



# THE TERRORISM OF TOMORROW IS ALREADY HERE

-By Phil Gurski

Many experts who track global developments in terrorism over time are familiar with the work of American political scientist David Rapoport. The UCLA professor emeritus is best known for what he dubbed the “wave theory of terrorism.” This comprehensive overview of terrorist movements spanning 150 years posits that there have been four such “waves” — or shifts in motivation, techniques, and outcomes — of terrorist activity since the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>[121]</sup>

Rapoport succeeded in applying broad categories to many terrorist movements active at particular stages of modern history. While, as with most social phenomena, there exist “exceptions” to his theory — not every terrorist cause within a given period conforms to the label applied to the totality of the given wave — it is nevertheless a useful framework scholars and policymakers may draw from. Each wave spans a generation, or about 40 years. Generally speaking, the waves dissipate upon the end of their allotted time.

## A RESURGENT RELIGIOUS WAVE

The current religious wave of terrorism has persisted since the end of the 1970s. If we follow Rapoport's theory to the letter, this current wave should peter out imminently, as it relates to a series of events that occurred in 1979: the Iranian revolution in February, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, and the lesser-known — albeit most important — seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November.

Some have speculated on what the “fifth wave” of terrorism could look like. The characteristics of the forthcoming wave are less important than many believe. What does matter is that the latest wave should die out soon if theory and history serve as accurate indicators of the future. So far, however, the current wave shows no sign of abating.

There is no evidence that the religious form of terrorism is on the wane; on the contrary, it continues vigorously and may in fact be growing. While the casualties attributed to religious terrorism may be falling as measured by the Global Terrorism Index, a database published annually by the Australia-based Institute for Economics and Peace, the sheer number of groups and actors may be on the rise.<sup>[122]</sup>

The religious wave is normally associated with Islamist extremism. This term is descriptive of many terrorists and terrorist groups which believe, *grosso modo*, that they have a divine obligation to fight Islam's enemies and establish a perfect Islamic society on Earth.<sup>[123]</sup> These actors' enemies range from the West in general to Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and even Muslims (e.g., adherents of Shi'a Islam) who reject the terrorists' interpretation of Islam and the use of violence to impose their convictions.

It is this form of terrorism that has captured the world's attention for decades, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The organizations that engage in this form of terrorism are far too numerous to list here but include the widely familiar al-Qaeda (AQ), Islamic State (ISIS), Boko Haram (BH), al-Shabaab (AS), the Taliban, and hundreds of others. ISIS and AQ have spawned regional branches (known as provinces) or affiliates in many parts of the world.

It must be noted that Islamist terrorism is far from the only manifestation of religious extremist violence. Hindu groups in India, Jewish groups in Israel, Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and Sikh groups in the Punjab region all cite faith to call for and justify death and destruction.

And yet when we glance at the number of attacks, casualties, group members, organizations, and countries in which terrorist groups operate, it becomes clear that Islamist extremism remains the most lethal

brand of this form of violent extremism. This record of infamy has endured for more than 40 years, surpassing the expectations of Rapoport's Wave Theory. Moreover, Islamist extremism shows no signs of slowing or yielding to a fifth wave or different form of terrorism. This is not to say that it is the sole manifestation of terrorism today — other forms of terrorism do exist, and new methods and motivations may develop — but this growth is unlikely to be at the expense of a downturn in Islamist terrorism.

## ISLAMIST EXTREMISM ACROSS THE WORLD: AN OVERVIEW

A quick tour d'horizon will illustrate the continued strength of Islamist terrorists and terrorist organizations. In Afghanistan, the 20-year U.S.-led campaign to quell al-Qaeda terrorism has failed. The Taliban now run the country, as they did in the run-up to the 9/11. Their fundamentalist, exclusionary version of Islam will add to the suffering of ordinary Afghans, and we should assume that their close relationship with AQ will continue. Even the internal conflict between the Taliban and an ISIS affiliate, Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), itself made up of disaffected Taliban, will not dampen the enthusiasm of Islamist terrorists who can claim to have defeated not one, but two, superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. In October 2021, a Pentagon official stated that ISK could be positioned to attack the United States and the West writ large sooner than originally assessed — in as early as six months.<sup>[124]</sup> AQ was also described as “not far behind” ISK in its own preparations.

The Taliban takeover has bolstered and inspired *jihadi* groups around the world. The Taliban's model will energize many groups, many of which some analysts had described as having on the brink of collapse in recent years. Pakistan, long accused of harboring Taliban-e-Tehrik Pakistan (TTP) has seen a worrying rise in attacks over the past four years.<sup>[125]</sup>

Moving westward, despite former U.S. President Donald Trump's declaration that ISIS had been “totally defeated” in 2019, the organization shows signs of life.<sup>[126]</sup> It no longer enjoys the geographic cohesion it experienced during its “Caliphate” heyday, but its core in Iraq and Syria is anything but idle. Further south, in Yemen, the ongoing civil war between the Houthis (supported in part by Iran) and the internationally recognized government (supported by Saudi Arabia and, until lately, the United Arab Emirates) has terrorist overtones. The group has been behind the killing of tens of thousands of Yemenis and the displacement of millions.<sup>[127]</sup>

These developments bring us to Africa. The continent has morphed into a hotbed of Islamist extremism, where terrorist groups, some affiliated with AQ and others with ISIS, have risen in recent years to cause death and mayhem. Some of the most important terrorist concentrations lie in Morocco, where police have dismantled more than 2,000 terrorist cells and captured

more than 3,400 people in terrorism-related cases.<sup>[128]</sup> In Nigeria, both Boko Haram and an ISIS affiliate, Islamic State Western Africa Province (ISWAP) have been active for over a decade. BH has existed since the late 2010s and ISWAP is a more recent phenomenon. Thousands have been kidnapped, including the infamous Chibok girls, and tens of thousands have been killed and millions of civilians have been displaced.<sup>[129]</sup> In Burkina Faso, terrorist groups linked to both AQ and ISIS have killed more than 1,500 people and forced 1.3 million to flee their homes.<sup>[130]</sup> In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a shadowy Islamist extremist group called the Allied Democratic Forces has killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands.<sup>[131]</sup>

Islamist extremist groups in Africa have demonstrated a fierce ability to thwart regional and Western efforts to eradicate them. In Mali, despite the French-led Operation Barkhane since 2013, there have been dozens of attacks and hundreds of deaths. Terrorists recently released a Colombian nun they had held hostage since 2017.<sup>[132]</sup> Egypt, a locus of terrorism since the 1980s and 1990s, has seen hundreds of police officers and soldiers and more than 1,000 civilians killed by ISIS in Sinai since 2013.<sup>[133]</sup> In Somalia, al-Shabaab is one of Africa's longest-standing terrorist groups and is active in neighboring Kenya as well.<sup>[134]</sup> Despite pressure from an international military coalition constructed to eliminate al-Shabaab, from September 2006 to October 2017, the group deployed 216 suicide bombers across 155 attacks, killing as many as 2,218 people.<sup>[135]</sup>



Boko Haram // Public Domain.

Counterterrorism efforts, both local and foreign, have done little to halt these attacks. When combined with purely criminal enterprises, such as the “banditry” that takes place in many parts of Nigeria and elsewhere, these groups beget a disturbing level of human misery. The immediate future of security and public safety in Africa appears increasingly dim.

Terrorist organizations have also expanded their ability to conduct deadly attacks abroad. In addition to hundreds of small-scale attacks over the last two decades, we have witnessed several in which dozens if not hundreds were killed and/or wounded, including in the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Germany, and the United States. Perhaps most importantly, homegrown radicalized individuals

conducted these attacks, in a break from traditional terrorist activity. In addition to this, we must also consider the thousands who left their homelands to join ISIS in the mid-2010s when the terrorist group launched its so-called “Caliphate.” Many also carried out attacks in other nations: my own country, Canada, has contributed actors who executed operations in Algeria, Somalia, Iraq, and Bangladesh.



January 6 Insurrection // Photo By: Brett Davis // CC BY-NC 2.0.

## FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Many experts and policymakers cite the growing threat from the far right, an umbrella term which usually encompasses white supremacists and nationalists, neo-Nazi groups, conspiracy theorists, and even, for some, involuntary celibates (known as Incels). The situation has become so dire in the United States that the FBI has developed a designation for what it considers “domestic terrorism.”<sup>[136]</sup> Caseloads for domestic terrorism have more than doubled in recent years.<sup>[137]</sup>

There is no question that the United States has a far-right problem on a scale unseen in other Western nations. The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States Capitol exemplifies the severity of this threat. However, fully understanding the situation requires greater context. An increase in the number of investigations does not necessarily reflect an increase in the threat level. Investigations by agencies such as the FBI or the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in Canada or MI5 in the UK do not always uncover actual plots: the purpose of these bodies’ efforts is in fact to determine whether a credible threat exists. Drawing a one-to-one mapping between “individuals of interest” and actual terrorist activity is misleading.

While there certainly have been large-scale attacks carried out by far-right actors in the United States (of which the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing is the most salient example), these pale in comparison to their Islamist extremist analogues. Islamist extremists have been behind tens of thousands of such attacks over the past 20 years, ranging in size from casualties in the single digits to those in the hundreds. If we look at



terrorism from a global rather than a local angle, the only viable conclusion is that Islamist terrorism is the single most lethal threat when it comes to this specific type of violence.

### WITHER ISLAMIST EXTREMISM? NOT SO FAST

Will Islamist extremism diminish along the lines of Rapoport's Wave Theory, to be replaced by far-right extremism? Current indications would suggest not. It is entirely within the realm of possibility that far-right terrorism may rise in the next few years in select countries. Some hypothesize that the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions, or the economic disruption caused by global climate change, or a growing distrust in government and authority will feed this ideologically diverse set of actors, leading to further terrorist activities. The perceived lack of action on global warming may even engender violence by far-left terrorists seeking to send a message to political elites whose inaction has frustrated activists.

Regardless of whether the two developments transpire, the current number one priority — Islamist violence — will not disappear overnight. If the rise of other forms of violent extremism does force us to take steps to address them, we will be faced with serious resourcing issues. States must ensure that they have enough people to monitor, investigate, and foil attackers and operations. Governments must determine sources of revenue and how to allocate resources to best defend citizens. More importantly, for most people, terrorism does not currently — and is highly unlikely to ever — pose an existential threat to their society. There are cases, however, such as Afghanistan, where the chances of such a threat do exist, but these are the exception, not the rule. The issue should not be exaggerated: policymakers have many serious problems to address and a laser focus on terrorism is not helpful.

Terrorism has existed for millennia, notwithstanding Rapoport's framework starting from the late nineteenth century. As such, it will remain with us in the future, likely

to ebb and flow like other social phenomena. At the time of writing, Islamist terrorism is strong and shows every sign of robustness moving forward, it too shall yield to some other form of violent extremism. That day, however, is still a long way off.

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