels or territories. Under international law, particularly UNCLOS, coastal states possess varying levels of authority in different maritime zones to address piracy at sea. While the use of force is possible for interdiction or enforcement, it must adhere to principles of necessity and proportionality [66].

For the states carrying out anti-piracy activities, just cause usually is expressed in terms of defending global trade and innocent passage rights. Yet, the disproportionate focus on safeguarding business interests at the expense of addressing the creation of piracy through poverty, illegal fishing activities, and governance shortfalls is what the findings indicate. This selective focus hints that business imperatives, not holistic security solutions, dictate counter-piracy missions.

The legitimate authority standard is particularly challenging in the maritime environment, where areas of overlapping jurisdiction between territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and international waters generate areas of juridical uncertainty. International missions by The European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) and multinational patrols are conducted under UN Security Council mandate, meeting formal requirements for JWT but challenging state sovereignty in regions. Kenya's engagement in such endeavors falls in an ambiguous space between national defense and safeguarding global common space.

### **5.3.2 Conduct in anti-piracy operations**

*Jus in bello* considerations in counter-piracy present less complicated ethical dilemmas than counterterrorism military action. Analysis indicates that international naval forces tend to exhibit greater observance of the principles of discrimination, with few civilian casualties in interdiction operations. Yet, concern relative to proportionality arises in detention policy and modes of private security contractor employment, wherein different standards of restraint are exercised and result in controversial instances of excessive use of force against suspected pirates.

The differential application of combatant status to pirates and terrorists is an important discovery. Terrorists are increasingly dealt with as unlawful combatants beyond the ordinary writ of law, yet pirates enjoy clearer status under the law of the seas, leading to more regularized judicial procedures. That differential shows how the economic construction of piracy, as compared to the existential security construction of terror, has substantively different ethical and legal dispositions, despite both including non-state violence.

### **5.4 Comparative analysis: Ideology versus economic motivation**

The comparative evaluation demonstrates that the applicability of JWT differs incredibly among ideologically motivated and economically motivated non-state actors. Al-Shabaab openly rejects the normative underpinnings of JWT, adopting forbidden practices under traditional war ethics and justifying them on the basis of alternative ethical paradigms founded on religious interpretation. Pirates, on the other hand, seldom speak ideologically against global norms but act opportunistically in governance voids. This doctrinal difference generates disparate ethical discourses: Perhaps, Al-Shabaab terrorism is a competing system of norms that disputes the universality claims of JWT, whereas piracy is an erosion of order that falls short of challenging JWT's ethical precepts.

State responses are also divergent in ethical rationale and actual conduct. Counterterrorist activities often appeal to existential threats to legitimize extreme actions, such as preventive detention, targeted killings, and intelligence activities that push or subvert traditional JWT limitations. Anti-piracy activities, as militarized as they are, are generally closer to rule of law paradigms and proportionate force. This difference shows that economic threats, though large, do not cause the same ethical exceptionalism as ideological threats that are perceived to attack state legitimacy itself.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 JWT's limited applicability to non-state conflicts**

The results indicate inherent limitations to the applicability of JWT to non-state security threats in Kenya and the wider East Africa. The state-centered origins of the theory founded on sovereign equality, territoriality, and mainstream military resources are not well suited to asymmetrical conflicts where operational contexts and power disparities are radically different from interstate fighting. Maritime piracy's stateless operational space and Al-Shabaab's transnational networks both blur the territorially defined ethical space that supports traditional JWT. These are

manifested most obviously in considerations of legitimate authority. JWT assumes legitimate violence stems from established sovereign powers acting within accepted international norms. Yet, the security landscape of Kenya is characterized by various overlapping powers, including formal state agencies, international coalitions, private military companies, and local defense forces. This makes straightforward application of JWT's authority standard challenging because counter-piracy and counterterrorist activities tend to include complicated chains of command across state frontiers.

In addition, *jus ad bellum*'s requirement of right intention is problematic when looking at the policy of Kenya. This analysis shows that counterterror and anti-piracy missions consistently act on many other ends at once, in addition to neutralizing imminent threats, such as regional influence extension, resource protection, and internal political expediency. These mixed ends undermine JWT's expectation of unitary humanitarian intent, and the implication is that modern-day military activities never meet the traditional moral standards of the theory.

## **6.2 Critical security studies (CSS) perspectives on JWT application**

Integrating Critical Security Studies insights sheds light on structural aspects that are underemphasized in mainstream JWT analyses. From the findings, it is clear that Al-Shabaab and maritime piracy arise from meaningful historical, economic, and political contexts and not merely as expressions of moral deviancy or opportunities for crime. Al-Shabaab taps into legitimate grievances by marginalized Muslim populations in Kenya's northeast and coastal areas and uses historical land disputes, political marginalization, and securitization of Muslim identities. Analogously, piracy arises due to the conditions of economic desperation fueled by illegal fishing, environmental degradation, and governance failure. This contextual perception complicates JWT's tendency to analyze conflicts as though they exist independently of structural causes. Security responses to take kinetic action against visible threats but not the grievances behind them meet JWT's short-term criteria of self-defense but may be breaching its long-term proportion and reasonable success requirements. Sustained security solutions, as the analysis implies, demand addressing the structural rather than merely the symptomatic expressions of violence, an approach missing in mainstream JWT paradigms.

## **6.3 Ethical implications for Kenya's security policy**

The ethical dilemmas that were identified in the course of the study pose important considerations for the formulation of Kenya's security policy. Existing practices reveal an excessive focus on military measures that meet immediate *jus ad bellum* requirements of self-defense at the cost of long-term security through harm to civilians, alienation of populations, and grievance creation. This implies the necessity for rebalanced practices that preserve defensive capacity with an overlay of addressing underlying causes structurally.

For Al-Shabaab, this would mean supplementing counterterrorism with meaningful political engagement with marginalized populations, redressing historical land disputes, and non-discriminatory security practices. For maritime piracy, success demands the coordination of naval interdiction with the provision of economic development opportunities, enforcement of fishing regulations, and the strengthening of governance capacity within the coastal population. These multifaceted responses are more in line with the reasonable chance of success standard of JWT because they target causal components as opposed to treating symptoms.

#### **6.4 Theoretical implications: Toward a revised JWT framework**

The results demand the rethinking of JWT's application to modern non-state threats. Although the core principles of the theory are still good ethical benchmarks, its application has to be adjusted to the realities of asymmetrical conflict. The three substantive revisions are proposed to achieve effective application of JWT to non-state actors: First, legitimate authority judgments need to move beyond state-centered analyses to include considerations of structural justice, consent by the community, and effects on human security. Second, just cause decisions should consider not just imminent threats but also structural violence that causes insecurity. Third, reasonable prospects of success standards should give greater weight to durable peace as opposed to short-term military successes, necessitating integrated approaches to security that address the causes. These revisions would recast JWT as an interstate ethical theory, one that can inform responses to sophisticated non-state threats such as Al-Shabaab and seaborne piracy. This adaptation maintains the essential normative commitments of JWT but recognizes the unique ethical dilemmas of the new security environments.

#### **7. Limitations and future research directions**

The findings are subject to several limitations. Use of secondary data prevents access to classified operational information that makes it possible to conduct more nuanced ethical judgments about particular counterterrorism and anti-piracy operations. Furthermore, the focus on Kenya in the study makes generalization to other regional contexts, exposed to similar non-state threats, problematic. Future studies should overcome these limitations using comparative studies on the application of JWT in various national contexts and incorporating more detailed examination of the conduct of certain operations, where primary data become accessible. Of greatest potential are studies on how affected populations within regions view the justice of non-state and state security responses. These analyses would inform on how JWT principles operate in practice, bridging abstract theoretical frameworks and community-rooted understandings of legitimate security provision. Further, longitudinal studies of how justifications change over the course of prolonged conflicts will help in highlighting the situational nature of ethical reasoning under conditions of asymmetrical warfare.

#### **8. Conclusion**

This chapter has critically examined the utility of Just War Theory (JWT) against the twin security threats facing Kenya: Al-Shabaab's ideologically motivated insurgency and the economically motivated non-state crime of maritime piracy. Through the lens of *jus ad bellum* (justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war), it has raised the ethical questions attendant on bringing traditional state-centered frameworks to bear on asymmetrical conflicts. The analysis highlights the inadequacy of JWT in grappling with the complexity of non-state threats, whose motives, modes of operation, and effects cross the bounds of traditional warfare modes.

Al-Shabaab's ideational construction of violence and the economic desperation of maritime piracy reflect the different motivations behind the non-state threats. Al-Shabaab undermines JWT's tenets by repudiating the sovereignty of the land and leveraging religious discourse to legitimize the uses of violence, whereas piracy is

the symptom of endemic economic exclusion and institutional disintegration. These differences make it challenging to ethically judge counter-measures because JWT's state-centered standards of legitimate authority and territorial jurisdiction do not consider the decentralized and transnational nature of these actors.

Kenya's anti-piracy and counterterrorism policies, including cross-border military actions, anticipatory maneuvers, and maritime interceptions, have also undergone an assessment through the lens of JWT's ethical demands. Although such actions might be justifiable according to *jus ad bellum* standards, such as just cause and proportionality in certain situations, they also pose serious risks of civilian injury, radicalization, and sustaining cycles of violence. The ethical dilemmas involved in balancing operational effectiveness and normative commitments underline the necessity for greater complexity in addressing counter-hybrid threats.

The incorporation of Critical Security Studies (CSS) has yielded insights into structural inequalities and the resultant power dynamics underpinning Kenya's security environment. The critiques within CSS exposed the manner in which securitization discourses obscure underlying causes of poverty, historical marginalization, and international economic inequality. For instance, Al-Shabaab's tactics take advantage of marginalization in Kenya's Muslim populations, and piracy is fueled in stateless waters characterized by the inequities of global capitalism. These structural considerations undermine the universalist ethical assertions of JWT and highlight the necessity to redress systemic drivers of insecurity in conjunction with short-term tactical interventions.

Ultimately, the chapter is urging an overhaul of JWT in order to more adequately take into consideration the ontological realities of non-state actor-led asymmetrical conflicts. An overhaul of JWT needs to include both *jus in bello* safeguards like the prevention of civilian harm and structural inequity-focused transformative responses popularized by CSS. Synthesizing these paradigms enables policymakers to implement ethically informed policies capable of addressing short-term security needs while fostering long-term justice and stability. The case of Kenya's dealings with Al-Shabaab and maritime piracy best exhibits the shortcomings of the traditional JWT in combating the hybrid threats of weak states. These case studies demonstrate a fundamental flaw in existing ethical models: state-centric models are not adequate anymore. In order to deal with conflicts in the modern era, ethical models have to adapt to respond to the multifaceted interplay between ideology, economic forces, and governance systems. It is only with such an adaptive response that states such as Kenya are able to deal with non-state actors and procure both the operational effectiveness and the ethical legitimacy needed.

## Acknowledgements

This research project could not have reached completion were it not for the critical support and resources available through the Africa Center for Excellence in Coastal Resilience (ACECOR) at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

## Funding

The author(s) declare financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article from the Africa Center for Excellence in Coastal Resilience (ACECoR), University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## **Author details**

Brigid K. Gesami<sup>1\*</sup>, Jacob Nunoo<sup>2</sup>, Stephen Moore<sup>3</sup> and Joshua Sebu<sup>4</sup>

1 Africa Center for Excellence in Coastal Resilience (ACECoR), University of Cape Coast, Ghana

2 Department of Applied Economics, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

3 Department of Mathematics, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

4 Department of Data Science and Economic Policy, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

\*Address all correspondence to: bgesami@stu.ucc.edu.gh

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] World Economic Forum. The Global Risks Report 2025. 20th ed. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum; 2025. Available from: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/> [Accessed: April 30, 2025]
- [2] MacDougall J, Ender MG, editors. Teaching the Sociology of Peace, War, and Social Conflict: A Curriculum Guide. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association; 2003
- [3] Dworkin A. Individual, not collective: Justifying the resort to force against members of non-state armed groups. *International Law Studies*. 2017;**93**:476-525
- [4] Lele A. Asymmetric Warfare: A State vs Non-State Conflict (Guerras Asimétricas: Un Conflicto Entre Estado Versus Actores No Estatales) [Internet]. OASIS No. 20, Julio–Diciembre 2014. 2015. Available from: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2574274>
- [5] Patterson E. Just War Theory & Terrorism. Virginia Beach, VA: Providence; 30 Nov 2016. Available from: <https://providencemag.com/2016/11/just-war-theory-terrorism/> [Accessed: April 30, 2025]
- [6] Ghaffar H. Legal and ethical implications of targeted killings using UAVs: A comparative analysis of targeted killing operations in the US and Israel [bachelor's thesis]. Malmo, Sweden; 2024
- [7] Lietzau WK. Old laws, new wars: Jus ad bellum in an age of terrorism. *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*. 2004;**8**:383-454
- [8] Miklaucic M, Brewer J, editors. Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press; 2013
- [9] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Countering Terrorism. Brussels, Belgium: NATO; 2024. Available from: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm)
- [10] Kimiti PG. The law of armed conflict and counterterrorism: A case study of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) [unpublished postgraduate diploma project]. Nairobi, Kenya: University of Nairobi, Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies; 2019
- [11] Johnson MW. Just-war theory and future warfare [master's thesis]. Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College; 2000
- [12] Orend B. Jus post bellum: The perspective of a just-war theorist. *Leiden Journal of International Law*. 2007;**20**(3):571-591. DOI: 10.1017/S0922156507004268
- [13] Walzer M. The triumph of Just War Theory (and the dangers of success). *Social Research: An International Quarterly*. 2002;**69**(4):925-944. DOI: 10.1353/sor.2002.0030
- [14] Barkawi T. From war to security: Security studies, the wider agenda, and the fate of the study of war. *Millennium*. 2011;**39**(3):701-716. DOI: 10.1177/0305829811400656
- [15] Booth K. Beyond critical security studies. In: Booth K, editor. *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; 2005. pp. 259-278. DOI: 10.1515/9781685857356-015

- [16] Human Rights Watch. "The Power These Men Have Over Us": Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by African Union Forces in Somalia. New York: Human Rights Watch; 2014. Available from: [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/6067234/10d78164-c70d-4d72-a84b-a8ac3ac70ca4/somalia0914\\_4up.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/6067234/10d78164-c70d-4d72-a84b-a8ac3ac70ca4/somalia0914_4up.pdf)
- [17] Zwiefelhofer T. Kenya's military intervention in Somalia: Ten years of cross-border security issues and bilateral relations. *Obrana a Strategie/Strategy & Security Outlines*. 2022;22(1):21-34. DOI: 10.3849/1802-7199.22.2022.01.021-034
- [18] Aradau C, Huysmans J, Neal A, Voelkner N. Introducing critical security methods. In: Aradau C, Huysmans J, Neal A, Voelkner N, editors. *Critical Security Methods: New Frameworks for Analysis*. London: Routledge; 2014
- [19] Welch JP. The Grotius Sanction: Deus ex Machina. The Legal, Ethical, and Strategic Use of Drones in Transnational Armed Conflict and Counterterrorism [Internet]. 2019. Available from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/69816>
- [20] Walzer M. *Just and Unjust Wars*. New York: Basic Books; 1977
- [21] Brooks R. Take two drones and call me in the morning. *Foreign Policy*. 2012. Available from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/13/take-two-drones-and-call-me-in-the-morning/>
- [22] Mayer J. The predator war: What are the risks of the C.I.A.'s covert drone program? *The New Yorker*. Oct 2009. Available from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/26/the-predator-war>
- [23] United Nations Security Council. *UN Documents for Terrorism: Security Council Resolutions*. New York: United Nations Security Council; 2018
- [24] Fabre C. *Cosmopolitan War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012
- [25] Mengistu AA. From ideology to action: Analyzing Rapoport's terrorism framework in the context of Al-Shabaab's evolving extremist ideology in the Horn of Africa. *International Relations and Diplomacy*. 2024;12(5):196-207. DOI: 10.17265/2328-2134/2024.05.004
- [26] Orend B. *The Morality of War*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press; 2006
- [27] Bueger C. Piracy studies: Academic responses to the return of an ancient menace. *Cooperation and Conflict*. 2014;49(3):406-416. DOI: 10.1177/0010836714531228
- [28] Hobsbawm E. *Bandits*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 1969
- [29] Gross ML. *The Ethics of Insurgency: A Critical Guide to Just Guerrilla Warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2015. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781139094047
- [30] Coomaraswamy R. *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. New York: UN Women; 2015
- [31] Bellamy AJ. *Just Wars: From Cicero to Iraq*. Malden, MA: Polity Press; 2006
- [32] Arjona A, Kasfir N, Mampilly Z. *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2015
- [33] McMahan J. *Killing in War*. Oxford: Oxford Academic; 2009. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199548668.001.0001

- [34] Menkhaus K. Vicious circles and the security development nexus in Somalia. *Conflict, Security and Development*. 2004;4(2):149-165
- [35] Williams PD. Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007-2017. 2018
- [36] Brosig M. Introduction: The African security regime complex—Exploring converging actors and policies. *African Security*. 2013;6(3-4):171-190. DOI: 10.1080/19392206.2013.854088
- [37] Bueger C, Edmunds T, Stockbruegger J. *Securing the Seas: A Comprehensive Assessment of Global Maritime Security*. Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research; 2024
- [38] Bueger C. Learning from piracy: Lessons for maritime security governance. *Global Affairs*. 2015;1(1):33-42. DOI: 10.1080/23340460.2015.960170
- [39] Odello M. The Enrica Lexie incident and the status of anti-piracy security personnel on board. *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*. 2021;26(3):551-576. DOI: 10.1093/jcsl/krab014
- [40] Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2020: Somalia*. New York: Human Rights Watch; 2020. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/somalia>
- [41] Alden C. Making old soldiers fade away: Lessons from the reintegration of demobilized soldiers in Mozambique. *Security Dialogue*. 2002;33(3):341-356. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298084>
- [42] Tanchu TL. Pirates' right to bail or bond in Kenya's legal framework: A critical appraisal [master's thesis]. Nairobi, Kenya: University of Nairobi; 2016
- [43] Stahn C. Jus post bellum: Mapping the discipline(s). *American University International Law Review*. 2007;23(2):311-347
- [44] Lusiola MA. Key challenges facing AMISOM in military diplomacy in the horn of Africa. *African Journal of Empirical Research*. 2021;2(1):54-67
- [45] der Merwe V, Aron RC. The African Union as a human security actor: A study of the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) from 2007-2017 [unpublished master's thesis]. Cape Town (South Africa): University of Cape Town; 2021
- [46] Fafore OA. Cooperation between the African Union and the United Nations on peacekeeping operations in Africa [doctoral dissertation]. Durban, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal; 2020
- [47] Chalk P. *The Maritime Dimension of International Security: Terrorism, Piracy, and Challenges for the United States (RAND MG697)*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation; 2008
- [48] de Coning C, Tchie AEY, Rupesinghe N, Grand AO. *Understanding Ad-Hoc Security Initiatives in Africa [Policy Brief]*. Norway: Training for Peace Programme; 2021
- [49] Shilliam R. *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; 2015. p. 208
- [50] International Crisis Group. *The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia*. Africa Report No. 184. Brussels: International Crisis Group; 2012
- [51] Kelly RM. Policies and strategies in Kenya's response to the war on terror:

A critical evaluation [master's thesis]. Nairobi, Kenya: Strathmore University; 2020. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/11071/>

[52] Wakube C et al. Inside Kenya's War on Terror: Breaking the Cycle of Violence in Garissa (Version 2) [Report]. London, UK: Saferworld; 2017

[53] Sassòli M. International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies, and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing; 2019

[54] Nzau M, Guyo M. The challenge of securing Kenya: Past experience, present challenges and future prospects. *The Journal of Social Encounters*. 2018;2(1):37-59. DOI: 10.69755/2995-2212.1012

[55] Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Annual Report 2011: Africa. Paris: FIDH; 2011

[56] Onditi F. Kenya–Somalia Gray Zone Dynamism: Are Response Mechanisms Equipped with Appropriate Doctrine? London, UK: Qeios; 2023. DOI: 10.32388/GGWZLU [Accessed: April 30, 2025]

[57] Autesserre S. The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding, Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2010

[58] Kaldor M. New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press; 2012

[59] Gregory D. The everywhere war. *Geographical Journal*. 2011;177(3):238-250. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238044>

[60] Dua J. Hijacked: Piracy and economies of protection in the Western

Indian Ocean. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 2019;61(3):479-507. DOI: 10.1017/S0010417519000215

[61] Anderson DM, McKnight J. Kenya at war: Al-Shabaab and its enemies in Eastern Africa. *African Affairs*. 2014;114(454):1-27. DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adu082

[62] Fund for Peace. Measuring Fragility and Resilience. *Fragile States Index*. Washington, DC: Fund for Peace; 2022. Available from: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

[63] Renders M. Consider Somaliland: State-Building with Traditional Leaders and Institutions, *African Studies*. Vol. 26. Leiden: Brill; 2012. pp. 1-311

[64] Birkett DJ. The legality of the 2011 Kenyan invasion of Somalia and its implications for the *jus ad bellum*. *The Journal of Conflict and Security Law*. 2013;18(3):427-451. DOI: 10.1093/jcs/lkrt014

[65] The Advocates for Human Rights. Report on Enforced Disappearances in the Republic of Kenya under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in Response to the Combined 8th–11th Periodic Report of the Republic of Kenya Presented at the 57th Ordinary Session of the Commission, November 2015. Minneapolis, MN: The Advocates for Human Rights; 2015

[66] Rajput A. Maritime security and threat of a terrorist attack. *Pace International Law Review*. 2022;34(2):1-62. DOI: 10.58948/2331-3536.1418

# Economic Crimes of Terrorism (ECT): Implications for Global Growth and Development

*Udom E. Akankpo*

## Abstract

Economic crimes of terrorism (ECT) pose a significant challenge to global growth and development. These crimes impact state economies, international trade, and diplomatic relations. They influence national budgets, disrupt direct foreign investment, and diminish socio-economic activities in vulnerable regions. Contemporary terrorist groups increasingly engage in financially based operations—including kidnapping for ransom, money laundering, exploitation of natural resources, and the drug trade—that undermine legitimate economic systems and exacerbate national insecurity. Terrorism, as an economic crime, has resulted in increased security spending and reduced budgets in essential areas such as education, healthcare, industrialization, and rural development. The persistence of terrorism has created a cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment, leading to the emergence of new groups and widening global economic disparities while deterring investment. The rise of cryptocurrencies and other digital transactions has further enabled law breaking by facilitating economic crimes. It is argued that the international community should develop a comprehensive approach to address the financial crimes of terrorism, promote regional and global collaboration, strengthen intelligence efforts, and implement robust legal frameworks. Additionally, addressing the socio-economic elements that fuel terrorism will help reduce global insecurity and foster development.

**Keywords:** crime, development, economic crimes, growth, terrorism

## 1. Introduction

Economic crimes of terrorism (ECT) are a significant, yet often underappreciated, threat to national and regional stability, particularly in Africa. These crimes—including fraud, kidnapping for ransom, money laundering, and resource theft and control—transcend borders and distort markets. Perpetrated by actors ranging from local insurgent groups and kleptocrats to transnational criminal networks, economic crimes of terrorism undermine democratic governance, drain public resources, and weaken state institutions. In Nigeria and across African states, these crimes are often not isolated incidents but part of broader strategies used by terrorist and criminal groups to sustain their operations and exert control over resources and populations.

Despite increasing awareness of their scope, economic crimes of terrorism are still frequently treated as secondary issues or dealt with in isolation. Many states lack enforcement efforts, legal frameworks are outdated, and institutional capacity is often limited. Many African countries—Nigeria among them—struggle to mount effective, coordinated responses. Meanwhile, terrorist networks exploit these vulnerabilities to expand their operations and reach.

Terrorism and economic crimes share similarities; they also differ in motivation and methods. Their convergence has become increasingly evident. The 2025 Global Terrorism Index report from the Institute for Economics and Peace emphasizes an increase in the number of terrorist groups and countries experiencing terrorist attacks—from 58 to 66—while 45 countries have experienced deterioration in their ability to manage these threats, and only 34 are said to be improving [1]. The impact of these developments affects multiple sectors, such as tourism and foreign direct investment (FDI), while also disrupting commercial activities worldwide.

By definition, economic crimes of terrorism (ECT) involve deliberate actions by groups designated as terrorists who, through criminal threats and attacks, pursue political or religious ideologies while seeking illicit economic control. They deprive victims and states of resource control, using these gains to finance further crimes and, in some cases, to establish parallel governments within carved-out enclaves.

Groups identified as terrorist organizations increasingly commit economic crimes to achieve their goals and, in many cases, to profit directly. This is because economic crimes reinforce terrorism. As Akankpo et al. assert, ‘Economic crimes have increasingly become a lucrative venture, largely due to inadequate prevention, minimal obstruction, and lack of effective punishment’ [2]. The crime-terrorism nexus centres on the economy. The financial underpinning of terrorism extends its reach and persistence, affecting both infrastructure and civilian life.

Historically, terrorism was rooted in struggles for political control or religious freedom. Over time, however, it has evolved into a form of entrepreneurial dominance. Various forms of terrorism have emerged, including international, transnational, and domestic variants. Some are ideologically and operationally—including revolutionary, religious, vigilante, and single-issue terrorism [3]. While the roots of terrorism lie in political and religious ideologies, the shift toward economic crimes reflects the growing profitability of such operations. As with other forms of crime, economic terrorism may serve covert or latent objectives. Each group has its own history, political orientation, and goals. Examples include political terrorism (state-sponsored), religious terrorism (by religious extremists), narco-terrorism (drug-related), and, currently, economic terrorism (profit-driven)—all represent facets of this evolution.

Terrorist groups increasingly use violence to generate revenue. As noted in Boeke, these groups function as criminal enterprises, often hiding behind the veil of religious or political ideologies [4]. Terrorist groups now pursue both ideological and economic objectives to support their operations. As Dishman posits, many of today’s terrorist groups as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) primarily concerned with profit [5]. Neumann asserts that ‘terrorism is a method, which can be used by any person or group and for any motive’ [6]. The concept of ‘new terrorism’ emerged to describe shifts in operations, goals, and globalization. The evolution of terrorism is not just ideological—it includes changes in methods and means.

There is no universally accepted definition of terrorism due to the diversity of actors, motives, and methods. Yet terrorism is undeniably a crime, incorporating all the core elements of criminality: motive, means, and gain. These groups commit

economic crimes both before and alongside their violent acts. Financial gain is often a central focus.

Although terrorism takes many forms, this chapter focuses specifically on the economic crimes associated with terrorism, with particular attention to their impact on national and international economics, global stability, and sustainable development. These impacts often surpass the ideological aims of political or religious groups, revealing a dual motive: profit and violence. Analyzing these dynamics may offer insights into addressing the challenges posed by terrorism and enhancing the security of the global economy.

To enhance the response, this chapter suggests that, for a more effective response, the economic crimes of terrorism should be addressed as both security and economic threats, as well as strategic challenges to national development and stability. It outlines the scope and evolving nature of economic crimes linked to terrorism, explains why current efforts are inadequate, and recommends a more integrated and intelligence-driven framework. The discussion emphasizes that regional collaboration, stronger legal instruments, and preventive strategies are needed to reduce impunity and improve resilience, especially within the African context, where the impacts are more acute.

This chapter presents a qualitative analysis of the implications of terrorism and economics, with a focus on international growth and development. It is structured into five sections, each addressing key themes: economic crimes and terrorism, financing of terrorism, a review of terrorist acts as crimes, economic crimes associated with terrorism, and the broader impact of terrorism on global growth and development. Each section draws on existing literature concerning terrorist activities to evaluate their economic impacts, with particular attention to the ways in which different groups engage in economically motivated crimes. Recommendations emphasize the importance of international collaboration in areas such as legal frameworks, border security, and technological monitoring systems.

## **2. Economic crimes and terrorism**

Historically, terrorism was predominantly driven by religious and political ideologies. However, beginning in the 1970s, a noticeable shift occurred as economic interests increasingly became central to the motives of terrorist organizations. As Aksoy posits, ‘the sociocultural context where a terrorist act occurs significantly affect both the success of the act in achieving its objectives and the shaping of the terrorist’s identity’ ([7], p. 28). This underscores the influence of environmental and cultural dynamics on the operational goals of terrorist groups. Accordingly, while terrorists’ motives were traditionally political, religious, or nationalist, contemporary terrorism encompasses economic incentives as a primary driver.

Despite the evolution of motivations, terrorist groups have largely retained consistent methods or *modus operandi*. Terrorist groups frequently fund their activities through various criminal enterprises, perceiving such avenues as lucrative and relatively low-risk [8]. The dual nature of their operations—terrorism and economically motivated crime—illustrates a strategic shift away from ideological commitment toward financial sustainability. The proceeds from these crimes are used not only to support operational capacities but also to destabilize national economies and undermine development efforts. As Dishman emphasized, criminal activity has become a function of terrorism [5]. Terrorist groups can be categorized based on their primary

motivations: those driven by economic crimes and those not. Nevertheless, the majority engage in financially motivated crimes, including armed robbery and kidnapping for ransom, often framed under ideological pretexts. These criminal acts serve either to support ongoing operations or to accumulate wealth for their own sake.

The typology of economically driven terrorist crimes includes vandalism, smuggling, drug trafficking, and money laundering, among other profit-motivated criminal behaviors. The emergence of digital financial systems, including cryptocurrencies, has further complicated the landscape of terrorism financing. These technologies facilitate covert transactions and obscure financial trails, thereby undermining regulatory efforts. Exploiting gaps in financial oversight—often exacerbated by weak institutional frameworks—terrorist networks operate transnationally, increasing economic risk, deterring both foreign and domestic investment, and elevating public and private security expenditures. These shifts consequently divert budgetary resources away from essential sectors like education, rural development, industrialization, and healthcare.

### **3. Funding terrorism**

Terrorism financing involves a distinct and multifaceted process, encompassing donor contributions, criminal activities, concealment of funds, procurement of materials, and fund transfers for operational execution. These activities are universally illegal and challenging to track, particularly due to the transnational nature of contemporary terrorist networks. Traditionally, terrorism was often state-sponsored, targeting political figures within or outside national borders. This form of ‘state terrorism’ stood in contrast to religiously motivated terrorism, which aimed to propagate specific belief systems. However, there has been a discernible decline in state-sponsored terrorism, supplanted by decentralized, ideologically agnostic actors who utilize indiscriminate violence coupled with economic extortion. As Separovic posits, ‘terrorism attempts to coerce a population and/or its leadership by inciting fear of being hurt’ ([9], p. 21). As noted by Hamm [10], the decline of state-sponsored terrorism has facilitated the rise of non-state actors who rely on economic and criminal activities to sustain their operations.

The financing mechanisms of modern terrorist organizations have evolved significantly. Traditional revenue streams, such as state sponsorship and charitable donations, have been increasingly replaced by criminal enterprises [11]. The underlying motive of modern terrorism appears to be a synthesis of economic gain and ideology, where financial resources are indispensable to operational viability. These resources support critical functions, including recruitment, reconnaissance, logistics, procurement of equipment, training, and execution of attacks. Broadly, terrorist financing can be categorized into three principal sources: firstly, criminal activities, such as robbery, kidnapping, smuggling, and trafficking; secondly, private donations from charitable organizations, individuals, and logistical supporters; and finally, state sponsorship, although now in decline, remains a factor in some regions.

### **4. Crimes perpetrated through terrorist acts**

Traditionally, terrorism relied heavily on violent acts and mass casualties. However, there is an increasing intersection between terrorism and economic crimes.

As Borum emphasized, terrorism has ‘no single root cause’ but is shaped by ideological, political, and environmental contexts [12, 13]. Terrorists now strategically attack populations and state assets to provoke responses that ultimately serve financial and ideological objectives. Modern terrorism is frequently used as a tool for economic gain by criminal syndicates and ethnically motivated agitators. These actors exploit geographic vulnerabilities and unregulated spaces. Advancements in technology, the abundance of natural resources, drug markets, surplus arms, and ideological motivations have all contributed to the expansion of terrorism as a criminal enterprise.

Terrorist groups often recruit individuals with criminal backgrounds and specialized skills to enhance their operational efficiency. Natural resource exploitation has become a critical driver of conflict, giving rise to militant factions vying for territorial control. These groups employ tactics of intimidation and coercion to destabilize the government and the economy. They deter foreign direct investment and perpetuate insecurity to gain economic advantage.

## **5. Economic crimes of terrorism (ECT)**

Academic literature has traditionally emphasized political and religious terrorism, with limited focus on the entrepreneurial or economically driven dimensions of terrorism now emerging. As terrorism evolves, it increasingly adopts an entrepreneurial framework, with economic crimes serving as its financial engine. This shift has intertwined the realms of terrorism and finance, further reinforcing the crime-terrorism nexus. As Mullins and Wither asserted, virtually ‘all terrorism relies on criminal activity to some extent’ ([14], p. 77).

Terrorism is now entrepreneurial in nature, generating pay-off to its operators through diverse criminal activities. Thus, terrorism has a direct effect on the economies of nations, with devastating consequences through its economic crimes. Terrorism aims not only to disrupt national economies but also to control them. It is well established that terrorism constitutes a criminal act; moreover, many terrorist groups—often composed of former criminals—systematically engage in additional forms of criminal activity. This convergence gives rise to what is commonly referred to as the crime-terrorism nexus.

The Daesh European organization consists of about 50–80% criminally profiled members. Al-Qaeda (AQ), with a 25% criminal base, derives revenue primarily through fraud and forgery. They employ the Hawala money laundering system and engage in heroin trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, and arms deals. The German Daesh network comprises approximately 98% individuals with criminal backgrounds. They collaborate with such individuals for operational advantages [15]. There is a clear interplay between terrorism and crime, as each enforces the other. Criminal activities generate funds to support members’ lifestyles and ongoing operations. At the same time, crime flourishes as terrorists seek out and create opportunities that serve their objectives.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey is known for its dual role of terrorism and criminal acts. It engages in illicit economic activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, and money laundering [16]. The PKK also engages in human smuggling operations and levies informal taxes on the drug trade. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been described by Carafano as the wealthiest terrorist organization, with an estimated annual revenue of \$2 billion, generated through kidnapping for ransom, oil theft, gas exploration, and other criminal enterprises [17]. Oftedal reported that, between

1994 to 2013, 40 Jihadi cells in Europe were financed by the same group; in 28% of the cases, their operations were funded through drug trafficking and weapons deals [18]. In Spain, Williams posits that funds from criminal activities—especially the narcotics trade—supported several attacks, including the assault on the Kosher supermarket in Paris [19]. According to Elias, both the Afghan and Pakistani branches of the Taliban are heavily engaged in kidnapping for ransom [20]. Also, Felbab-Brown emphasized that the Taliban controls poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, which enables it to suppress international market prices for poppies. The terrorist group also collects Ushr (Islamic tax) from local businesses and agricultural producers within its territory. The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) group extorts businesses by imposing ‘taxes’ on truck shipments and commercial activity within their area of influence [21].

According to Hamm, the Aryan Republican Army (ARA) operated as a gang specializing in bank robberies; in a two-year period (1994–1995), they robbed 22 banks, earning approximately \$500,000, used to fund further terrorist activities [10]. In the 1970s, following a U.S. crackdown, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) increasingly turned to criminal financing. It reportedly earned between \$7.7 and \$12.3 million through fuel smuggling, armed robberies, counterfeiting, protection rackets, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and arms procurement [22, 23]. In Chile, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) was involved in various economic crimes, including bank and armed robberies.

Colombia’s April 19 Movement (M-19), in collaboration with Pablo Escobar, provided protection for cocaine shipped by sea. The group was also engaged in kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, and theft [22, 24]. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) reportedly earned over \$1 billion through drug trafficking and illegal gold mining, with 20% of the proceeds exchanged for arms [25, 26]. Mullins and Wither observed that, in the 1990s, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in the U.S. generated between \$6 and 15 million annually through drug trafficking and robbery. Additional revenue sources included kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, fuel laundering, and protection rackets [14]. Dawood Ibrahim’s D-Company is yet another example of a terrorist organization engaged in human smuggling, weapons and drug trafficking, and money laundering. The Taliban continues to profit from drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom, with their total assets reportedly valued at \$3.4 billion. Hezbollah are occupied in taxing criminal enterprises, drug smuggling, and the illicit diamond trade. Additional activities include arms deals, money laundering, and counterfeiting [8, 27].

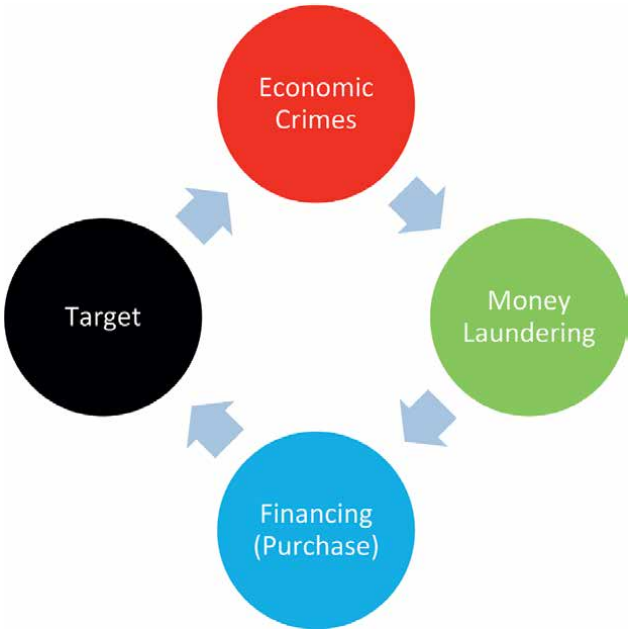
Each terrorist group has its modus operandi, yet all prioritize securing funds—both locally and internationally. The nature of their criminal activity, the size and structure of the organization, and the scale of their finances provide them with operational sustainability. In Africa, terrorist operations often exploit local economies, taking advantage of communal dynamics and ungoverned spaces. According to a report by the U.S. Department of State, al-Shabaab has exploited coastal and wildlife-based economies, maintaining control over key trade routes and ports such as Kismayo. Their estimated annual revenue exceeds \$70 million [28]. Similarly, Boko Haram finances its operations through kidnapping for ransom, bank robberies, and cattle rustling.

## **6. Impact of terrorism on global growth and development**

Terrorism’s evolution into a conduit for organized economic crime poses significant threats to global peace, political stability, and economic development [2].

Once state-sponsored, terrorism today increasingly undermines state institutions and economies. As Pratiwi, Abdullah, Abdullah, Wardana, and Muhammad emphasized, ‘the economic effect of terrorism on economy is on the rise’, impacting individuals, communities, and national development initiatives ([29], p. 1). Terrorism infiltrates state economies by exploiting systemic weaknesses such as corruption, weak governance, ineffective legislation, and law enforcement. It disrupts trade, discourages foreign investment, and destabilizes supply chains. Its broader impact includes direct crimes against persons (victim targets), such as murder, kidnapping, extortion, robbery, human rights abuses, and psychological trauma. It also encompasses attacks against the state (state targets), such as sabotage of public infrastructure, arson, vandalism, cybercrime, oil and drug trafficking, money laundering, arms trading, cultural artifacts looting, extortion rackets, and the exploitation of natural resources (cash crops, petroleum resources, diamonds, etc.). Other methods include tax evasion, passport forgery, and violent opposition to government authority.

The estimated economic cost of terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is approximately \$434 billion in losses, with an additional \$133 billion in damages. In Afghanistan, terrorism accounted for 22% of the national gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 [30]. Additional repercussions include rising insurance premiums, declining tourism revenues, increased unemployment, and reduced commercial activity. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), three important global peaks mark the economic impact of terrorism: the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States (costing \$73 billion); heightened violence in Iraq in 2008; and the surge in terrorism across Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan in 2013, which incurred damages estimated at \$94 billion. In 2016, terrorism in Africa alone cost an estimated \$15.5 billion, with the cumulative cost from 2007 to 2016 reaching \$119 billion (**Figure 1**) [31].



**Figure 1.**  
*Economic crimes of terrorism (ECT) model.*

Terrorism's commercialization corresponds with rising global demand for arms and narcotics. Continued international inaction against terrorism risks profound long-term economic consequences. As Bewley-Taylor asserts, the increasingly blurred lines between insurgent groups and organized criminal networks demand a unified and proactive international response [32].

Terrorism has evolved from a linear model—where state-directed violence pursued distinct political objectives—into a cyclical paradigm centred on four interdependent elements: economic manipulation, criminal enterprise, operational preparations, and targeted attacks. Contemporary terrorist organizations now actively pursue dominance over state resources. Exploiting national infrastructures and systems allows them to gain a strategic advantage.

## **7. Recommendations**

Addressing the root causes of terrorism is essential for effective counter-terrorism efforts.

1. *Addressing ethnic marginalization*: one of the core drivers of terrorism is the systematic exclusion of ethnic minority groups from political discourse and the decision-making processes. Such marginalization fosters resentment and alienation, often leading to agitation and the formation of armed factions.
2. *Psychosocial and socio-economic interventions*: states must take responsibility for reducing radicalization by addressing psychological factors and socio-economic grievances that fuel terrorism.
3. *Defining terrorism universally*: the absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism impedes international legal and policy coordination. A clear, consistent definition is critical to developing effective transnational legislation and coherent punitive frameworks.
4. *Reinforcing state control*: states must assert primary control over national security and boundaries while simultaneously supporting regional cooperation and intelligence-sharing initiatives.
5. *Outlawing state-backed terrorism*: the use of legal and political inducements to support terrorist groups for strategic gain must be unequivocally condemned. States must refrain from leveraging non-state actors as tools of domestic or international policy.
6. *Strengthening the rule of law*: reinforcing the integrity of legal institutions is critical despite variations in legislative capacities across states. International oversight, intelligence cooperation, and legal harmonization are essential.
7. *Regulating financial networks*: the regulation of digital financing systems, including cryptocurrency markets, is critical to disrupting terrorist financing. A thorough overhaul of current national and international counter-terrorism financing policies is overdue, as many existing measures are fragmented and inconsistently applied.

8. *Disrupting funding sources*: the strategic dismantling of terrorist funding streams will significantly undermine operational capacity. In many regions, weak state responses have allowed terrorist groups to entrench themselves economically, extorting local businesses and appropriating revenue through illicit means.
9. *Adopting a multidimensional strategy*: terrorism must be addressed through a globally coordinated, multi-sectoral approach. Advances in globalization and communication technologies have granted terrorists unprecedented reach and operational agility, necessitating equally dynamic and innovative policy responses.

## 8. Conclusion

Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism, progress still remains limited. This stagnation is largely attributed to geopolitical divisions, the involvement of complicit state actors, tacit sponsors, and disparate victims. The integration of terrorism with organized criminal activity has made it the most viable form of violence in the modern era. Combating this trend requires a multi-layered strategy that incorporates regional and international cooperation, robust legal systems, and harmonized enforcement protocols. Emerging technologies must be harnessed not only for surveillance and intelligence gathering but also to disrupt hybrid threats targeting economic infrastructures. Absent decisive, diverse, and globally unified interventions, the proliferation of terrorist groups—motivated increasingly by economic gains—will continue to flourish. Left unchecked, this evolution risks the rise of ‘criminal governance’, a concept Phil Williams uses to describe state-like entities sustained by illicit economies.

## Acknowledgements

The author extends gratitude to Professors Otu Ekpenyong, K.A. Anele, and Afianmabon Benson for their insights and support. This study received no external funding.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **Author details**

Udom E. Akankpo  
Department of Sociology, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

\*Address all correspondence to: [efiong\\_udom@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:efiong_udom@uniport.edu.ng)

## **IntechOpen**

---

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Institute for Economics and Peace. Terrorism Spreads as Lone Wolf Attacks Dominate the West. 2025. Available from: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org>
- [2] Akankpo UE, Ekpenyong O, Anele KA. Economic crimes in south-east, Nigeria: Its implications on security of business and survival. *Global Scientific Journals*. 2024;**12**(5):972-984
- [3] Staiger I, Letschert R, Pemberton A, Ammerlaan K. Victims of terrorism: Towards European standards for assistance. In: *European Forum for Restorative Justice Report*. 2008. pp. 1-15. Available from: <https://www.eufourmrj.org>
- [4] Boeke S. Transitioning from military interventions to long-term counter-terrorism policy: The case of Mali (2013-2016). In: *ICCT Research Paper*. 2016. Available from: <https://zendy.io/title/10.19165/2016.1.09?>
- [5] Dishman C. Terrorism, crime, and transformation. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 2001;**24**(1):43-58. DOI: 10.1080/105761001118878
- [6] Neumann PR. Terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In: *The Rule of Law as a Guideline for German Policy*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; 2008. pp. 1-20. Available from: <https://library.fes.de>
- [7] Aksoy E. International terrorism in the age of globalization [Masters thesis]. Bilkent University; 2002. pp. 1-90. Available from: <https://core.ac.uk>
- [8] Rollins J, Wyler LS. Terrorism and transnational crime: Foreign policy issues for congress. R41004, United States Congressional Research Service; 2013. pp. 1-39. Available from: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/uscrrs/2013/en/97683>
- [9] Separovic ZP. International terrorism: Large scale victimization. In: Ewald U, Turkovic K, editors. *Terrorism in Large-Scale Victimization as a Potential Source of Terrorist Activities*. Amsterdam: IOS Press; 2006
- [10] Hamm MS. Crimes Committed by Terrorist Groups: Theory, Research and Prevention. US Department of Justice, 211203; 2005
- [11] Omelicheva MY, Markowitz LP. Rethinking intersections of crime and terrorism: Insights from political economics of violence. *International Studies Review*. 2021;**23**:1541-1565
- [12] Borum R. *Psychology of Terrorism*. Tampa: University of South Florida; 2004. pp. 1-75
- [13] Brown V, Ressler D. *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*. Oxford University Press; 2013
- [14] Mullins S, Wither JK. Terrorism and organized crime. Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes. 2016;**15**(3):65-82
- [15] Gaub F, Lisiecka J. *The Crime-Terrorism Nexus*. European Union Institute for Security Studies; 2017. DOI: 10.2815/038257
- [16] Reitano T, Clarke CP, Adal L. Examining the Nexus between Organized Crime and Terrorism and its Implications for EU Programming. 2017. Available from: [www.ct-morse.eu](http://www.ct-morse.eu)
- [17] Carafano J. *ISIS Annual Turnover: How Much Money the Terrorist*

Group Makes [Internet]. Forbes. 2018. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/gkll45egf/1isis-annual-turnover/#4dab256c2c9d>; [Accessed: June 5, 2025]

[18] Oftedal E. The financing of jihadi terrorist cells in Europe. Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. 2015;**16**:1-68

[19] Williams P. In cold blood: The Madrid bombings. Perspectives on Terrorism. 2008;**22**:19-24

[20] Elias MOT. The resurgence of the Taliban in Kabul, Logar, and Wardak. In: Giustozzi A, editor. Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field. New York: Hurst; 2009

[21] Felbab-Brown V. Kicking the opium habit? Afghanistan's drug economy and politics since the 1980s. Conflict, Security, and Development. 2006;**6**(2):127-149

[22] White JR. Terrorism: An Introduction. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2002

[23] Curtis GE, Karacan T. The Nexus among Terrorists, Narcotics Traffickers, Weapons Proliferators, and Organized Crime Networks in Western Europe. Federal Research Division; 2002. pp. 1-33. Available from: <https://globalinitiative.net>

[24] Cowell-Meyers K, Arthur P. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army>

[25] Lee R. Smuggling Armageddon: The Nuclear Black Market in the Former Soviet Union and Europe. New York: St. Martin's Press; 1999

[26] Williams P, Quincoses S. The Evolution of Threats Networks in

Latin America. Florida International University, Research Publications; 2019. p. 33. Available from: [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi\\_research/33](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi_research/33)

[27] Micallef JV. Op-Ed: Hezbollah's Global Criminal Empire. 2017. Available from: <https://www.military.com>

[28] US Department of State. Somalia: Kenya Lists Al-Shabaab as Organized Crime Gang. 2013. Available from: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201308310553.html>

[29] Pratiwi ET, Abdullah LOD, Abdullah R, Wardana, Muhammad R. Impact of criminal act of terrorism on economy. IOP Conference Series: Earth & Environmental Science. 2019;**235**:012066. DOI: 10.1088/1755-1315/2235/1/012006

[30] Iqbal M, Bardwall H, Hammond D. Estimating the global economic costs of violence: Methodology improvement and estimate update. Defence and Peace Economics. 2019;**32**:402-426. DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2019.1689485

[31] UNDP. Measuring the Economic Impact of Violence Extremism Leading to Terrorism in Africa. Report. 2019. pp. 1-50. Available from: <https://www.undp.org>

[32] Bewley-Taylor D. Drug trafficking and organized crime in Afghanistan. The RUSI Journal. 2013;**158**(6):9

# What Terrorism Hides: Understanding the Psychology of Terrorism as a Measure to Prevent It

*Yuri Yuryevich Cherny and Irina M. Tsibizova*

## Abstract

This chapter examines terrorism as a phenomenon through the metaphor of an iceberg, including possible methods for its prevention. To this end, its history and the reasons for the impossibility of providing a universal definition are briefly discussed. A defining characteristic of modern terrorism is highlighted: the desire to maximize intimidation through physical and psychological influence on the weakest and the most vulnerable segments of the population. This strategy is reinforced through the intensive use of social media for recruitment, preparation of terrorist attacks, and the amplification of fear through the rapid dissemination of news. The key psychological traits that predispose individuals to terrorism include a distorted perception of reality and one's place within it, radical beliefs paired with a willingness to engage in extreme actions, and a tendency toward fanaticism, or utopian thinking, the presence of a mythologized consciousness which perceives the world as inherently threatening, along with social polarization and the framing of "the other" as an "enemy." These traits are marked by an uncompromising attitude toward opponents, and a desire to impose one's values on others. Utopianism of consciousness is particularly highlighted. Preventive measures are proposed to prevent the development of this undesirable feature, namely the use of concepts of the dominant in the other's face (A.A. Ukhtomsky), the opposition of abstract utopianism to the concrete, proposed by E. Bloch in "The Philosophy of Hope," the philosophy of action and dialogism of M.M. Bakhtin and the related attention to the world of M.M. Prishvin and K.G. Paustovsky.

**Keywords:** deviance, history of terrorism, narcissism, psychology, radicalism, terrorism, utopianism

## 1. Introduction

To better understand terrorism, we can use a conceptual metaphor<sup>1</sup>: It can be thought of as an iceberg: only a small part is above the surface, visible to the naked eye, while the main part is hidden in the depths below the surface.

Terrorism poses no less a danger to humanity than an iceberg does to ships in the ocean if radar does not detect it in time, invisible but extending far beyond obvious boundaries.

Similarly, the obvious, horrific results of terrorist attacks are immediately publicized by the eagerly disseminating press,<sup>2</sup> while their preparation often remains a secret even to the relevant intelligence agencies. Many terrorist attacks, like active terrorist organizations, remain undiscovered even after many years.

Philosophers, by understanding both terrorism in general and its significant aspects, are able not only to make a significant contribution to the study of the phenomenon but also to propose the methods for its prevention. Preventing the emergence of a problem seems far more expedient, and in this case, humane, than having to deal with its consequences.

Consequently, terrorism has remained unsuccessfully defined for many years.

Anne Schwenkenbecher, having covered the debates on terrorism that took place in the first decade of the twenty-first century, set herself the task of providing a clear, non-ambivalent academic definition of this phenomenon, abstracting from the emotional and moral components ([7], p. 1), as well as from concepts used in jurisprudence and politics, which often have a manipulative component ([7], p. 10). This is a difficult task, given the strong emotional impact of the word “terrorism” itself, the differences in its definitions in state legislation, the possibility of manipulating the concept for the sake of condemning certain events or actors, its erosion in political and academic discourse, and sometimes even the transformation of the term into a “discursive weapon” ([7], p. 11).

E.V. Bogmatsera and I.E. Ilyichev also highlight this issue, noting differences in interpretations even within the anti-terrorist documents of such an authoritative international organization as the UN ([8], p. 18).

Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman counted 109 definitions, in which they identified 22 key elements ([9], p. 12). Among these elements, the most frequently occurring words were “cruelty” / “violence,” “political,” and “threat.” A study by Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, limited to definitions from 1977 to 2000, confirmed these data [5], while also noting a sharp decrease in the use of the concepts “fear” and “terror” ([7], pp. 12–13).

In a later study, Alex P. Schmid also draws attention to the multiplicity and vagueness of definitions of terrorism, approaching its definition from five different

---

<sup>1</sup> A cognitive or conceptual metaphor facilitates understanding and functions as a mechanism for human thought. The theory of cognitive metaphors was developed by J. Lakoff and M. Johnson in their works *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* [1, 2]. The need for conceptual metaphors in philosophical hermeneutics, used for the merging of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), a deeper understanding of meaning, as well as some abstract concepts, the significance was convincingly demonstrated by (Refs. [3], S. 281; [4, 5]). N.A. Lavrova demonstrated how metaphors are used in the study of the letters of the alphabet and accompany human cognition throughout conscious life [6].

<sup>2</sup> The question of the specific correlations between the press and terrorism in the post-television era has become so acute that it deserves separate consideration.

perspectives: He focuses on its history, the psychology of “terror” (threat and destabilizing factors), forms, terrorist acts and terrorists ([10], p. 1). The difference in approaches to the phenomenon is reflected by Walter Laquer in his well-known saying: “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” ([11], pp. 7, 302). A simple search by this author for definitions of the phenomenon yielded 48 million results in 2014, 136 million in 2019, and 238 million in mid-2023 ([11], p. 2).

## **2. The origins of terrorism**

To better understand the phenomenon and get closer to its definition, it is worth briefly covering the history of terrorism.

A number of Russian scholars, including N.N. Afanasyev and V.S. Shukshin, associate its emergence with the development of civilization [12]. Some authors find its roots in the Old Testament’s ten plagues of Egypt (Ex. 5:12), interpreting them as acts involving the use of weapons of mass destruction (“poisoned water turned into blood,” a plague of locusts, a plague of livestock, the death of firstborns, etc.), not only aimed at intimidating the pharaoh, but also causing numerous casualties among the Egyptian people [13].

The attack by the brothers Harmodius and Aristogeiton on the Athenian tyrant Hippias during the Panathenaic festival in 514 BC and the murder of his brother Hipparchus [13] are sometimes classified as terrorist acts. However, the lack of numerous civilian casualties, the fact that the attack was directed against tyranny, and the later installation of statues of the brothers on the Acropolis as freedom fighters make this classification questionable.

## **3. Ancient Rome also left evidence of early manifestations of terrorism**

The first example represents state-perpetrated terror. In 88 BC, the Pontic king Mithridates VI Eupator, seeking to preserve Hellenistic culture and counter Roman expansion, ordered the extermination of all Roman merchants in Asia Minor. During this Asiatic or Ephesian Supper<sup>3</sup>, between 80,000 and 150,000 Romans were killed, including women and children who had sought refuge in temples.

The second is associated with the actions of the Zealots<sup>4</sup>, sometimes called the first terrorist organization, who rebelled after the Roman procurator confiscated temple silver, leading to the Jewish War of 66–73 CE.

The activities of the radical group of Sicarii (from the Latin “sica”—dagger, literally “dagger-men” or robbers), which broke away from the Zealots, are the closest to the modern understanding of terrorism. Its members spread terror by killing their opponents in broad daylight during festivals, relating the crowd to darkness, where it was impossible to discern who had struck the fatal blow. The Sicarii destroyed the house of the high priest Ananias, the palaces of members of the Herodian dynasty,

---

<sup>3</sup> This is the name by which this event has entered history. It was probably suggested by the Church of Ephesus, with reference to the Revelation of St. John [Rev. 2: 1–7] and the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 2:16].

<sup>4</sup> Zealots (from the Greek ζήλωτης, literally “zealot, adherent”) are a religious and eschatological movement in Judea, directed against Roman rule.

burned the public archives containing debtors' receipts, several grain storage facilities, and disabled water supply systems.

Not recognizing earthly authority, the Sicarii considered martyrdom a panacea, believing that after the overthrow of the unjust foreign power, the Lord would appear to his people in order to free them from torment and suffering.

Paradoxically, a comparable case can be found in the Ismaili assassins (the adherents of a Shiite branch of Islam), whom some authors consider the founders of the subcultural terrorist tradition [14]. The Hashishin sect, named after the drug hashish, under whose influence its members carried out attacks, also known as the Assassins<sup>5</sup>, was led by the "mountain elder" Hassan Sabbah, who developed its tactics. The Hashishin also preferred to kill with daggers and also did not flee the scene of the crime. In fact, the only differences between them and the Sicarii lay in the name of God, the holy book that promised the reward, and its recipient: in the former case, the reward was granted to the beloved people of God; in the latter, it was the Assassin himself ascended to paradise to appear before Allah along with seventy relatives of his choosing, where eternal feasts awaited him, in the company of seventy-two beautiful hour is to appease the martyr.

This comparison is not intended to offend anyone's religious sensibilities. It is merely an attempt to trace certain patterns in early forms of terrorism, which, according to the authors, are incompatible with true faith.

A number of authors, including Anne Schwenkenbecher, trace the history of terrorism back to the Jacobin Terror, which witnessed the term's intensive use, noting its positive connotations among some authors. She also remarks that its definition, which includes the terms "anti-state" and "anti-social," gives an advantage to public and state actors who exploit the concept for their own ends ([7], p. 11). Their discourse often plays into the hands of terrorists, increasing public fear of them. Sometimes this discourse evokes greater anxiety than the terrorist acts themselves, which undoubtedly plays into the terrorists' hands [7].

This thinker begins her research with a basic definition of terrorism, qualifying it as a *strategy* or *tactic* (A.Sch.'s emphasis) that uses cruelty or violence to achieve political goals ([7], p. 14). In her view, this formula is far from infallible and does not allow for a clear distinction between terrorism and other strategies.

The Encyclopedia Britannica's definition of terrorism is even vaguer. It notes the complexity and contradiction of the definition, attributing this to the intense stigma inherent to terrorism, which developed due to its brutality and violent nature.<sup>6</sup> It also notes that the word entered the English language as a loanword from French, referring to the state terror carried out by the Jacobins against their opponents during the French Revolution. Terrorism is defined there as the deliberate use of violence to create a general atmosphere of fear for the purpose of achieving political goals. It also demonstrates the lack of uniformity in the definition of the concept in legislation around the world and significantly recalls that resistance to the apartheid regime, like the French resistance during World War II, was equally defined as terrorism.

<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that the word assassination—a political or treasonous murder—entered the English language.

<sup>6</sup> Terrorism // Britannica. – URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism> (accessed: May 02, 2025).

The etymological origin of the term “terrorism” from the word “terror,” meaning “extreme anxiety and fear” ([7], p. 15), is taken into account by most researchers, who logically include the concepts of “terror” and “fear” in their definition.

The suffix “-ism” is found in both Russian and English, in both cases denoting:

1. the names of socio-political, scientific, or esthetic teachings, movements, systems, qualities, inclinations, or states associated with the meaning of the nouns, or less commonly, the verbs, from which they are derived: liberal—liberalism, Marx—Marxism;
2. nouns characterized by the features of the adjectives from which they are derived: archaic—archaism.

In both languages, both cases are valid. Terrorism denotes a systemic phenomenon associated with terrorist—frightening—acts.

Anne Schwenckenbecher discusses the possibility of using the concept of intrastate terrorism ([7], p. 22). However, it seems more legitimate to distinguish terror, as a method used by the state, from terrorism. Terror (Latin *terror* or in one of its meanings *oreo* (horror)) was the name given to a method used in Ancient Rome of intimidating prisoners into confessing their guilt. In practice, state terror, which became one of the harshest methods of reprisal against political opponents, was used by Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who received emergency powers in 88 BC. The Romans were also the first to codify state terror in law by introducing the term *crimen majestatis* (Latin for crimes against the majesty [of the Roman people]) ([15], p. 36), which legitimized it as a case in which the use of state terror became not only possible but also necessary.

#### 4. The French reign of terror

Terror as a means of reprisal against political opponents was also legitimized during the French Revolution by the Jacobins, who, out of fear of the aristocracy attempting to restore the old regime, introduced terror onto the agenda on August 30, 1793. In the spirit of the times, the Parisian newspaper *Courrier de l'Égalité* demanded the overthrow of traitors by covering all of France with guillotines to consolidate the gains of the revolution (Cited in [10], p. 4). It is noteworthy that the very members of the Convention<sup>7</sup>, who had legalized terror and subsequently feared for their own lives as the revolution “devoured its children,” declared Robespierre’s actions “terrorism” in the sense of an illegal abuse of power. The term “terrorists” logically came to refer to the direct perpetrators of “revolutionary terror”—the agents and supporters of revolutionary tribunals [10]. Today, according to most researchers, the connotation has shifted: Terrorists are more often considered the organizers (it is important not to forget them) and perpetrators of crimes involving violence and aimed at destabilizing society and state authority.

It was after the Jacobin Terror that the words “terrorism” and “terrorist” became common in European languages. They were popularized in English by Edmund

---

<sup>7</sup> The National Convention was the highest legislative body of the First French Republic in 1792–1795.

Burke, a politician considered the founder of conservatism in general and philosophical conservatism in particular, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [16]<sup>8</sup>.

## 5. Terror and the Russian state

The word entered the Russian language directly from French, becoming widespread in the 1860s along with the spread of the populist and anarchist movements. Among them, it carried a distinctly positive connotation. Just as Robespierre asserted, “Terror is nothing other than justice, brutal adequacy, the inevitability of retribution. It is the embodiment of virtue,” so too did the Russian anarchist Vera Zasulich, who shot at St. Petersburg mayor F.F. Trepov on January 24 (February 5—Julian and Gregorian calendars, respectively), 1878 for ordering the flogging of the populist political prisoner A.S. Bogolyubov. After wounding him, she threw down her weapon and declared, “I am a terrorist, but not a murderer” (Quoted from Pavlenkova [18]).

For a long time, the “Catechism of a Revolutionary” by S. G. Nechayev<sup>9</sup> served as a guide for Russian terrorists. It was harshly criticized by European Marxists and the Russian revolutionary emigration for its calls for pogroms and massacres ([19], p. 121) and “barracks communism,” although this term would appear later, as a reaction to Nechayev’s article “*The Main Foundations of the Future Social Order*” of 1870 in the pamphlet by K. Marx and F. Engels “*The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association. Report and Documents Published by Resolution of the Hague Congress of the International*” of 1873 ([15], pp. 323–452).

The text emphasized the need for the swift destruction of the old world—the state, the class, and the so-called educated (§ 13)—through absolute renunciation of the world—interests, affairs, feelings, attachments, property, even one’s name—with complete subordination to one idea, one passion—revolution (§ 1). For the sake of this great goal, according to Nechayev, people are divided into several categories: those subject to immediate destruction, “people especially harmful to the revolutionary cause,” whose death will weaken and intimidate the government as much as possible (§ 16)<sup>10</sup>; those granted temporary life (§ 17); those who can be left behind in order to master their dirty secrets and make slaves, exploiting their connections, power, and wealth (§ 18); and so on. Women, defined as the sixth category, were also divided into categories depending on their devotion and usefulness to the revolutionary cause, with the first two recommended to be “used” like men, who were blackmailed into the revolutionary cause, while the third category, the only one—accorded genuine respect—was granted the title of “comrades” of the male revolutionaries, and recognized as their “precious treasure” (§ 20)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> In Russian scholarship, the most complete understanding of his views is presented in the book by A.V. Chudinov, *Reflections of the English on the French Revolution: E. Burke, J. Mackintosh, W. Godwin* [17].

<sup>9</sup> Nechaev S.G. < *Catechism of a Revolutionary* > 1869. - URL: <https://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/nechaev.htm>. (date accessed: May 19, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> These goals are also pursued by modern terrorists, who, in order to instill maximum terror, have shifted their focus to the destruction of the most vulnerable segments of the population—women and children. In the age of social media, when news, including fake news, spreads almost instantly, this often allows them to achieve their desired effect.

<sup>11</sup> Nechaev S.G. < *Catechism of a Revolutionary* > 1869. - URL: <https://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/nechaev.htm>. (date accessed: May 19, 2025).

It is a frightening categorization, which essentially gave rise to Raskolnikov's question, dividing people into "trembling creatures" and those "entitled" to dispose of others' lives as they please, even to the point of destroying them. The particular cynicism of the situation lies in the fact that, protesting social inequality, Nechayev divided people into categories, assuming God's prerogative—that is, he appropriated the right to decide who lives and who dies.

The founders of Marxism were highly critical of what was proposed to replace the "obsolete state": "common dining rooms and common sleeping quarters, appraisers and offices regulating education, production, consumption—in a word, all social activity" under the supreme control of a "committee" ([20], p. 414). Such a "bright future" would hardly have pleased those who were being forcibly made happy in this way.

Most Russian revolutionaries rejected the Catechism of a Revolutionary, which began to be perceived as a terrorist manifesto<sup>12</sup>, especially after the murder of the student Ivanov, an event that inspired F. M. Dostoevsky to write the novel *The Demons* (1871–1872) [21]<sup>13</sup>.

## 5.1 Terror and the state

When attempting to define terrorism, it is important to remember that state terror as a tool of power and a means of reprisal against political opponents is distinct from terrorism used as a means of destabilizing society and the state. The common denominator stems from the word's root, referring to horrific methods<sup>14</sup>, although the methods themselves vary state regimes typically practice terror involving mass repressions, arrests, and concentration camps.

Thus, even the vagueness of the concept validates the use of the cognitive metaphor of the iceberg. Moreover, this vagueness is used as a weapon by countries and governments, as well as revolutionaries and political extremists ([7], p. 23). A terrifying terrorist act against a civilian population may be viewed by the other side as an act of religious struggle, guerrilla warfare, or a "normal" sabotage operation. It is precisely this circumstance—the predominance of the local over the general and political pressure—that prevents the development of a unified definition of terrorism, even in an organization such as the UN (See for more detail: [10], pp. 19–20). And it is precisely the involvement of intelligence agencies that further justifies the metaphorical comparison of terrorism to an iceberg, guaranteeing that individual terrorist attacks will remain undetected.

To partially uncover the underwater part of the iceberg and move closer to developing a definition and a more complete understanding of the essence of terrorism, A. Schmid suggests focusing on its history, the psychology of "terror," forms of political violence distinct from terrorism, terrorist acts, and terrorists ([7], p. 4). Schwenkenbecher disagrees, proposing to make the definition "neutral" in relation to

<sup>12</sup> Not to be confused with Brenton Tarrant's much later Manifesto. – Tarrant B. *The Great Replacement. Toward a new society. We march ever forwards.* [electronic resource] – URL: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/1192779/mod\\_resource/content/1/Tarrant\\_vyber%20%281%29.pdf?ref=derekguzman.com](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/1192779/mod_resource/content/1/Tarrant_vyber%20%281%29.pdf?ref=derekguzman.com) (accessed: October 22, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> An attempt to rethink the personality of Nechayev was recently undertaken by Yu.V. Pushchayev [22, 23].

<sup>14</sup> The authors do not intend to offend the feelings of particularly sensitive individuals, but believe that it is impossible to define terrorism without this fundamental and basic characteristic.

the latter—the perpetrators ([7], p. 25), which seems quite difficult given the strong psychological impact of terrorist attacks, which seems quite difficult given the strong psychological impact of terrorist attacks.

Among the new features of terrorism is the supposed discovery of the underwater tip of the iceberg. These include its fusion with media<sup>15</sup> and digital technologies.

Social media have expanded terrorist capabilities, actively exploiting them for communication, recruitment (often through blackmail), and intelligence gathering through photographs published on social media. Maps and aerial imagery, publicly available on Google, serve the same function. Google Earth, which allows viewing a selected geographic feature in real time, provides terrorists with even greater convenience. The problem has become so acute that Yuval Diskin, director of Israel's Shin Bet security service, highlighted it in an October 2010 interview (cited in Aliev and Kudelin [25], p. 31). He naturally focused on Muslim terrorists. The simultaneous explosions of booby-trapped pagers and other electronic devices in Lebanon claimed the lives of not only Hezbollah<sup>16</sup> officers but also many civilians and were described by many media outlets as "terrorism on a new level," [26] are considered in Israel to be a systematic and brilliantly executed sabotage operation. This is just another illustration of the impossibility of adopting a definition of terrorism at the level of international organizations, as well as the fact that what is proclaimed as the fight against terrorism is becoming a factor in its development.<sup>17</sup>

In his section "The Psychology of Terrorism," A. Schmid focuses on the reaction that terrorist attacks evoke, and which terrorists actually count on—namely, horror and panic. He defines this as the primary goal of terrorists ([10], p. 7). Moreover, the significant emphasis is placed on the multiplication of second-order victims—those, as physician M. Silberstein has identified, who, seeing the suffering of innocent, unarmed victims, mentally transfer it to themselves, feeling equal vulnerability and fearing for their own safety [10]. In this regard, a number of researchers point to the symbolism of terrorist acts ([10], p. 17). Schmid also proposed a ten-point scale, ranging from horror, panic, and shock to approval, support, and a desire to join a terrorist organization. After the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, items seven through ten reflected the position of some respondents in certain parts of the Muslim world. This, among other objectives, was one of the terrorists' goals ([10], p. 7).

## 5.2 Dark psychology

This chapter aims to examine one of the most "hidden" aspects of terrorism: the psychology of those who directly commit terrorist acts. A better understanding of this psychology will not only allow us to more accurately identify the likely sources of the terrorist threat but also propose more effective preventative measures. This is not about changing the established psychology of an established individual—and

<sup>15</sup> The connections between terrorists and the media, whose representatives often appear at the scene of a terrorist attack even before it is committed, are examined in the article by Ref. Katrich [24, 25].

<sup>16</sup> Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shiite militant organization and political party advocating the establishment of an Islamic state in the country.

<sup>17</sup> The only exception to the rule is the aviation industry, which is vulnerable to terrorist attacks and whose representatives concluded nineteen protocols and conventions concerning the hijacking of aircraft between 1963 and 2014 (See for details Ref. [10], pp. 11–12).

terrorists, with the exception of ideological inspirers, are rarely the considered established individuals—but rather about identifying a kind of “psychological markers” that can raise the alarm and developing preventative measures to prevent the development of such traits. This primarily applies to upbringing and educational systems, but it is also relevant to fostering societal resilience to manifestations of terrorist psychology, even if this objective may seem somewhat overly idealistic. Furthermore, this approach does not address the question of why, of two children raised in the same family and educated at the same educational institution, one chooses a terrorist path while the other does not.

Understanding the psychology of terrorism is necessary despite the absence of a unified definition—a definition which is unlikely to emerge, since the rhetoric of terror itself, as Tomis Kapitan noted, is a political weapon ([10], p. 11). Nevertheless, meaningful interstate cooperation in this area could still yield significant benefits, though such cooperation may be difficult to envisage in the current geopolitical climate.

An examination of the psychology of terrorism does not necessarily imply an *a priori* assumption of obligatory psychopathic deviations based on Erich Fromm’s concept of destructivity and, in particular, its component – “malignant aggression,” expressed in necrophilia, sadism, and sadomasochism, the desire for unlimited power over a helpless creature, which gives the aggressor a sense of omnipotence. In his view, this is how sadism manifests itself, reminiscent of the works of F.M. Dostoevsky. Erich Fromm understood masochism in this sense as a conscious renunciation of freedom and subordination to the group for the sake of one’s own safety. Sadomasochism – as self-pity and pity for “one’s own” along with hatred of a real or imaginary enemy and a willingness to sacrifice oneself (Cited in [27], p. 117).

Psychoanalysis also explains the cruelty and shahidism as a pathological death drive, since the necrophilic personality sees violence as a way to solve all problems (as suggested by Antonyan). Necrophilia is characterized as a freezing in the pre-Oedipal phase of development—the desire to find the safety of the maternal womb ([27], p. 118).

Another psychopathic disorder is narcissism, both personal and group. At the pathological level, narcissism involves:

1. excessive focus on one’s own ego with a complete lack of empathy for others;
2. a belief in one’s own superiority and intolerance of “otherness.”

Group narcissism extends the attitude toward one’s own “I” to a religious or national group, perhaps a criminal community, considering “one’s own” to be superior (professing the only true religion or belonging to the only pure race) and despising “others” to the point of denying their right to exist.

Undoubtedly, all these observations should be considered. However, it should be noted that individuals suffering from severe psychopathic traits are useful to terrorist organizations only as “bargaining pieces,” or expendable operatives—for example, as suicide bombers willing to sacrifice themselves. The sustained work required within a terrorist organization requires secrecy, discipline, precision, and strict coordination, qualities that individuals with psychopathologies are incapable of. This is the conclusion reached by psychologist and expert in the field of nuclear terrorism Stern (Cited in [27], p. 119).

Max Taylor further distinguished psychopaths from terrorists, emphasizing that the former are unable to exploit situations effectively; the actions of psychopaths are motivated solely by personal rather than socio-political, concerns—whether these motivations are real or imagined. In addition, their behavior is often unpredictable, they have difficulty following orders and remaining under organizational control, and they are unable to stay inconspicuous, or dissolve into the ([27], p. 119).

Modern Muslim terrorists, even those who profess a belief in heavenly reward, often display a pragmatic orientation. Many negotiate substantial financial compensation,<sup>18</sup> as well as secure escape routes to locations where they can expect guaranteed protection from prosecution and personal immunity.<sup>19</sup>

Attempts to understand the psychology of terrorists are complicated by the opportunities offered by modern social media: Experienced curators are capable of quickly turning even people who are not ideologically committed to terrorism—that is, those who hold a terrorist worldview and ideology and who are not members of a “typical” terrorist cell—into terrorists.

Alex Schmid emphasizes that a combination of personal vulnerabilities and situational pressure factors act as drivers that collectively determine how and why young people become involved in terrorist activity ([29], pp. i–xiv).

Non-ideological terrorists, in particular, tend to exhibit low resistance to these pressures, making them more susceptible to recruitment.

Suicidal tendencies may be considered a distinct factor, although this applies primarily to individuals involved in suicide-bombing operations, a tactic more frequently employed by certain militant groups in regions with Muslim-majority populations.

Although it is widely recognized that compiling a psychological portrait or profile of the average terrorist is impossible ([28], p. 38), it is nevertheless worth following Dashkova [29] in identifying the deviant psychological characteristics that recruiters target and that make individuals exhibiting them easy targets. This does not apply to the leadership of terrorist organizations and their handlers, who often employ intelligence agency methods or are directly associated with them.

These characteristics are as follows:

- Cognitive distortions, even to the point of denial.
- Radical views and extreme choices of action.

---

<sup>18</sup> Martha Crenshaw, among others, drew attention to this fact (cited in [28], p. 24). The terrorists who blew up the concert hall of the Crocus City Hall shopping center on March 22, 2024, were promised a reward of 500,000 rubles. Not to each, as initially expected, but to all of them. Half the amount was transferred to their bank cards. Moreover, this was not a sleeper cell of terrorists or fanatics in the classic sense. Rather, they were transformed into such fanatics in 2 to 3 weeks... These were randomly selected perpetrators with extremely low levels of intelligence and critical thinking. This is what allowed their handlers, who are proficient in a variety of recruitment techniques and psychological pressure methods, to turn taxi drivers and barbers into terrorists,” a counterterrorism security specialist explained to an Izvestia correspondent. — The exact amount of the terrorists’ fee for the attack on Crocus has been revealed // Izvestia. – March 25, 2024. – URL: <https://iz.ru/1671115/2024-03-25/stala-izvestna-tochnaia-summa-gonorara-terroristam-za-napadenie-na-krokus> (date accessed: May 17, 2025).

<sup>19</sup> The same perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Crocus were provided with “safe” escape routes abroad [28].

- Fanaticism, obsession with an idea.
- Utopianism and absolute faith in the achievability of goals.
- Mythological consciousness, a threat-oriented perception of the world.
- Dualism, polarization (“us versus them”), perception of the “Other” as the “Enemy.”
- Uncompromising attitudes, extreme intolerance toward opponents, a desire to impose one’s values on them.
- Dogmatism, claims to complete and exclusive possession of the truth.

S. L. Frank, in his essay “*The Heresy of Utopianism*,” in the 1930s, focused on revolution, the construction of a new society, and attitudes toward religion in a critique of utopian consciousness—one of the most significant psychological characteristics among individuals of this type ([16], pp. 85–106). Frank demonstrated that utopianism, which aimed to make everyone happy, actually leads to inverse results:

“No villains or criminals have done so much evil in the world, nor shed so much human blood, as people who wanted to be the saviors of humanity” ([16], p. 88).

“By devoting all their energies to the endless, never-ending task of curbing, suppressing, and destroying the original foundations of peaceful existence, the saviors of the world become its sworn enemies and gradually fall under the power of their natural guide on this path—the spirit of evil, hatred, and contempt for man.”

“A godless anthropocracy fatally degenerates into a demonocracy, which leads not to the salvation of the world, but to its destruction” ([16], p. 102).

Modern terrorists are far removed from messianic ideas of universal happiness, limiting themselves to the desire to make their comrades, fellow tribesmen, or co-religionists happy, and they too frequently arrive at the opposite results—a deterioration in attitudes toward them, increased repressive measures, and punishment in accordance with the laws of the state in which the terrorist attack was carried out.

The proposed measures may also seem idealistic, yet their purpose is not the radical improvement of humanity, but rather the development of educational approaches that prevent the development of a deviant utopian consciousness. Such proposals have long been advanced by writers and philosophers and are intended to redirect destructive impulses toward the creative ones. In this regard, the development of a dominant “face of the other”<sup>20</sup> approach, proposed by Academician A.A. Ukhtomsky, appears crucial, as it counters the individualism inherent in liberalism.

Another measure could involve teaching the distinction between abstract utopianism and the concrete utopianism proposed by Ernst Bloch in “*The Philosophy of Hope*.” This approach encourages attempts to anticipate and shape the New by “the

---

<sup>20</sup> According to this concept, when addressing a person, one must see them as an Interlocutor in their uniqueness and singularity. It is important to recognize the value and individuality of a person, to be attentive to their “human face,” while simultaneously embracing inner self-improvement. In this way, one can free oneself from the “curse of an individualistic attitude toward life” and achieve the principle of the unity of “I” and “Thou” (Quoted from Ref. [30], p. 130).

dreamer” through its embodiment in life, giving concrete contours to the Not-Yet-Being (Quoted from [31], 194).

A similar purpose is served by the philosophy of action and the concept of dialogicity developed by M.M. Bakhtin, who emphasized responsibility—valued above autonomy and obligation—as the foundation of human action ([32], p. 73). Understanding one’s unique, unrepeatable place in existence invariably requires action and active engagement, the rejection of the indifference of the “I-only” and the establishment of a “non-alibi in existence,” that is, responsibility for one’s own being ([32], p. 78).

Another way to counter destructive terrorist-oriented utopian thinking is to cultivate a kinship-based attentiveness to the world. This idea was proposed by the Russian writer M.M. Prishvin and further developed by K.G. Paustovsky, who drew inspiration from him (See details in Ref. [33]). It entails, first and foremost, a sense of unity with nature, and awareness of one’s own connection to it; once internalized, this orientation can be extended to human society as well.

This methodology is not a panacea, yet it may offer a useful antidote to the utopianism underlying terrorist thinking. In confronting terrorism, it is far better to employ every possible preventive measure than to deal with its consequences.

## Author details

Yuri Yuryevich Cherny<sup>1</sup> and Irina M. Tsibizova<sup>2\*</sup>

1 Center for the Study of Informatics Problems, Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

2 Department of Philosophy, Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

\*Address all correspondence to: [itsibizova@mail.ru](mailto:itsibizova@mail.ru)

## IntechOpen

---

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

## References

- [1] Lakoff G, Jonson M. *Methapohors We Live By*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 2003
- [2] Lakoff G, Jonson M. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books; 1999
- [3] Gadamer H-G. *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzuge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; 1972
- [4] Ricoeur P. *La métaphore et la problème central de l'herméneutique*. *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*. 1972;5:93-112
- [5] Ricoeur P. *La métaphore vive*. Paris: Seuil; 1975
- [6] Lavrova NA. *Kognitivnaya metafora kak sposob predstavleniya znaniy v yazyke i kak osnovopolagayushchiy printsip chelovecheskogo myshleniya* [Cognitive metaphor as a way of representing knowledge in ABC-book and as a fundamental principle of human thinking]. *Prepodavatel' XXI vek* [Teacher XXI Century]. 2015;1:294-307. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/kognitivnaya-metaforakak-sposob-predstavleniya-znaniyav-yazyke-i-kak-osnovopolagayuschiiyprintsip-chelovecheskogo-myshleniya/viewer> [Accessed: April 07, 2025] [in Russian]
- [7] Schwenkenbecher A. *Terrorism: A Philosophical Enquiry*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2012
- [8] Bogmatsera EV, Ilyichev IE. *Terrorizm: Istoki, ponyatiye, ugrozy* [Terrorism: Origins, concept, threats]. *Vestnik Belgorodskogo yuridicheskogo instituta MVD Rossii imeni I.D. Putilina* [Bulletin of the Belgorod Law Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia named after I.D. Putilin]. 2018;3:12-29. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/terrorizm-istoki-ponyatieugrozy/viewer> [Accessed: April 17, 2025] [in Russian]
- [9] Schmid AP, Jongman AJ. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers; 1988
- [10] Schmid AP. *Defining Terrorism*. ICCT Report. International Center for Counter Terrorism. ICCT Publ; 2023. Available from: [https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/Schmidt%20-%20Defining%20Terrorism\\_1.pdf](https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/Schmidt%20-%20Defining%20Terrorism_1.pdf) [Accessed: May 05, 2025]
- [11] Laqueur W. *The Age of Terrorism: A Completely Revised and Expanded Study of National and International Political Violence*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company; 1987
- [12] Afanasyev NN, Shukshin VS. *Istoricheskiye Kornii Terrorizma* [Historical Roots of Terrorism]. Moscow: Yur-VAK Publ.; 2002 [in Russian]
- [13] Kaftan VV, Putyatin VD. *Istoricheskiye Kornii i Evolyutsiya Terrorizma. Plan Lektsii* [Historical Roots and Evolution of Terrorism. Lecture Plan]. Novosibirsk: Ministerstvo obrazovaniya, nauki i innovatsionnoy politiki Novosibirskoy oblasti Publ. [Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation Policy of the Novosibirsk Region]; n.d. Available from: [https://mooc.nspu.ru/pluginfile.php/34/mod\\_resource/content/1/Kaftan\\_Putyatin\\_Istoricheskiye\\_korni\\_terrorizma.pdf](https://mooc.nspu.ru/pluginfile.php/34/mod_resource/content/1/Kaftan_Putyatin_Istoricheskiye_korni_terrorizma.pdf) [Accessed: April 28, 2025]

- [14] Reznik SV, Kutomanov SA, Mizaev VN. Islamskiy terrorizm kak transkul'turnyy proyekt [Islamic terrorism as a transcultural project]. Nauchnyye vedomosti Belgorodskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Filosofiya. Sotsiologiya. Pravo [Scientific Bulletin of Belgorod State University. Series: Philosophy. Sociology. Law]. 2010;**13**:299-306 [in Russian]
- [15] Ayzyatov FA, Burova YUV. Kontseptualizatsiya fenomenov «terrora» i «terrorizma» v usloviyakh sotsial'no-filosofskogo znaniya [Conceptualization of the phenomena of “terror” and “terrorism” in the context of socio-philosophical knowledge]. Obshchestvo: filosofiya, istoriya, kul'tura [Society: Philosophy, History, Culture]. 2016;**12**:35-37. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/kontseptualizatsiya-fenomenov-terrorai-terrorizma-v-usloviyah-sotsialnofilosofskogo-znaniya/viewer> [Accessed: April 17, 2025] [in Russian]
- [16] Frank SL. Po tu storonu pravogo i levogo. In: Frank VS, editor. Sbornik Statey [Beyond Right and Left. Collection of Articles]. Paris: YMCA-Press; 1972 [in Russian]
- [17] Chudinov AV. Razmyshleniya anglichan o Frantsuzskoy revolyutsii: E. Bork, Dzh. Makintosh, U. Godvin. [Reflections of the English on the French revolution: E. Burke, J. Mackintosh, W. Godwin]. Moscow: Pamyatniki istoricheskoy mysli [Monuments of Historical Thought]; 1996 [in Russian]
- [18] Pavlenkova ON. Etimologicheskaya Evolyutsiya Znacheniya Slova «Terrorizm» [Etymological Evolution of the Meaning of the Word “Terrorism”]. [Electronic Resource] Network Object Identifier: 62d766c12a458b339bb4f0919d2219603951520eb5cb49bc227efc1ae1324895. Moscow: Limited Liability Company “Institute for Strategic Studies”; 2009. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/etimologicheskayaevolyutsiya-znacheniy-slova-terrorizm/viewer> [Accessed: May 07, 2025] [in Russian]
- [19] Stepanov YG, Kazus CG. Nechaeva (kommentariy k biografii) [Case of S.G. Nechaev (commentary to the biography)]. Vestnik Surgutskogo Gosudarstvennogo Pedagogicheskogo Universiteta [Bulletin of the Surgut State Pedagogical University] Surgut. 2022;**3**(78):118-127. DOI: 10.26105/SSPU.77.2.026 [in Russian]
- [20] Marx K, Engels F. The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association. In: Marx K, Engels F, editors. Report and Documents Published by Resolution of the Hague Congress of the International. 2nd ed. Vol. 18. Moscow: State Publishing House of Political Literature; 1961. pp. 323-452 [in Russian]
- [21] Dostoyevsky FM. The Demons/ Dostoyevsky F.M. Complete Works in 30 Volumes. Vol. 10. Leningrad: Nauka Publ; 1974
- [22] Pushchaev YV. Popytka pereotsenki lichnosti S.G. Nechayeva v sovetskoy istoriografii v 1920-ye gg. Predystoriya i kontekst [An attempt to reassess the personality of S.G. Nechaev in soviet historiography in the 1920s. Prehistory and context]. Voprosy filosofii [Questions of Philosophy]. 2023;**5**:130-141. DOI: 10.21146/0042-8744-2023-5-130-141 [in Russian]
- [23] Pushchaev YV. Roman «Besy» F.M. Dostoyevskogo i popytka pereotsenki lichnosti S.G. Nechayeva v sovetskoy istoriografii v 1920-1930-ye gg. [The novel “Demons” by F.M. Dostoevsky and an attempt to reassess the personality of

- S.G. Nechaev in soviet historiography in the 1920s-1930s]. *Voprosy filosofii* [Questions of Philosophy]. 2025;1:128-139. DOI: 10.21146/0042-8744-2025-1-128-139 [in Russian]
- [24] Katrich LV. Problema terrorizma v otechestvennoy sotsiologicheskoy mysli v 1960-1990 gg. [The problem of terrorism in domestic sociological thought in the 1960s–1990s]. *Ob'yedinennyy nauchnyy zhurnal* [United Scientific Journal] Moscow. 2009;5:64-69 [in Russian]
- [25] Aliev TE, Kudelin AA. Novaya volna terrorizma: Chto prines XXI vek [New wave of terrorism: What the 21st century brought]. In: *Vestnik RUDN. Seriya Vseobshchaya Istoriya*. [Bulletin of RUDN University. Series General History]. Moscow, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia; 2015. pp. 26-34 [in Russian]
- [26] Shestakov E. Pagers That Blew up the World Are Terror on a New Level. Moscow: Rossiyskaya Gazeta; 2024. Available from: <https://rg.ru/2024/09/18/poluchite-soobshcheniem.html?ysclid=mceb9rinl2187401661> [Accessed: June 25, 2025]
- [27] Abdrashitova TA. Ob ogranicheniyakh psikhooanaliza v Obyasnenii prirody ekstremizma [On the limitations of psychoanalysis in explaining the nature of extremism]. *Yevraziyskiy soyuz uchenykh* [Eurasian Union of Scientists]. 2015;5-6(14):117-119. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/ob-ogranicheniyah-psihoanaliza-v-obyasnenii-prirody-ekstremizma/viewer> [Accessed: May 11, 2025] [in Russian]
- [28] Borum R. Psychology of Terrorism. Tampa: University of South Florida; 2004. 79 p. Available from: <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208552.pdf> [Accessed: May 17, 2025]
- [29] Dashkova SV. Ideologiya sovremennogo terrorizma [Ideology of modern terrorism]. *Vestnik Kalmytskogo un-ta* [Bulletin of Kalmyk University]. 2017;1(33):141-148 [in Russian]
- [30] Tkachenko AS, Ivanov DO, Berezkina EN. Filosofskoantropologicheskii aspekt ucheniya A.A. Ukhtomskogo o dominante [Philosophical and anthropological aspect of A.A. Ukhtomsky's teaching on the dominant]. *Pediatrician* (St. Petersburg). 2018;9(3):128-136. DOI: 10.17816/PED93128-136. Available from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/filosofsko-antropologicheskii-aspektucheniya-a-a-ukhtomskogo-o-dominante/viewer> [Accessed: June 25, 2025] [in Russian]
- [31] Vershinin SE. Filosofiya Nadezhdy Ernsta Blokha: Opravdaniye Utopii [Ernst Bloch's Philosophy of Hope: Justification of Utopia] Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Specialty HAC RF 09.00.03. Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences; 2001 [in Russian]
- [32] Matveev PE. Filosofiya postupka M.M. Bakhtina (opyt eticheskoy interpretatsii) [Philosophy of the act of M.M. Bakhtin (an attempt at ethical interpretation)]. *Eticheskaya mysl'* [Ethical Thought]. 2016;16(2):70-83. DOI: 10.21146/2074-4870-2016-16-2-70-83
- [33] Kachalova MP. «Dnevnik» M. M. Prishvina: Ponyatiye rodstvennogo vnimaniya [“Diaries” of M. M. Prishvin: The concept of related attention] *Vestnik Leningradskogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta. Seriya filologiya: Nauchnyy zhurnal* [Bulletin of the Leningrad Pedagogical University. Philology Series: Scientific Journal. - St. Petersburg:

Leningrad State University named after  
A.S. Pushkin] – SPb.: LGU im. A.C.  
Pushkina. 2011;2(12):99-115. Available  
from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/dnevnik-m-m-prishvina-ponyatie-rodstvennogo-vnimaniya/viewer>  
[Accessed: June 28, 2025] [in Russian]



*Edited by James P. Welch*

Terrorism has not remained static; it has transformed. *Terrorism in Transition - The Shifting Face of Global Threats* provides a rigorous examination of how state power, ideological movements, intelligence reform, economic structures, and psychological dynamics are reshaping contemporary global security and the international order. This interdisciplinary volume analyzes state-sponsored and state-supported terrorism, institutional adaptation, regional conflict environments, ethical dilemmas in asymmetric warfare, and the financial and behavioral mechanisms sustaining extremist networks. By integrating strategic, political, economic, and human dimensions, and situating terrorism within shifting geopolitical and governance frameworks, the book offers a structured and authoritative assessment of evolving threats and explores the institutional recalibration required to confront them.

*Sandro Serpa, Social Sciences Series Editor*

Published in London, UK

© 2026 IntechOpen  
© 9parusnikov / iStock

**IntechOpen**

ISSN 2977-6473

ISBN 978-1-83635-368-3

