

Fifth Wave Terrorism:

Threats, Implications, and Risk Management for U.S. Forces

by Captain Matthew A. Hughes

Editor's Note: *The U.S. Department of Defense is a partner organization in an integrated, whole-of-government approach to international counterterrorism. The U.S. State Department is the lead organization for this effort. Other U.S. national security partners include the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and Treasury, and the intelligence community.*

Introduction

Terrorism has ripped through society's fabric, causing violent disturbances throughout the past 150 years. During this period, four distinct waves of terrorism have eroded democratic foundations and toppled governments. Such was the objective of 28-year-old Leon Czolgosz in September 1901. The young anarchist Czolgosz stood in a line at the Temple of Music in Buffalo, New York, waiting to come face-to-face with President William McKinley. He gripped a .38-caliber revolver in his left hand, hidden beneath a white handkerchief, drawing no attention because sweat towels were fre-

quent among attendees of the Pan-American Exposition on that hot day. When Czolgosz finally reached the front of the line and the President extended his hand to greet him, Czolgosz fired two rounds into the President's abdomen from point-blank range. The infected wound killed McKinley within days. As Theodore Roosevelt assumed the mantle of the presidency, he denounced anarchy and demanded immediate legislation, initiating "America's original war on terror."¹ More than a century and four waves of terrorism later, society now faces a fifth wave that, much like the first four, will propagate across the globe, carrying violence and destruction.

The Next Wave

Terrorists like Czolgosz have threatened U.S. forces at various echelons for over a century, targeting individual constituents ranging from new recruits to the commander in



Photo of wash drawing by T. Dart Walker (1869-1914). Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Assassination of William McKinley. Czolgosz shoots President McKinley with a concealed revolver, at Pan-American Exposition reception, September 6, 1901.

chief. Despite efforts to extinguish such threats, terrorism continues to be a chief concern for U.S. forces, prompting military responses both domestic and abroad, institutional changes, and at times, a paradigm shift in strategies and conflict as a whole. As a concept or idea, terrorism is a formidable adversary because of its ever-evolving nature and dynamic factors, including ideologies, objectives, and tactics. Extensive analysis of terrorism has produced models to understand and conceptualize characteristics, feeding strategies to counter ideologies and predictive analysis to plan against future threats. Political scientist David Rapoport developed one such model, dividing the past 150 years of terrorism among four distinct waves based on characteristics that defined each wave. In this model, Rapoport outlines terrorists’ predominant ideologies, objectives, targets, and tactics, as well as conditions that influenced the emergence or decline of prevalent ideologies.

- ◆ New Tribalism.
- ◆ Jihadist groups.
- ◆ Technology.
- ◆ Anti-globalization.

New Tribalism Wave Characteristics and Implications

In the post-Cold War era, culture has overshadowed ideological, political, or economic distinctions as the most important factor behind wars and conflict.⁴ Professor Jeffrey Kaplan’s assertion that an emerging fifth wave will be characterized by mass violence associated with ethnic, racial, or tribal mysticism nests with this observation of culture driving modern conflict.⁵ Under New Tribalism, terrorists pursue a utopian vision to build a perfect society in their regions during their lifetime.⁶ Genocide and rape provide

the means to bring this goal to fruition and transform society within one generation.⁷ Children are the vanguard of New Tribalism: adherents kidnap young men to serve as soldiers and young women to serve as child brides.⁸ Kaplan hypothesizes that the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia will initiate this fifth wave and that the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda will be the wave’s paradigmatic standard.⁹

A fifth wave characterized by New Tribalism would likely involve U.S. special operations forces intervening in New Tribalist conflicts or regionally aligned forces engaged

Wave	Catalyst	Goals	Targets	Tactics	Reasons for Decline
Anarchist (1870s-1910s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow political reform • Declining legitimacies of monarchies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instigate revolution • Eliminate government oppression 	Heads of state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assassinations using dynamite • Bank robberies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive state opposition • Beginning of World War I
Nationalist (1920s-1960s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Versailles Peace Treaty • Increased desire for self-determination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate colonial rule • Create new states 	Police and military	Guerrilla style hit-and-run attacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved goals • Colonial rulers withdrew from territories
New Left (1960s-1980s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vietnam War • Cold War tensions 	Eliminate the capitalist system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments • Increased focus on United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hijackings • Kidnappings • Assassinations 	End of Cold War
Religious (1979-2020s) (predicted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iranian Revolution • New Islamic century • Soviet invasion of Afghanistan 	Create a global Islamic Caliphate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United States • Israel • Europe • Mass transportation systems • Public venues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide bombings • Aircraft and vehicles as weapons 	Unknown

Table 1. Defining Characteristics of David Rapoport’s “Four Waves of Modern Terrorism”¹²

Based on previous waves spanning around 40 years, Rapoport believes a *fifth wave* may begin around 2025, but he also acknowledges challenges in forecasting the next wave’s characteristics and timeline because it may erupt unexpectedly in response to some political issue.³ Various terrorism studies experts and others have conjectured about the predominant ideologies or characteristics of a fifth wave emerging in the 2020s, often focusing on cultural or technological factors. As predominant global terrorism trends transition from religious ideologies to a Fifth Wave of Modern Terrorism in the 2020s, U.S. forces will encounter emerging terrorism threats possibly characterized by one or more of the following:

in security cooperation efforts with neighboring countries of those conflicts, as well as in competition below levels of armed conflict or containment. U.S. forces would also develop contingency operations for likely hotspots. The prospect of localized conflicts and genocide in areas with weak governance would prompt consideration for armed intervention, by the United States, neighboring states, multinational coalitions, or United Nations peacekeeping forces. U.S. intervention could lead to small wars with heavy financial costs and a risk of troop loss. Kinetic actions have inherent risks of collateral deaths of children because of the New Tribalism adherent group techniques involving children, carrying risks of domestic and

Leahy Vetting

Protection of human rights is an essential American value—one enshrined in the Constitution and increasingly extended in foreign policy. One way Congress has extended this value to foreign policy is through the “Leahy laws” (named for their author, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.). These laws prohibit the U.S. government from providing assistance or training to members of a unit of any nation’s security forces that has perpetuated a gross violation of human rights with impunity. The process by which individuals are examined for possible human rights violations is referred to as *Leahy vetting*.¹⁰

international moral criticism. As these movements are likely to erupt in areas of weak governance rife with corruption, Leahy vetting would probably identify several military units and leaders among host or neighboring nations’ armed forces that committed human rights violations in the recent past, limiting potential for security cooperation activities.

Jihadist Groups Wave Characteristics and Implications

Dr. Anthony Celso, Associate Professor at Angelo State University, proposed a fifth wave dominated by Jihadist groups in which notions against apostate Muslims and non-Muslims provoke attacks. A central end state involving isolation from society distinguishes Jihadist groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State from other religiously motivated terrorist groups dominating the fourth wave of modern terrorism.¹¹ Jihadist groups, largely motivated by *jahiliyyah* to reject manmade governments’ and institutions’ dominion over man, seek to replace modern governments with a new Caliphate based on practices instituted in the times of the Prophet Muhammad. Tactics in this wave would likely include unrestrained violence targeting ethnic groups and communities of other religious denominations, as well as attacks against Muslims perceived to be corrupt or deemed apostates for their acceptance or tolerance of worldly institutions. Jihadist terrorist groups may inflict severe damage to communities and wage brutal campaigns in pursuit of their goal, but ultimately, their objective of a utopian society based on strict interpretations of Islamic doctrine is irrational and unattainable.

A wave dominated by Jihadist groups would likely involve special operations forces in urban environments or rapid deployment forces for escalating events in austere locations. Conflict, poverty, and other conditions prompted diasporas of Muslims in recent decades, and these trends of refugees and displaced persons show no signs of slowing down. While relatively few migrants become involved in Jihadist groups, conditions like poverty, ostracism from society and failure to assimilate, exposure to propaganda, and returning foreign fighters may influence second-generation migrants’ susceptibility to radicalization. Muslim enclaves in migrant-rich areas of France and other parts of Europe raise concerns for governments where law enforcement cannot penetrate and ethnic jurisprudence replaces national rule of law. Hence, this wave poses varied risk for domestic terrorism among Western countries and communities around the globe. Attacks most likely perpetuate contemporary terrorism trends of small arms and bombs targeting masses, but sponsors among Islamist governments present the possibility of weapons of mass destruction. Jihadist cells present a widespread threat of varying degrees of sophistication, especially against U.S. Government stationary long-term targets such as embassies or military bases. Jihadist terrorists prioritize attacks against U.S. targets due to incompatibility with Jihadist ideology, culture, and vision of how society should function. This global movement could also inspire green-on-blue attacks, especially where U.S. forces operate in Islamic societies and are perceived to be encroaching on local culture.

Wave	Catalyst	Goals	Targets	Tactics	Reasons for Decline
New Tribalism (2020s-?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as wave in which group emerged • Cultural differences • Local conditions • Weak multinational cooperation 	Establish local/regional utopia within one generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government institutions • Children • Women • Outside ethnic groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rape • Child soldiers • Child brides • Ethnic cleansing/genocide 	Unknown

Table 2. Defining Characteristics of a Fifth Wave Characterized by New Tribalism

Wave	Catalyst	Goals	Targets	Tactics	Reasons for Decline
Jihadist Groups (2020s-?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak state authority in rural areas • Takfiri groups’ separation from larger Islamist movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolate from society • Restore idyllic past in modern utopian society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments • Ethnic groups and other religious denominations • Apostate Muslims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrestrained violence • Ethnic and sectarian cleansing 	Unknown

Table 3. Defining Characteristics of a Fifth Wave Characterized by Jihadist Groups

Technology Wave Characteristics and Implications

Dr. Jeffrey Simon, president of Political Risk Assessment Company, Inc., and a former RAND Corporation analyst, offers an alternative theory for a fifth wave. He theorizes a wave wherein “there will be no single type of terrorist ideology...in the same way anarchism, anti-colonialism, new left/Marxism, and religious fundamentalism dominated the preceding four waves.”¹² Rather, he suggests that “the influential role of technology will be the defining characteristic of the Fifth Wave” and that methods by which terrorists conduct operations will more accurately reflect global terrorism trends than ideologies.¹³ While various aspects of technology will influence this fifth wave, the principal catalyst setting this wave in motion is the internet, acting as a force multiplier for individuals and small groups attempting to influence or harm large groups or formidable targets. Groups rely on the internet for recruitment, logistics, and planning. They further leverage the internet to conduct large-scale and dangerous attacks. According to Simon, terrorist groups in the Technology Wave access critical information (i.e., maps, blueprints, and security measures), which they use to plan strikes and wage successful cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, financial systems, and vulnerable aspects of government and business.¹⁴

Wave	Catalyst	Goals	Targets	Tactics	Reasons for Decline
Characterized by technology, not specific ideology (2020s-?)	Advent of the internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vary among groups• Influence masses• Harm stronger targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Critical infrastructure• Financial systems• Government business	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access critical information for use in planning attacks• Large-scale cyber attacks	Unknown

Table 4. Defining Characteristics of a Fifth Wave Characterized by Technology

A wave characterized by technology would likely involve heavy reliance on the National Guard in response to domestic attacks, as well as the prioritization of cyber defense initiatives, counterintelligence activities, and operations security measures. Attacks in this wave would predominantly take place in the cyberspace domain and pose unconventional and asymmetric threats. While weapons of choice may not be the small arms and bombs typical in prior waves, attacks in this wave will likely yield more widespread and devastating effects. Weak security measures of targets and high attack sophistication of terrorists may yield high pay-offs for surprise and audacity of attacks, but indications and warning frameworks can help detect pending attacks and identify targets. The cyber domain also affords combatants with geographic standoff, decreasing the risk for terrorists because they can attack virtually anywhere from anywhere.

Technology also enables lone wolves to conduct large-scale, sophisticated attacks, which may be difficult to detect because of limited indications or warning. U.S. response may vary based on attacker size, sophistication, affiliation (e.g., anonymous/unknown, lone wolf, or state-sponsored), and political considerations (i.e., if the attacker is located in another nation’s sovereign land); however, one likely implication and key distinction from other theories on a fifth wave involves heavy reliance on the National Guard. The prospect of cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure increases the probability of states leveraging the National Guard in defense support of civil authorities’ roles. This may involve disaster response or addressing other effects of an attack, such as riots following an attack on the financial sector. In addition to cyber defense measures, U.S. forces must also emphasize counterintelligence and operations security in order to deny terrorists access to information on potential targets.

The Fifth Wave: Anti-Globalization

Another theory, which Erin Walls introduced in her thesis for Georgetown University, centers on far-right populist ideologies and strict nationalist stances often perceived as xenophobia. According to this theory, events such as the United Kingdom’s referendum to leave the European Union (“Brexit”) and the United States 2016 presidential election served as catalysts for the transition from an era of religious terrorism to one fueled by ideologies based on xenophobia and nationalism.¹⁵ Extremists would likely seek to polarize societies through controversial content

using the internet and benefiting from free speech liberties in their countries. Terrorists would frequently develop “targeted violence campaigns to weaken the institutional weight of the world’s largest international alliances and organizations like the [European Union] EU, [United Nations] UN, [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] NATO, and World Trade Organization,” attacking international organizations and institutions in support of a global free market or propagating the “increasingly liberal world order led by U.S. hegemony.”¹⁶

Domestic threats, weakening international coalitions, and widely adopted protectionist policies among Western nations may lead U.S. forces to focus inward to ensure domestic security. Because of U.S. Government prominence among several international alliances and organizations, such as the United Nations and NATO, terrorists in this

Wave	Catalyst	Goals	Targets	Tactics	Reasons for Decline
Anti-Globalization (2020s-?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brexit • U.S. 2016 presidential election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polarize societies • Weaken liberal world order led by U.S. hegemony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International alliances or financial organizations • Multinational corporations • U.S. interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lone wolves • Explosives • Cyber-attacks • Commercial drones 	Unknown

Table 5. Defining Characteristics of a Fifth Wave Characterized by Anti-Globalization

wave would likely directly target U.S. Government facilities or personnel. An indirect result of perceived links between terrorism and migration may lead to U.S. forces securing national borders to enforce immigration guidelines. This broader mentality among Western countries, turning inward to provide security and adopting protectionist policies, may weaken international coalitions' and U.S. forces' abilities to provide security abroad.

Recommendations

The following are key actions concerning U.S. forces that U.S. Government parties can take to prepare for likely threats in a Fifth Wave of Modern Terrorism:

The U.S. Government should increase defense institution building efforts in likely hotspots of fifth wave terrorism. Extensive research and evidence indicate that political reforms and strengthening institutions are some of the most effective ways to lower violent extremist organizations' activities, especially those related to ethnic insurgencies and terrorism.¹⁷ Defense institution building focuses on these reforms because defense institution building is a long-term approach to support partners in "developing the strong institutional foundations needed for legitimate, effective, professional, and sustainable defense sectors" by focusing engagements to guide reforms at the ministerial, military headquarters, and operational defense sector levels.¹⁸ The traditional preparation for or reaction to conflicts abroad has been a rapid train-and-equip approach with the partner nation wherein the conflict erupts; however, the Malian Army's collapse in the face of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2012, despite tens of millions of dollars and in U.S. training and equipping, revealed that such an approach is bound to fail when there are deep institutional flaws in the partner nation's defense or political apparatus.¹⁹ Defense institution building is a more sustainable approach in staving off security crises by enhancing partners' abilities to provide internal security and manage threats. Embassy country teams should be heavily involved in developing comprehensive defense institution building plans with experts for likely breeding grounds of New Tribalism or Jihadist ideologies, such as sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.

As fifth wave terrorism groups emerge, the United States should assist organizations battling these groups below the level of armed conflict. As New Tribalist or Jihadist groups begin to challenge security forces in areas with weak government institu-

tions, U.S. regionally aligned forces and/or special operations forces should train, advise, and assist rivals of these groups. Intelligence support to these rival groups can aid in targeting efforts and disrupt terrorist groups' operations. Additionally, the United States should leverage soft power tools to enhance local governance, which can help to delay the spread of such groups' influence. These actions afford the United States time to assess the dynamic situation and escalate to armed conflict, if deemed necessary.

Expand the National Guard's State Partnership Program in sub-Saharan Africa. The State Partnership Program involves partnerships between individual (U.S.) states and foreign nations through which states' National Guard units conduct formal engagements and training with partner nations' armed forces, law enforcement, emergency response personnel, and other organizations. The State Partnership Program contains only 13 partnerships among the 46 sub-Saharan countries in Africa, a region likely containing hotspots for fifth wave threats associated with New Tribalism and Jihadist groups.²⁰ New partnerships with fragile states demonstrating institutional capacity can strengthen security co-operation efforts by establishing long-term relationships fostering professionalization of armed forces, partner capacity, and interoperability. Furthermore, upper echelons of National Guard units can enhance defense institution building at the operational defense sector level by providing partner nation counterparts with assistance and expertise in readiness, command and control, logistics, and operational planning.²¹

Facilitate ease of information sharing with private sector and partner nations through formal agreements and expansion of existing tools. The U.S. Government should improve information sharing efforts with the private sector, which have stagnated because of a lack of engagement, and sign information sharing agreements with international partners. Sharing tactics, techniques, and procedures, threat information, or lessons learned can enhance security within the United States and abroad. Interagency and multinational exercises would facilitate information sharing through wargaming scenarios and preparing

appropriate responses to threats. Information sharing is especially relevant in preparing for and confronting threats associated with a global wave of terrorism characterized by technology. For instance, the U.S. Government should dedicate more resources to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's Intelligence Community Analysis and Signature Tool, a tool designed to draw from various sources and disseminate threat information. Additional funding and manpower can expand the tool's scope from disseminating only top-secret information to sharing secret and unclassified information throughout the interagency and with select international partners.²² Similarly, prioritizing a related annual exercise called Ice Storm, which investigates and evaluates "cybersecurity information sharing capabilities between the Intelligence Community, [Department of Defense] DOD, law enforcement agencies and international partners," can improve the practical ease of engaging with partner nations and rapidly responding to cyber threats.²³

Explore possible fifth wave threats through research and wargaming. The geopolitical nature of terrorism and the military implications involved in these emerging threats make further research ideal for students attending professional military education institutions, such as the Army War College or National Defense University. Case studies, alternative futures, and wargaming-specific scenarios will help researchers to identify doctrinal and policy gaps concerning this anticipated wave of terrorism. Findings can shape policy, such as the prioritization of security cooperation efforts, develop or enhance contingency plans, and contribute to scenarios for multinational exercises.

Conclusion

Of the four proposed *fifth wave* theories, Kaplan's New Tribalism is the most likely to draw a response from U.S. forces. The Fund for Peace ranks nearly half of sub-Saharan African countries in its Fragile States Index "alert" category, indicative of political, security, and other conditions making the region ripe for New Tribalism violence.²⁴ In sub-Saharan Africa, violence against civilians (i.e., abduction, attack, and sexual abuse) conducted by identity militias—"armed and violent groups organized around a collective, common feature including...ethnicity [or] religion"—increased by nearly ten times in 8 years, growing from 83 incidents in 2010 to 817 incidents in 2018.²⁵ Unless drastic changes occur to strengthen political institutions within the region, sub-Saharan Africa will likely be a hotbed for New Tribalism terrorist activities threatening regional stability and prompting a response by U.S. forces.

A cyber wave would prove to be the most dangerous for U.S. forces because successful attacks would likely cause ex-

ceptionally grave damage to national security through the sabotage of critical systems or the compromise and unlimited distribution of classified information. State-sponsored groups or lone wolves may successfully breach security networks and destroy systems with sophisticated tactics. Stuxnet, a malicious computer worm, demonstrated extreme possibilities for sabotage when it destroyed one-fifth of Iran's nuclear centrifuges.²⁶ Other direct threats to U.S. forces, such as hacking Department of Defense assets like Pentagon databases, could yield devastating effects by exposing vulnerabilities and critical information about forces. Activities by an organization such as WikiLeaks could weaken U.S. ties with partner nations, expose national security vulnerabilities, and compromise intelligence-gathering methods and sources.

Evolving security conditions, cultural and technological factors, and global political dynamics bolster theories of a new wave of modern terrorism commencing in the near future. Waves dominated by New Tribalism, Jihadist groups, technology, or anti-globalization all present unique challenges for U.S. forces. Despite uncertainties about future threats, U.S. forces can brace for the next wave of modern terrorism through concerted efforts to hinder its momentum or mitigate its impact, primarily through increased defense institution building and security cooperation in areas of weak governance. ❄️

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