# Forgotten Frontier

## A Phenomenon of Terrorism in the Shadow of the European War

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For almost two decades since the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, combating violent extremism and its ultimate form—terrorism—has remained the top strategic issue on the international agenda. The lengthy and exhausting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the turmoil of the so-called "Arab Spring," the advent of a terrorists-owned state (the so-called "Caliphate") in the Middle East, the radicalization of some Muslim communities in Western countries, the significant securitization of politics, and many other developments became intertwined, one way or another, to the issue of terrorism.

The adaptation of states to that threat cost untold billions of dollars. Politicians overemphasized societal security concerns in their electoral programs. Western armies shifted their operational planning and training focus from conventional warfare towards expeditionary counterinsurgency missions. Experts and scholars expended tons of paper for research and policy recommendations. Meanwhile, that strategic course, once dubbed the "Global War on Terror," has diverted attention from other emerging challenges, and foremost, the rise of the revisionist states willing to defy existing international order.

The COVID-19 pandemic affair and then the Russia-Ukraine war caused a fundamental transformation of the global scenery. One of the particular outcomes was a shift of the issue of terrorism from the focus of global concerns to its periphery. Two main reasons for this shift are the relative decline of terrorist activities worldwide and the pressure of (the) unfolding geopolitical confrontation(s). Yet, this may have produced a deceptive, even false impression that the terrorist phenomenon has become irrelevant. It remains present, and it may indeed return in force.

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The purpose of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief is to examine the state of the field, to highlight the existing and emerging trends and geographic regions of concern, and to place the phenomenon of terrorism into a broader context.

## Global Jihadist Movement: Two Persistent Networks

The dynamic in the Islamist jihadist realm is changing. Both of the Salafist-jihadist terrorist mega-networks that caused major concerns in the past decades—Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS)—are now relatively weakened and fragmented. The primary reason for that change is threefold: nonstop Western counterterrorist pressure, an internal crisis of strategy, and the partial loss of mass appeal.

The Islamic State embodied a unique fusion of violent jihadist ideology and the institutional culture of the security services of Saddam Hussein's regime overthrown by the United States. Moreover, it was further strengthened by tens of thousands of extremists who migrated to the Levant and Mesopotamia from all corners of the world to wage jihad and build up its "statehood." The proclamation of the "Caliphate" in parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014 manifested an expansionist agenda of the IS. However, the sustained and exhausting military campaign by the U.S.-led military coalition and its regional allies eventually led to the defeat of the "Caliphate," which lost its physical signature and by 2019 had disintegrated back down to even the small underground groups. The IS-inspired homegrown terrorist micro-cells and "lone wolves," which in 2014-2019 committed several deadly terrorist attacks in France, Germany, Belgium, and other Western countries, have evidently decreased their operations in the past few years. There were only two Islamist-related attacks in Europe in 2022. Overall, the number of attacks by IS outfits worldwide between June 2022 and December 2022 has declined by 60 percent.

Al-Qaeda, once a driver of the global jihad, an IS-parent entity, and its ensuing nemesis, is almost unobservable. Its long-time leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, a companion of Osama bin Laden, was killed by a drone strike in Kabul in July 2022. The vestiges of AQ's veteran core are hiding somewhere in the difficult to control border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan (AFPAK). There are no indicators of the network's recent operational activity in the West.

None of this means the jihadist threat is over. Its networks may be partially defeated, have lost control of areas, and lack new charismatic leaders. Yet, the violent ideology inspired by radical political Islam (Islamism) persists, and online propaganda and recruitment continues. Notwithstanding all setbacks, the regional affiliates and associated groups of AQ and IS—foremost in AFPAK, parts of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia—continue fighting local governments and each other. To employ a boxing expression: they may be down, but they are not out.

In the past, the jihadist networks repeatedly demonstrated their ability to regroup and adapt to a crisis environment. The endurance of this violent ideology establishes a precondition for the recurrent revitalization of the global jihadist movement, despite its current relative decline trajectories. This could happen in the context of evolving broader settings.

## AFPAK: Back to the Square One?

Almost two years after the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, that country remains far from stabilized. Factional rivalry and the failure of its governance model established a power vacuum to which extremist outfits have rushed. The rising regional branch of the IS—the Islamic State in the Province of Khorasan (IS-KP)—is challenging the Taliban's rule in many areas as well as projecting instability to neighboring Pakistan—a nuclear-armed country that is gripped by an ongoing political and economic crisis. The Central Asian states are also threatened. In particular, propaganda outlets of the ethnic-Uzbek and ethnic-Tajik wings of the IS-KP (partially consisting of jihadist nomads who retreated from theaters in Syria and Iraq) not just appealed to their sympathizers to overthrow governments but also to conduct periodic cross-border attacks from the Afghan territory.

The current situation in Afghanistan delivers a sense of 1990s *déjà vu*, when the existing chaos formed both a safe-haven and a nutrient-rich environment for the rise of Al-Qaeda that culminated in 9/11. This time around, the jihadist ambitions, goals, and strategies may change, but the utility tool will remain the same—the use of terrorist violence.

That predisposition may eventually affect the security situation in the core Central Asian states of the Silk Road region. Despite evident progress in various fields, the Central Asian Five, as they are often called, still cannot be classified by some metrics as fully stable countries: since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have experienced an array of complications in the socio-economic, political, demographic, and environmental spheres. More recently, the European War has projected more negativity into the region, causing effects on the labor market as well as on and food and energy prices. To be effective, terrorist actors do not depend upon being a mass movement at the initial stage; all it takes is an organized and agile hardcore group. Thus, the growing social alienation and dissatisfaction that leads to radicalization in some parts of the population (especially in the younger generation) could potentially be exploited by the IS and local extremist actors. IS could also try to target countries' critical infrastructure associated with major geo-economic projects being constructed at accelerating pace in Central Asia since the onset of the European War.

## The African Theatre: Perpetual Micro-Wars

Africa is the area of the world most affected by terrorism. Terror-related deaths have increased by an alarming 2,000 percent in the past 15 years. In 2022, one in two fatalities due to terrorist attacks worldwide occurred in Africa.

A set of root causes shapes a permissive environment for the spread of extremist ideologies that drive terrorist activity on the continent. Contributing factors include: weak states, ineffective governance, injustice, marginalization, socio-economic inequality and poverty, interfaith frictions, and environmental degradation. The vast and often hard-to-access geography provides violent non-state actors with favorable conditions to establish and further expand the lawless areas and gray zones under their control, especially in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

Two competing networks—AQ and IS—that are waging terrorist insurgencies in different parts of Africa. The IS has consolidated its several jihadist ecosystems that they dub *wilaya* (provinces):

- Islamic State in the Western Africa Province (IS-WAP), which operates in northeast Nigeria and around Lake Chad (in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon).
- Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), which is active largely in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.
- Islamic State in the Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) which is present in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique.
- Less active outfits in Egypt (IS-Sinai Province), Libya, and Somalia.

Furthermore, a constellation of groups gravitates towards Al-Qaeda's ideological influence. Among them are Harkat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin in Somalia, Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (Algeria and the surrounding countries), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (operating in seven countries of North and West Africa). In addition, some other jihad-inspired entities, like Boko Haram in Nigeria, operate autonomously.

Notwithstanding the strength of the organizational bonds and groups' affiliation to their umbrella networks, the traits of their strategy and *modus operandi* have a common design. These include:

- Establishment of parallel governance structures (public administration, courts, and social services) in areas without effective state control.
- Intensive indoctrination and recruitment activities in local communities.
- Mixing insurgency tactics with "classical" terrorist attacks (such as the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and periodical mass massacres and kidnappings to intimidate the civilian population).
- Fluid internal dynamic based on the frequent splitting and merging of groups.
- Nexus with organized crime in the form of smuggling operations (weapons and drugs) and exploration of resources (gold and other minerals, timber, ivory, etc.) for self-sustainment.

Various African governments are responding to terrorism with robust military force and some hearts-and-minds engagement. The concerned Western actors, primarily the United States and France, are providing assistance. Nevertheless, as long as the root causes for the phenomenon persist, it seems unlikely that the terrorist malady in Africa

can dwindle any time soon. In the meantime, terrorism induced by the aforementioned extremist ideology continues to distress Africa, upsetting development whilst producing an increase of migration flows from the continent to Western countries.

## Strategy & Tactics: The Quest for New Rationales and Solutions

For many years the jihadist leadership cohort, besides their theological and ideological disputes, remained divided by debates on the strategic course to execute. Notably, certain leaders (such as al-Zawahiri, who was bin Laden's aide on ideology) insisted on targeting the "far enemy" (the U.S. in particular and the West in general). In contrast, others argued for the need to focus on the "near enemy" (i.e., overthrowing the "apostate" pro-Western regimes in the Muslim world). When the first group prevailed, the 9/11 attack commenced, causing an overwhelming counterterrorist response by the West. Caught under duress, Al-Qaeda and associated movements soon switched to a stratagem of "one thousand cuts," founded on the delusion that multiple minor attacks and the projection of the threat of attacks would bleed and bankrupt the West.

When AQ's offshoot—the Islamic State—became an independent player in 2014 and soon surpassed its parent entity in strength and global narrative outreach, its leaders tried to execute another strategy: the establishment of the "Caliphate" as an initial foothold for the future spreading out worldwide. Not coincidentally, one of the individuals selected to make the announcement about the establishment of the "Caliphate" was a Norwegian citizen born in Chile—i.e. belonging to two geographically disparate corners of the world, thus reflecting the global ambitions of that new entity. However, that gargantuan project soon suffered a failure, too.

In many aspects, the strategy discourse in the jihadist realm resembles the Trotsky-Stalin debates from the 1920s-1930s in the international communist movement ("permanent revolution" worldwide vs. the "building of socialism in one country" as the basis for the next expansion). Yet, both jihadist strategic concepts proved to be botched, generating the ongoing crisis in the strategy of the global jihad.

Apparently, at the current stage, different regional jihadist outfits operating in parts of Africa, Yemen, and some other places employ the quasi-strategy of "ink spots." A derivative of the now defunct Caliphate-building project, this approach is based on establishing low-signature micro-zones of control, with the long-term perspective of steady expansion when conditions permit—akin to an ink spot on a blotter.

Strategy determines operational and tactical doctrines. The jihadist *modus operandi* is in crisis too. There have been virtually no noteworthy successful terrorist attacks in the West in recent years. The continuous strengthening of states' security systems and the application of soft power tools like counter-narrative, counter-radicalization, and de-radicalization strategies has significantly depleted the jihadist homegrown recruitment pool.

However, there is no reason to relax and rest on one's laurels, as jihadist entrepreneurs still possess the capabilities to be effective. One specific concern in this regard is the "Mumbai 2.0" scenario—i.e., a large-scale distributed attack aimed at causing mass casualties, analogous to the notorious terrorist operation that took place in India in November 2008. Thus, several synchronized attacks in an urban environment executed by trained terrorists (perhaps by veterans of the wars in Syria or Ukraine) armed with light weapons and explosives would significantly complicate the response of law-enforcement agencies, produce many civilian casualties, and thus, generate the political and media effects sought by terrorists. Another tactical solution is the use of suicide bombers, especially in dense human areas like mass transit systems, airports, music festivals, and so on.

Technology is a further enabler of capabilities. There is only a short time left to wait until jihadist terrorists (and malicious actors of other strains) begin applying the ample open-source technological innovations. They already use cyberspace and social media for communication, coordination, operational control, recruitment, and the spread of propaganda narratives. They use drones, digital planning, and cryptography as well. Artificial intelligence tools will enhance their capabilities eventually.

Overall, the crisis of strategy and degrading capabilities may explain the current lull in jihadist activity in the Western theatre. However, that might be the lull before the storm.

## *The Case of Iran*

In the past four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has reportedly developed a unique system that fuses the tradecraft of conventional state intelligence services and the unconventional tactics of a certain type of non-state actors. Networks belonging to such a system appear to stretch from Latin America and West Africa across the European continent to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the most capable of such Tehran-supported non-state or sub-state actors are present in the Middle East—in the Levant, Iraq, the Gulf, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. There and elsewhere, elements from local Shia communities are also instrumentalized for various ends of the sort not practiced by almost any other UN member state, including staffing for paramilitary forces operating in various theaters. This includes now-routinized proxy-hybrid operations directed against its sworn nemesis, the State of Israel.

It is an observable trend that the more Tehran feels that its security perimeter has been breached, the more bellicose is the posture that it takes. Iranian strategic culture embeds the notion of retaliation for any hurt caused. Thus, for example, perceived Israeli actions against Iranian targets in Syria and Iran itself are confronted with an asymmetric response, which sometimes involves Israel-related soft targets in third countries. One such plot was thwarted in March 2023, where an allegedly Iran-controlled sleeper cell consisting of Pakistani nationals tried to target a synagogue and other targets in Athens.

The risk of such types of operations is likely to remain heightened in the event that the situation in and around Iran remains tense.

## The European War: Delayed, Yet Imminent Effects

Long wars produce long-lasting security effects. After it is finally over, one of the myriad outcomes of the European War will almost certainly be the emergence, on both sides of the divide, of an immense pool of seasoned veterans, politicized and affected by various post-traumatic stress disorders and finding no place in civilian life. That could turn out to be a fundamental problem far beyond Ukraine and Russia.

As Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, hundreds of volunteers from all five continents rushed to fight on the Ukrainian side. Some of them belonged to far-right political groups in their homelands. From mid-2022, in addition to that "foreign legion," several battalions consisting of ethnic Chechens living in exile in Europe joined the fight on the Ukrainian side. There are quite credible reports of ethnic-Chechens, Dagestanis, and ethnic-Albanians, affiliated with Syria-based *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* and *Ajnad al-Qawqas* leaving that theater to merge into the aforementioned Ukrainian contingent.

On the Russian side, several neo-Nazi paramilitary groups have been absorbed into the ranks of the field army—one of them filmed and disseminated the beheading of one Ukrainian prisoner of war in a typical Islamic State pattern. In addition, there are also pro-government Chechen paramilitary outfits whose members often use the discourse and symbols of classic jihad. Given the lax vetting process and the recruitment of prisoners, the enlistment of the radical elements is not impossible (including the migrant workers from the Central Asian states and members of jail *jamaats*). Furthermore, the accelerated establishment of various militias (officially known as "private military companies" in Russia) challenges the state's monopoly on violence.

As radicalization at the front accelerates, some of the hardcore veterans fighting on both sides could potentially cause a significant headache—not only in postwar Russia and Ukraine but also beyond.

The European War (as well as the preceding COVID-19 pandemic and endless waves of migration from the Global South) led to a worsening economic situation, rising social tensions, and increased public disgruntlement in Western societies. One of the facets of the latter is the noteworthy upsurge of both the far-right and far-left political trend. Many politicians, experts, and scholars express anxiety that some ultra-rightists and ultra-leftists may heighten public anti-establishment violence, violent anti-social behavior, and even to terrorism. An outward increase of the far-right trend is taking place in the United States, including in the military. In Germany, an alleged "coup d'état" conspiracy was thwarted in 2022, and part of the elite KSK commando force of the Bundeswehr was disbanded for the neo-Nazi leaning of some of its personnel.

Even though the far-right and far-left movements in the West are not always very hierarchically structured and have not yet engaged systematically in violence, their ongoing evolution and radicalization curve causes concerns. In the context of the ongoing European War, the Western security services and law enforcement agencies must now redirect their attention and resources from watching homegrown Islamist extremists to neutralizing Russian intelligence networks and spy rings. An added challenge of containing both far-right and far-left groups will further overstretch them and widen loopholes in the security system. That is a trend to watch.

## Synopsis

- The European War and the numerous ensuing precipitants overshadow the existing threat of terrorism and violent extremism.
- The scale of terrorist activities worldwide in the past few years has been decreasing due to a combination of objective reasons.
- The number of terrorist attacks in the West has declined, and terror actors become more fragmented, weakened, and localized in parts of the Global South.
- The present state of the terrorism phenomenon resembles the Cold War period when it was in the background of the international security agenda and absorbed by the bipolar politico-military confrontation.
- However, that downward trajectory of terrorism towards "business as usual"—a positive by itself—has a reverse side.
- The peril is that the terrorist threat could be overlooked as a niche problem and fall out of the focus of policymakers dealing with more urgent worries.
- Meantime, the phenomenon of terrorism is naturally cyclical and always determined by broader existing settings.
- The ongoing transformation of political, social, and economic conditions, and an emerging technological order, are shaping a new global environment.
- History shows that the phenomenon of terrorism reemerges exactly at the transformative stages of humankind.
- The widening social divide and exclusion may potentially push millions of people to radical ideologies, be it Islamism, far-right or far-left political doctrine, or anything else.
- The next wave of terrorism presumably will be more fragmented, aggressive, and heterogeneous by its nature.

It is believed that terrorist acumen requires four essential components—ideas, leaders, resources, and foot soldiers. Of that set, ideas represent the most crucial sustaining driver of terrorism. Ideology cannot be defeated by force. It only can be self-defeated—through decay and the loss of mass appeal and demand. Even then, other ideas challenging the existing order of things may emerge. That leaves few hopes that the phenomenon of terrorism will vanish from the face of the Earth someday.