



THE GLOBAL TERRORIST THREAT FORECAST IN 2025

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Abstract:

The global terrorist threat remains persistent and pervasive as the world moves into 2025. Armed conflicts from Ukraine to Gaza and destabilisation by both State and non-State actors are redefining international stability. The influence of groups such as Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias underscores the enduring risks. Key challenges include geopolitical rivalries, radicalisation and increasingly sophisticated cyber and physical attacks. With the Middle East at the epicentre of escalating tensions and Africa emerging as a new hotspot, coordinated international efforts are essential to prevent and counter threats. States must strengthen cooperation in intelligence, security and strategic foresight to deal with a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous global landscape.

Keywords : Global terrorism, geopolitical competition, radicalization, Middle East conflicts, cyber-attacks, Salafi-Jihadism, global security, counterterrorism, transnational threats, international collaboration, security & happiness by design

Titulo en Español: Previsión de la amenaza terrorista mundial en 2025

Resumen:

La amenaza terrorista global sigue siendo persistente y omnipresente a medida que el mundo se adentra en 2025. Los conflictos armados, desde Ucrania hasta Gaza, y la desestabilización por parte de actores estatales y no estatales están redefiniendo la estabilidad internacional. La influencia de grupos como el Estado Islámico, Al Qaeda y las milicias respaldadas por Irán pone de relieve los riesgos persistentes. Entre los principales retos figuran las rivalidades geopolíticas, la radicalización y los ataques cibernéticos y físicos cada vez más sofisticados. Con Oriente Próximo en el epicentro de la escalada de tensiones y África emergiendo como un nuevo punto caliente, es esencial coordinar los esfuerzos internacionales para prevenir y contrarrestar las amenazas. Los Estados deben reforzar la cooperación en materia de inteligencia, seguridad y prospectiva estratégica para hacer frente a un panorama mundial volátil, incierto, complejo y ambiguo.

Palabras Clave: *Terrorismo global, competencia geopolítica, radicalización, conflictos en Oriente Medio, ciberataques, salafismo-yihadismo, seguridad global, contraterrorismo, amenazas transnacionales, colaboración internacional, seguridad y felicidad por diseño.*

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1. Synopsis

Today, armed conflicts rage across the globe, from Ukraine to Gaza, Lebanon to Sudan, Libya and Afghanistan-Pakistan border, destabilising nations, regions, and even the global order. Terrorist attacks and State responses create ripple effects - they don't just shape battlefields but redefine States, fragment societies and radicalise communities.

2. Introduction

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 has exacerbated widespread instability across the world. Superpower rivalry and geopolitical competition has polarised and fragmented the community of nations and, in some cases, compromised international security.

More than ever before, political will and leadership is vital to fight threats and restore local, national, regional and global security. Unless Western and Eastern governments work together to mitigate common security threats, risks, and challenges, threat actors will exploit the gaps, loopholes and weaknesses in the global security systems. Far reaching leaders should reach out to leaders across the ideological divide to end unresolved conflicts and crisis.

In a rapidly evolving global and political landscape, all nations require an unblinking eye to prevent and pre-empt threats from seeding, taking root, and manifesting harming the State and hurting its citizens. Public spaces in urban settings especially open facilities will be vulnerable to mass fatality and mass casualty attacks. The threat will be by State and non-State actors including lone wolf attackers. In addition to disinformation and misinformation operations, States will engage in information infrastructure attacks. The threat of cyber-attacks by both State and non-State actors will rise compelling nations to secure the online domain. Hostile States will attempt sabotage of infrastructure, assassinations of public officials, and engage in espionage.

3. The Context

The deadliest war on European soil in more than 70 years, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is widening. While Ukrainian forces and its intelligence services are attacking deep in Russia including in Moscow, Russians are responding with both overt and covert attacks in Europe. Although Donald J. Trump and Vladimir Putin are determined to end it, the Russian Ukrainian conflict is as intractable as the wars in the Middle East.

The heartland of the world, the Middle East, has entered a renewed phase of conflict. Hamas-led devastating attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the fall of the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, has radically changed the balance of power in the Middle East. The Hamas led attack killed about 1,180 (797 civilians, including 36 children and 379 security forces personnel); 3,400 civilians and soldiers were wounded. 251 civilians and soldiers were kidnapped. Nationals from 35 countries were killed, injured or held hostage. The attack killing 32 American citizens and five still being held hostage, has reinforced US support for its steadfast ally, Israel. With Hamas unwilling to surrender, release the hostages and its use of human shields resulted in unprecedented Palestinian fatalities and casualties. As of Dec 28, 2024, Hamas run Health Ministry reported Gaza's death toll at 45,484 and injured at 108,090.

The worst act of international terrorism after Al Qaeda's 9/11, the Hamas attack prompted Israel to decimate the rank and file not only of Hamas but its ally the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Hezbollah's drone and missiles attacks on Israel since October 8, 2023, prompted Israel to decapitate its leadership and decimate its membership. The Israeli Defence Force (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 was reshaped by Israeli operations that disabled the Iran-led axis. Israel delivering a death blow to Iran's partners and proxies in the Middle East had an unintended consequence - the reemergence of Sunni Islamism and jihadists. As the war in the Ukraine tied down Russian forces, Moscow was unable to respond adequately to the urgent call of the then President Bashar Al Assad for help. With Russia prioritising its campaign in Ukraine, Moscow was neither able to sustain its presence in Syria. Due to the threat from Israel, neither Iran nor its partners and proxies were rendered impotent. As it was crippled, Hezbollah, the shock troops of Bashar al Assad, could not protect the Syrian regime. The events that followed were similar to the fall of two secular dictators - the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 where the power vacuum was filled by Salafi Jihadists. 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 50 years authoritarian rule by 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 was Abdel Rahman Youssef al Qardawi, the son of the late Youssef al Qardawi, who legitimized suicide bombing, Jihadists to seize the Middle East and blessed Al Qaeda. Qardawi Jr stated, "that the takeover of Damascus is the continuation of al-Aqsa flood initiated on October 7."

4. Background

Israel's overwhelming response to the Hamas invasion and massacre on October 7, 2023, galvanised a segment of the Muslims worldwide. Harnessing the resentment against Israel, Iran engineered both 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 has formed a government in Yemen. In addition to attacking Israel with missiles and drones, Ansarullah disrupted global trade and commerce in the Arabian and Red Sea. With Yemen disrupting global shipping, a 10-nation "multinational security initiative" fight Ansarullah from the Houthi tribe. Israel together with the U.S. and UK is conducting focused operations on Ansarullah in Yemen. In 2025, Israel is likely to eliminate the entire leadership of Ansarullah.

Israel also targeted Iran and its partners and proxies in Gaza, West Bank, Syria and Iraq. They 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.

With the rise of non/State threat entities some supported by States threaten not only the Middle East but the world-at-large. The stability of the Gulf is at stake and a second Arab Spring is a possibility. Like the return to power of the Al Qaeda-aligned Taliban to Afghanistan in August 2021, HTS captured power in Syria in December 2024. Future Afghanistan and Syria will provide a safe haven for the rise of the Salafi-Jihadi fraternity. Among the foreign fighters and ideologues that travelled to Syria was Qardawi Jr. While touring Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Damascus, Qardawi Jr of the Muslim Brotherhood threatened the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and others, calling them the 'Zionists of the Arab world.'

Although the fighting in Syria has ended, restoring stability in the country will take a decade. For 13 years, starting in March 2011, the conflict in Syria ravaged a country of 22 million killing over half a million people. With help from Russia, Iran, Iraq and Lebanese



Hezbollah the Syrian regime fought Sunni jihadists. Despite appeals by Bashar Al Assad for military help from Moscow, due to the Ukrainian conflict Damascus did not receive adequate support. In addition to Iran, Israel had severely weakened Hezbollah and other Iran sponsored Shiite militia. HTS-Sunni Jihadists including its foreign fighter contingent from North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia emerged as the winner. Assad Regime in Syria was predictable but the HTS-led Syria is not. Rather than be like Afghanistan, the HTS-led Syria is seeking to engage the international community. Nonetheless, its adherence to the Salafi Jihadi version of Sharia, treatment of the minorities, other faiths, and women demonstrates its true nature. The western media has a romantic view of HTS, a group that models itself after the Afghan Taliban.

After Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan and HTS in Syria captured power, Al Shabab in Somali and other threat entities on the continent are likely to seize power and establish control in Africa. Africa and Asia are the two regions most affected by terrorism after the Middle East. The incidents in Africa remained at all-time highs in 2024, a trend that will escalate in 2025. With the drawdown of European forces and the increase of Turkish and Russian forces, Africa is emerging as a global epicentre of threat.

With the threat cascading from Maghreb to its south, the Sahel recorded the highest levels of violence in Africa accounting for over half of activity on the continent in 2024. The 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 expanded their territorial control in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Russia's Africa Corps (previously Wagner group) were invited by Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso to displace the French military presence and Niger to replace the US military presence. In 2025, the threat posed by both Al Qaeda and IS affiliates is shifting to Africa's south and west.

In Asia, India-Pakistan conflict led to sponsorship of threat groups across their borders. Clashes between Pakistani and Afghan Taliban forces escalated after Pakistani airforce bombed targets in Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban deployed forces on the border of Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban is hosting Tareek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) seeking to create an Islamic Emirate in Pakistan. Modelled on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by the Afghan Taliban where sharia is practiced, TTP is mounting attacks in Pakistan. Erstwhile allies, the military in Pakistan appealed to the Afghan Taliban to take action against TTP in Afghanistan's border areas with Pakistan. Like the Afghan Taliban refused to surrender Osama bin Laden to the Americans, the Afghan Taliban is refusing to take action against TTP. Such action would disrupt the Afghan Taliban's equilibrium with TTP. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is operating in tribal Pakistan and in Baluchistan Province and mounting attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan and beyond including in Russia, Iran, and Turkey. To Afghanistan, ISKP presents the number one threat. Afghanistan remains a rouge State hosting Al Qaeda, TTP and other terrorist entities.

In Southeast Asia, the threat diminished with relentless operations against the Islami State affiliates in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. By coordinating, cooperating and collaborating across governments transnational threats can be mitigated. The dissolution of an Al Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia is a game changer in the fight against terrorism. Nonetheless, the formers need to be engaged and remnants continuously monitored. The key lesson is that any threat entity can be neutralised by governments committed to ending violence especially terrorism.

5. Syria's Future

Off on a new trajectory, Syria can descent to chaos like Libya or become an Islamic State like Afghanistan. After the phase of consolidation, HTS-led Syria is likely confronting Israel. To



protect itself, Israel established a buffer zone in the south of Syria by occupying the summit of Mount Hermon, about 10 kilometres from the border with the Israel-held Golan Heights.

After the formation of a Ministry of Defence by HTS, its core strength of 40,000 fighters was joined by 50,000 from allied groups. The very same way the Afghan Taliban turned its guns on Pakistan, after creating a navy, air force and ground forces of 300,000, will the new Syrian government threaten its neighbours? To pre-empt the chemical weapon and other stockpiles of the Syrian regime from falling into the hand of HTS, Israel mounted a series of operations deep in Syria to destroy the strategic weapons. Nonetheless, HTS will inherit the capabilities to develop strategic weapons and a portion of the weapons developed by Assad's Syria.

Religious exclusivism, extremism, and fanaticism has no bounds. Like Iran that sponsors both Shiite and Sunni threat groups, like Afghanistan, will Syria too be a source of support to Salafi Jihadi entities? More than any other group, HTS with a significant foreign fighter contingent. They formed the vanguard to defeat Assad's regime. Although Sharaa's hands are stained with blood, the international community should engage the HTS-led transitional government in Damascus to restore domestic, regional and even global stability.

To restore stability in Syria, the international community has no option but to work with Syria's de-facto leader Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa known widely as Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Born in Saudi Arabia, to a distinguished Syrian family from the Israel-occupied Golan Heights, Al-Sharaa served in Al Qaeda in Iraq from 2003-2005 and then was imprisoned by the US forces from 2006 to 2011. Although Al-Sharaa never met Abu Musab Al Zaraqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, he was the envoy to Syria of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With six members, USD 50,000 and his blueprint in a thumb drive, Al-Sharaa travelled to Syria to establish a branch of ISIS. Designated as a global terrorist in May 2013, four years later the U.S. announced a reward of USD 10 million for information leading to his capture.

The request by Sharaa to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to unite with the HTS-led Syrian government will destabilise Syria's northeast. Today, Syria's Al Hol and Roj camps under the control of the US-supported SDF hold 17,000 Syrians, 20,500 Iraqis and 9000 third country nationals from over 60 countries. Of 46,500 IDPs in these camps, there are 9500 non-Iraq and non-Syrians. SDF controls 9000 IS fighters including 1600 from Iraq and 1800 outside Iraq and Syria. Although 5,500 FTFs and families were repatriated from Syria to 21 countries within 2024, the global threat of terrorism will spike if they are freed. Some foreign governments have risen to the impending threat. In 2025, Indonesia is likely to start repatriating 529 of its citizens. As there was no effective deradicalisation program in the facilities in Syria, foreign governments should focus on bringing their national's home. To implement a multi stakeholder reintegration program, capabilities should be built in religious and spiritual, educational, vocational, social and family, financial, creative and performance art and psychological rehabilitation.

After a full census, the international community should work with the new Syrian government to draft a new constitution and help build a secular and a democratic country where all communities and faiths can live harmoniously. In regions, where HTS-implemented its model of Salafi-Jihadism, Christians, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis and moderate Muslims have suffered. No one can dispute that in Idlib, since HTS implemented Sharia starting on July 23, 2017, churches no longer celebrated Easter, toll bells, and display crosses publicly. After their wealth was seized, 10,000 Christians left their homes and lands and only 200 remain. Will this be the new fate of a HTS-run Syria? Will it be the return of ISIS in another name?

The new Syria under HTS will remain a destination for travel for extant and emerging Jihadists. To counter the theological and ideological attraction of both Levante and Afghanistan,



the ulema needs to rise to the occasion. The narrative of the Black Flag movement, the fight with Dajjal, and return of the Mahdi should be rebutted. Although the war in Syria ended in December 2024, driven by ideology, revenge and retaliation, Alawites are being incessantly targeted by HTS. Assad regime officers have been lynched and some executed in front of their families. While in detention, Alawites have been stabbed to their death. Muslim women have been tormented or beaten for not covering their heads. Based on the experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere, if the version of Sharia practiced by Salafi Jihadism is implemented, Syria will be in eternal turmoil. With polarisation and fragmentation, can an umbrella of nations work with the HTS-run Syria?

Despite being surrounded by a ring of fire, Israel emerged as the most powerful country in the Middle East. Nonetheless, no nation-State including Israel cannot fight a seven-front war perennially. To consolidate its military gains, Israel needs to work with the Muslim world to restore diplomatic ties and harmonious relations.

6. State and International Response

The 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 prevent, pre-empt and respond to threats, intelligence services, law enforcement authorities and military forces should enhance their cooperation and coordination. In addition to eyeballing the threat, governments and their partners should shift from security and intelligence cooperation to collaboration and partnerships. To respond effectively, the services should build common databases, exchange personal, conduct joint training, conduct joint operations and share experiences, expertise, technology and resources.

There is a greater need for States to enhance strategic intelligence, especially in improving capacities on strategic foresight and future thinking. Governments and partners need to correctly identify and analyse weak signals to continuously anticipate possible changes and scenarios in current trends in geopolitics. Unless governments work together to mitigate threats across the ideological spectrum, the world and the future remain highly vulnerable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

7. Expanding the Global Threat Landscape with the HIBLISS Model and Regional Cooperation

Building on the previous discussion of global terrorist threats, this section emphasizes the importance of integrating psychological and emotional well-being into security strategies. Introducing the HIBLISS (Happiness Initiated Behaviour Led Intelligence Security System) concept, A new approach can be seen in using psychological defence through the promotion of Security and Happiness by Design, by simply focusing on the analysis of human behaviour and emotions instead of the heavy reliance on AI technologies to design security solutions that can potentially attract more severe cyber threats. This approach represents a shift from conventional defensive measures to a proactive design fostering resilience and positivity. Furthermore, Singapore and Malaysia serve as a case study for cooperative regional security frameworks exemplified by joint initiatives like the Rapid Transit System (RTS) and the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (SEZ). These examples illustrate the feasibility of applying HIBLISS at a regional level, strengthening both security and societal harmony.

7.1 The HIBLISS Concept in Modern Security Paradigms

The HIBLISS framework integrates psychological well-being with advanced security systems, aiming to neutralize threats through a balance of resilience and positivity. By embedding happiness elements such as aesthetics, interpersonal interaction, and human-centric technologies into security architecture, the model redefines security not as an intimidating force



but as an enabler of trust and comfort. For instance, concealed surveillance systems within urban landscapes can ensure vigilance without generating unease. Such an approach shifts the narrative from mere protection to creating environments where citizens feel both secure and content.

7.2 Case Study: Singapore and Malaysia's Regional Collaboration

In Southeast Asia, cross-border partnerships exemplify the HIBLISS philosophy of balancing security and well-being. The RTS linking Johor Bahru and Singapore enhances mobility and fosters economic integration while embedding advanced security measures. Similarly, the Johor-Singapore SEZ agreement reflects a shared commitment to socio-economic resilience, creating opportunities and fostering trust across borders. These initiatives highlight the potential of bilateral collaboration to transcend traditional security paradigms, fostering both stability and prosperity.

7.3 Strategic Implications

Global terrorist threats necessitate both innovative security frameworks and robust regional cooperation. The HIBLISS model, with its emphasis on psychological well-being, provides a blueprint for modern security systems, while initiatives like the RTS and SEZ underscore the benefits of collective action. Together, these approaches address not just the physical dimensions of threats but the societal factors critical for long-term resilience.

8. Conclusion

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is radicalising both Muslims and non-Muslims. The threat is manifesting in the form of worldwide protests and a surge of attacks. In addition to strikes by threat groups, networks and cells in the physical space, the world in 2025 will witness the surge of attacks in online space.

Today, geopolitics is at the heart of political violence and terrorism. The west and the east should work together to establish a new world order without bloodshed. Rather than compete, nations should collaborate. Otherwise, the world's most intense and fatal, the multiple conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, will widen and deepen. After the collapse of the Iranian axis in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, Tehran will focus on replenishing their wastage and losses and sustaining its militias in Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Afghanistan and Pakistan. After rest and recuperation, Iran and its affiliates will rearm and regroup. Not only will Israel attack the rising threat of Sunni Islamism but Iran.

While some conflicts can be ended, others will need to be managed. To restore long term stability in the Middle East, economic incentives, political engagement, diplomatic persuasion and military pressure on both hostile State and non-State actors are essential. To resolve a long-standing international dispute, Abraham Accords is the first step for Israel and Muslim countries to work together and eventually to create a two-State solution.

With Iran at the threshold of developing a functional nuclear weapon, Israel is determined to degrade Tehran's conventional and unconventional capabilities in 2025. With the support of the US, Israel is likely to reestablish deterrence. With Donald J. Trump's return to power, will he implement the Abraham Accords and support Israel to cripple Iran's nuclear program? How will Iran respond to the US and its Arab and Muslim partners? Will there be exacerbated widespread instability across the world? The national, regional and global responses to these questions will determine the State-of-security of the world in 2025.

As the global threat landscape evolves, security solutions must adapt to address both tangible and intangible dimensions. By integrating the HIBLISS framework/ Security and Happiness by Design methodology and learning from regional collaborations like those



between Singapore and Malaysia, the international community can build systems that ensure safety while fostering societal well-being. This holistic approach may well define the security paradigms of the future.