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## **Global Terrorism Threat Forecast 2025**

*By Rohan Gunaratna*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As we enter the new year, armed conflicts continue to rage across the globe, destabilising nations, regions, and even the global order. Terrorist attacks and state responses create ripple effects, which not only shape the battlefields but redefine states, fragment societies, and radicalise communities. What does the terrorism threat landscape look like in 2025?*

### **COMMENTARY**

Global terrorism will remain a persistent and pervasive threat to the stability and peace of the world. The Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and Iran-sponsored Shiite and Sunni militia have exacerbated instability around the globe, while geopolitical competitions have polarised and fragmented the community of nations. Unless governments work together to mitigate common security challenges, threat actors will exploit the gaps, loopholes, and weaknesses in global security systems.

All nations need to be steadfast in preventing and preempting threats from taking root and facing up to threats from state and non-state actors including lone wolf attackers. In addition to disinformation operations, threat actors will attack information infrastructure. Nations will need to secure the online domain as hostile states increase their cyberattacks, sabotage infrastructure, assassinate public officials, and engage in espionage.

### **The Background**

In the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, Ukrainian forces and its intelligence services are attacking deep into Russia, including in Moscow, while the Russians are responding with both overt and covert attacks in Europe. Although US President-elect

Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin are determined to end the war, it remains as intractable as the wars in the Middle East.

The Middle East has entered a new conflict phase. The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the fall of President Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, have radically changed the balance of power in the Middle East. The Hamas attack prompted Israel to decimate the rank and file, not only of Hamas but its ally, the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's drone and missile attacks on Israel since October 8, 2023, prompted Israel to decapitate its leadership and decimate its membership. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) attacked Hezbollah enclaves in Lebanon, especially Dahieh in Beirut, and invaded Southern Lebanon on October 1, 2024. Five mediating countries, including the United States, negotiated a ceasefire signed by Israel and Lebanon on November 27, 2024.

The dynamics in the Middle East have been reshaped by Israeli operations that disabled the Iran-led axis. This had an unintended consequence – the reemergence of Sunni Islamism and jihadists. Tied down in Ukraine, Moscow was unable to respond adequately to Bashar Al Assad's calls for help. Neither was Russia able to sustain its presence in Syria.

Iran and its partners and proxies were rendered impotent. Hence, Hezbollah and Syrian forces could not protect the Assad regime. The events that followed had parallels in the fall of two secular dictators – the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, where Salafi jihadists filled the power vacuums.

In Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a hybrid of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, exploited the opportunity. In a lightning assault on Syria's cities, HTS ended the authoritarian rule of the Assad family. With the ascent of a Salafi jihadi group to power, the strategic map of the Middle East has changed.

Many jihadists see the conquest of Damascus as a continuation of the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. Praising the "new rulers" in Syria, Abdel Rahman Youssef al Qardawi, son of the late Youssef al Qardawi, who legitimised suicide bombing and blessed Al Qaeda, stated that "the takeover of Damascus is the continuation of al-Aqsa flood initiated on October 7".

### **Expected Developments in 2025**

Israel's overwhelming response to the Hamas attack galvanised many Muslims worldwide. Harnessing the hostility towards Israel, Iran rallied the Sunni and Shiite extremist groups to work together. Iran-based Al Qaeda leader Saif Al Adil ended the fighting between Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Ansarullah, another Iran-sponsored Shiite militia that had formed the government in Yemen.

Besides attacking Israel with missiles and drones, Ansarullah disrupted global trade and commerce in the Arabian Sea and Red Sea. A 10-nation "multinational security initiative" was formed to fight Ansarullah, which was from the Houthi tribe. Israel,

together with the US and UK, is conducting focused operations on Ansarullah in Yemen. In 2025, Israel is likely to eliminate the leadership of Ansarullah. \

Israel also targeted Iran and its partners and proxies in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, and Iraq. These are Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in the Palestinian Territories, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in Lebanon, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria.

The rise of these non-state threat entities, some supported by states, threatens not only the Middle East but the world. The stability of the Gulf is at stake, and a second Arab Spring is a possibility. As did the return to power of the Al Qaeda-aligned Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021, the HTS captured power in Syria in December 2024 following the collapse of the Syrian government.

Afghanistan and Syria will now provide a haven for the rise of the Salafi-jihadi fraternity. Among the foreign fighters and ideologues who travelled to Syria was Qardawi Jr. While in Damascus, Qardawi Jr, who is from the Muslim Brotherhood, threatened the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and others, calling them the "Zionists of the Arab world".

### *The Middle East*

The fighting in Syria has ended. However, restoring stability in the country will take a long time. For 13 years, starting in March 2011, the conflict ravaged the country of 22 million people, killing over half a million. The Syrian regime fought Sunni jihadists with help from Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Despite appeals by Bashar Al Assad, Moscow could not provide adequate military support. Besides keeping Iran at bay, Israel also severely weakened Hezbollah and other Iran-sponsored Shiite militias. HTS-Sunni jihadists, including their foreign fighter contingent from North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, emerged as winners.

Although the Assad regime in Syria was a known and predictable entity, the HTS-led Syria is not. Rather than being like Afghanistan, the HTS-led Syria is seeking to engage the international community. However, its adherence to the Salafi jihadi version of sharia, treatment of minorities, adherents of other faiths, and women demonstrates its true Islamist nature. As of now, the Western media seems to have a romantic view of HTS, a group that models itself after the Afghan Taliban.

### *Africa*

In Africa, Al Shabab in Somalia and other threat entities on the continent are likely to seize power. Africa and Asia are the two regions most affected by terrorism after the Middle East. The incidents in Africa remained at an all-time high in 2024, a trend that will escalate in 2025. With the drawdown of European forces and increased Turkish and Russian troops, Africa is emerging as a global epicentre of threat.

With the threat cascading from the Maghreb southwards, the Sahel recorded the highest levels of violence in Africa, accounting for over half of the activities on the

continent in 2024. The number of deaths and injuries tripled with Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) intensifying their attacks and expanding their territorial control in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Russia's Africa Corps (previously known as the Wagner Group) was invited by the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso to replace the French military presence, and Niger to replace the US military presence. In 2025, the threat posed by Al Qaeda and IS affiliates is going to shift to Africa's south and west.

### *Asia*

In Asia, the India-Pakistan conflict led to the sponsorship of threat groups across their borders. Clashes between Afghan Taliban and Pakistani forces escalated after the latter's air force bombed targets in Afghanistan and Taliban forces deployed along the border. The Afghan Taliban is supporting the Tareek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is seeking to create an Islamic Emirate in Pakistan.

Modelled on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by the Afghan Taliban, where sharia is practised, the TTP is mounting attacks in Pakistan. Erstwhile allies, the Pakistan military has appealed to the Afghan Taliban to take action against the TTP operating along the border, a request which the Afghan Taliban has declined.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is operating in tribal Pakistan and its Baluchistan province and mounting attacks on Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond, including Russia, Iran, and Turkey. To Afghanistan, ISKP presents the number one threat. Afghanistan itself remains a rogue state hosting Al Qaeda, TTP and other terrorist entities.

In Southeast Asia, the terrorist threat diminished with relentless operations against Islamic State affiliates in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Transnational threats can be mitigated by coordinating, cooperating, and collaborating across governments.

The dissolution of an Al Qaeda affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), in Indonesia is a game changer in the fight against terrorism. Still, its former members need to be engaged, and the remnants closely monitored. The key lesson is that threat entities can be neutralised by governments committed to ending violence, especially terrorism.

### **Going Forward: State and International Response**

The terrorist threat has globalised. From the Muslim territories in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, the virulent ideologies are radicalising migrant and diaspora communities in the West.

To deal with the threat, intelligence services, law enforcement authorities, and security forces should move beyond cooperation towards collaborations and partnerships. They should build common databases, exchange personnel, conduct joint training and operations, and share experiences, expertise, technology, and resources.

States need to enhance strategic intelligence, especially in strategic foresight and forecasting. Government agencies must be able to identify and analyse signals to anticipate changes in scenarios and trends in the threat environment. Unless governments work together to mitigate threats across the ideological spectrum, the future will be uncertain, complex, and vulnerable.

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