Regional and International Conflicts and their Impact on the Escalation of Extremist Organizations' Threats in the Middle East after 2014: Coping and Treatment Mechanisms (ISIS as a Model)

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Abstract

Research on the issue of extremist organizations in the Middle East after 2014 is of great importance, due to the geo-economic and geo-strategic importance of the region. The risks and threats that the Middle East suffers from have repercussions on global stability and international peace, as political conflicts have an regional and international impact on the escalation of the threats of extremist, terrorist and takfiri organizations after 2014. This is especially appertaining to ISIS and its violations of human rights, targeting infrastructure, demolishing places of worship and sabotaging historical monuments related to the human and cultural heritage. The research also dealt with the means and tools required to confront or treat these Organizations with an emphasis on the fact that there is a big difference between the mechanisms of confrontation and the means of treatment for those organizations, and how to employ all of this to alleviate their threats and risks and to achieve international peace and stability at the regional and international levels.

Keywords: *Terrorism, the Middle East, the threat, atonement, ISIS.*

Introduction

The international system in contemporary history has witnessed fundamental transformations, the most important of which was the post-World War II era and the supremacy of the bipolar system. That era lasted four decades and was called the Cold War. It ended with the disintegration and collapse of the Soviet Union and the supremacy of the liberal-capitalist system at the top of the pyramid of the international system, and the subsequent fundamental transformation of that system. There have been some challenges and differences between specialists in the field of international studies in describing the features of that international system although there is almost international consensus that it is a different system from what preceded it in that bygone era.

Those transformations or changes in the structure of the international system coincided with different and perhaps conflicting intellectual arguments, including Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history and the sovereignty of the liberal-capitalist system, and on the other hand, Samuel Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations, in which he warned of the emergence of new patterns of conflicts that differ from the conflicts witnessed during the Cold War era. Huntington (1996, p. 254) identified the most important and intense conflict zones, which he called the fault lines of civilization, including the Middle East region, where Islamic civilization prevails against Western

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civilization based on two important pillars: the political pillar based on the principles of liberalism and democracy and the sovereignty of human rights, and the economic pillar based on capitalism and the free market.

The Middle East region has seen some key and accelerating events that contributed to the escalation of those civilizational conflicts, the most important of which was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the intervention of international powers led by the United States of America to deter Iraq and liberate Kuwait. The result was the breaking out of the Second Gulf War in 1991 with a mandate from the United Nations to perform that task and preserve the sovereignty and security of States in the face of any aggressions, abuses or violations of international legitimacy and the laws of the international system.

The international coalition led by the United States of America achieved a great victory in that war, and was able to force the political regime in Iraq to yield to the decisions of international legitimacy under the pressure of military force. That victory also strengthened the position of the United States of America at the helm of the international system. That war required a large military presence of foreign forces led by the United States of America in the Middle East in general, and in a number of Arab countries in the Gulf region in particular. This raised major problems among a number of intellectual and social elites of the region. It also restored the same justifications to the Salafi jihadist and Takfiri currents in the region. These were recruited and supported by some Arab governments and in cooperation with international powers - openly or secretly - under the slogan of Jihad to confront the Soviet foreign presence (communist) on Afghan lands with an Islamic identity and culture at the end of the last century.

This major problem that turned the confrontation by these Salafi-Jihadi currents from a confrontation with the communist East (occupying Afghan lands) to the West, the forces of which were present in the heart of the Islamic world. As such, the new international order witnessed another wave of confrontations and wars different from the wars before 1991. These atrocities were called asymmetric wars or threats, the most dangerous of which was the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the territory of the United States of America, which was prompted to declare war on these terrorist organizations as well as on the political regimes that embrace or support them, and it came under the title of war on terror.

There is a problem addressed by the research through questions over the reasons of the increasing threats and dangers of extremist and terrorist armed organizations in the Middle East after 2014 and the inability to eliminate these dangers, despite all the military, economic, political and media capabilities of the international powers that have been employed to confront these organizations.

The hypothesis from which the research proceeds in clarifying this problem is: - There are many subjective and objective reasons behind the lack of success in confronting and eliminating the threats of armed and terrorist organizations in the Middle East. The most important of these reasons is the lack of differentiation between the mechanisms of confrontation and the means and requirements of treatment of these organizations on the one hand, as well as regional and international political conflicts have caused an increase in threats and risks to these armed organizations on the other. All of this contributed to the escalation of these threats and risks regionally and internationally, and this can be explained as follows:

First: The impact of international conflicts on the emergence of takfiri terrorism in the Middle East:

The Middle East region was a hotbed of conflicts and wars, the most important of which were the wars that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, and with the

beginning of the first decade of the second millennium. The war on Afghanistan began in 2001, and then the war on Iraq in 2003. These wars and conflicts caused an increase in violence and instability in the region and the world, and had immense and very dangerous repercussions, and among those risks is the escalation of the activity of extremist organizations. Of particular note here have been the Salafi-jihadi and takfiri organizations in that region, the latest of which was the official announcement of the emergence of those takfiri terrorist organizations and their declaration of what they called the (Caliphate State) over substantial parts of Iraq and Syria (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria– ISIS) in 2014 (Ismail, 2015, p. 167).

It has caused a state of instability in the region as these extremist organizations have committed crimes and very serious human violations.

It is very necessary to differentiate between the main causes of the emergence of terrorism (Hough, 2004, p. 63) and the reasons for the escalation of threats. The emergence of terrorism, as a phenomenon, was associated with the emergence of human societies, and it took many diverse forms such as ethnic, racial, national, religious, sectarian, among other forms. Although the concept of takfir in the Middle East region dates back to ancient times as ancient as the religions known to that region, the reasons for its escalation and the increase of its threats in contemporary history are diverse. Some of these reasons are internal because of the totalitarian regimes that ruled the peoples of that region, while others are external because of unbalanced or unfair international policies towards those peoples. In any case, internal and external causes have combined together in the escalation of its dangers and threats until it has become today a clear phenomenon that characterizes the contemporary international system.

The dangers and threats of takfiri terrorism in the Middle East region were initially confined within its countries and societies. This is evidenced by Egypt and other countries in the region in the last century. However, the international factor had a major role in increasing its influence and expanding its risks due to the recruitment policy pursued by some countries in international conflicts especially in the era of the Cold War. This caused the expansion of its dangers and threats from a regional to a global scope as could be seen in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of its lands.

The initial confrontation between Takfiri terrorism and global powers took place in the 1980s with the Soviet Union, mainly in the Eastern part of the world. However, the impact and risks of this conflict soon began to affect the Western world, particularly after foreign military forces intervened in the region during the second Gulf War in 1991 (Brezeziniski, 2012, p. 119). As a result, the threat of Takfiri terrorism expanded beyond the confines of the Middle East and took on a global scale, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. These attacks prompted the United States of America to declare a war on terror (Brezeziniski, 2003, p. 12).

The armed groups used the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by foreign forces as a primary reason to justify their escalation and confrontation. However, they also factored in the goal of challenging the political regimes in the region in their ideological calculations. However, they shifted their focus away from contending priorities in the face of a confrontation between the "near enemy" – symbolized by the current political systems and religious movements that they differ with ideologically – and the "distant enemy" – foreign nations and their military presence in the area – as well as supporting or forming an alliance with the totalitarian regimes governing the region (Nesser & Sternsen, 2014, p. 15).

Under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda had a primary focus on targeting the distant enemy, which included military forces and interests in the region (ibid). This strategy resulted in several direct confrontations during that period, until the United States eliminated the organization in 2011. Conversely, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, under the leadership of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, had a different approach, focusing on attacking the

internal enemy, which he referred to as the Rafidah or Shiites, along with government agencies and state institutions. This caused a rift between Zarqawi and Bin Laden (Hamada, 2015, p. 54), as Zarqawi refused to obey Bin Laden's orders and directives, leading to disagreements and tension between the two leaders. The adoption of takfiri terrorism ideologies, whether targeting distant or nearby enemies, has endangered global peace and security. These ideologies have resulted in terrorist activities and human rights violations, posing a threat to the political stability of regional countries.

Second: The impact of regional and international conflicts on the escalation of ISIS threats, and the mechanisms of confrontation:

The utilization of takfiri terrorist groups in regional and international political conflicts by various political factions is one of the significant factors that has contributed to the increase of the dangers and threats of takfiri terrorism in the Middle East. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supported some leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood during their conflict with Egypt in the era of former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Qablan, 2015, p. 9), which has further exacerbated the threat of takfiri terrorism in the region . Similarly, in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the intelligence agencies of significant regional and global powers provided support to takfiri jihadi organizations fighting against the former Soviet Union. In addition, following the second Gulf War in 1991, the ruling government in Iraq drew the attention of some terrorist takfiri leaders and Salafi-jihadi groups, particularly after escalating its disputes with Arab Gulf nations, notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. During that time, the political administration in Iraq capitalized on the rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda who was expelled from the Kingdom. This led to the political mobilization and utilization of numerous armed jihadist organizations in the regional conflicts and disputes.

Several nations have made grave mistakes in addressing extremist and takfiri organizations, as some regional and global political regimes have resorted to using jihadi armed and takfiri groups in the region to advance their political interests or balance power by weakening their opponents from other regional political forces. This approach was apparent in the region after 2003 when the Syrian regime supported numerous takfiri and extremist organizations and facilitated their training and entry into Iraqi territory to confront potential or expected American risks and threats to target the Syrian regime, particularly after the US Congress approved the Syria Liberation Resolution in 2004. Following the removal of Iraq's dictatorial regime by the United States in 2003 and their stated goals of spreading democracy and human rights principles, some regional Arab and non-Arab countries supported a number of takfiri terrorist and armed jihadist organizations in Iraq. Their support was driven by various reasons, including fears of the spread of these principles. Religious and ideological reasons also played a significant role in this, including the concerns of Saudi Arabia regarding the growing influence of Iran in the region after the shift in Iraq's political system and the rise of Shia to assume power after 2003 (Crelisen, 2011, p. 232) and the fears of those Arab countries about the imbalance in the region caused by these developments.

The diagram was prepared by the researcher

The threat of takfiri terrorism has grown in the 2010s due to a variety of factors, among them being the political shifts in the Middle East referred to as the Arab Spring in 2011. This led to the removal of several long-standing authoritarian governments in the region such as those in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria remained unstable and anti-regime forces engaged in a protracted conflict that persists today.

The utilization of takfiri terrorism and armed groups by regional and international political forces during the conflict in Syria was most clearly seen in this situation. The majority of the Syrian opposition came from extremist Islamic groups that opposed the Syrian government. As a result, certain Arab countries, particularly the Arab Gulf states, provided explicit support to these armed groups. In addition, various powerful regional and international players, such as the United States, Turkey, and several European countries, also backed different factions of the Syrian opposition, with the understanding that they would receive support in return for supporting countries allied with the Syrian government,including Russia and Iran. These actions have led to an increase in the activity and effectiveness of armed and takfiri terrorist groups throughout the Middle East.

historical era	The place of conflict and confrontation	The entity or party employing extremist movements	Target
Cold War era	Afghanistan	Western major powers and some Arab countries	Soviet Union
Post 1991	Arab region	Some regional regimes and armed organizations in the region	Western foreign forces in the Middle East
2001	the states United States of America (the attacks of September 11, 2001).	Al Qaeda in Afghanistan	United States of America
2003	Iraq and Afghanistan	Extremist armed organizations, Al Qaeda and affiliated organizations	Foreign forces stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan
After 2004	Iraq	Extremist armed organizations and some of the regional countries that support them, al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations	Security forces in Iraq, foreign forces, and international and diplomatic missions
2014	Iraq and Syria	Extremist armed organizations and some of the regional countries that support them, T-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations (ISIS and al-Nusra)	The political system in Iraq and the political system in Syria

The takfiri armed groups have reached a perilous point with the announcement of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) (Wikipedia, 2023). In 2014, after conquering vast territories in Iraq and Syria, the group declared the establishment of a caliphate state and annexed the border between the two countries. This move deviated from the traditional system of independent nation-states based on the Westphalian model and posed a serious threat to the international system. The emergence of new leaders from various Arab and foreign nationalities further increased the group's power and influence (Zeida, 2017, p. 18). The severity of the terrorism threat prompted international and regional powers to take it seriously and consider the need for an international coalition to combat it. This was exemplified by the formation of an international coalition to address Takfiri terrorism in the Middle East in 2014, which was announced by several countries. The coalition was formed with the purpose of confronting the dangers of terrorism and finding a solution to the issue.

Third: Mechanisms for confronting extremist and takfiri terrorist organizations (ISIS):

The threats and security risks posed by the Takfiri terrorist organization increased after 2014, and it established branches in Africa, Asia, and other regions (Pregent & Simcox, 2015) Its movement also became somewhat independent from the parent organization (Al-Qaeda) with which it was ideologically and politically associated. This prompted many countries to accept participation in confronting the terrorist organization. Hence, the United States announced the formation of an international coalition to wage war against that terrorist organization.

The international coalition was formed to combat and confront ISIS, and despite harnessing its significant military, economic, media, and technological capabilities in that war, it is observed that all of this did not achieve complete and comprehensive victory over Takfiri terrorism in general, and ISIS in particular. Although the coalition was able to limit its expansion, reduce its risks and threats, it did not achieve its goals of eliminating it.

The main reason for this failure can be attributed to the failure of those allied international forces to distinguish between two important concepts or strategies in confronting such terrorist organizations. These are the strategy of direct confrontation and war on terrorist organizations and the strategy of addressing them. Here, it can be said that the United States, along with the allied international forces, succeeded – to a large extent – in the war against Takfiri terrorism and confronting it and achieving military defeat. However, it did not succeed in addressing it or eliminating it.

Fourth: Mechanisms for dealing with terrorist organizations:

When studying and analyzing the issue of Takfiri terrorism, its roots, and causes, it is essential to note the fact that the mechanisms for combating terrorism differ from those for addressing it. Any step or attempt to eliminate Takfiri terrorism must identify the necessary tools, means, or mechanisms for both of these approaches. It can be said that confronting Takfiri terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and others, falls under the tenets of the realism school, based on the use of hard military and economic force. This is what the United States did after 2001, as well as what the international coalition against ISIS did in 2014,achieving battlefield military successes that were able to scatter the forces of that organization, limit its movements, and cripple its capabilities. There were significant international efforts made by the United Nations in combating terrorism through a series of resolutions issued by the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as international agreements in this regard. The most important of these are:

1-   Tokyo Convention on the Security of Aircraft in 1963.

2-   The Hague Convention on Aircraft Hijacking of 1970.

3-   Montreal Convention on the Safety of Flights for Civil Aviation of 1971.

4-   Convention for the Protection of Diplomatic Personnel of 1973.

5-   The 1979 Hostage-Taking Convention.

6-   Conventions of 1980 and 2005 on nuclear terrorism and other international treaties and agreements.

However, the issue that can be pointed out in this regard – as I see it – is that most of these treaties and agreements focused more on the principle of confrontation than on the principle of addressing the issue. Therefore, these treaties or agreements did not achieve strategic results in confronting terrorism, reducing its risks, or eliminating it entirely. However, there were important subsequent steps taken by the United Nations – albeit belatedly – which were issued on September 8, 2005, entitled "The United Nations Strategy for Combating Terrorism (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, 2006). " as well as the report issued by the Secretary-General on May 2, 2006, entitled "Together Against Terrorism:Recommendations for a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy." Finally, the United Nations General Assembly resolution of June 15, 2017, establishing the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, focused more on the principle of strategic addressing than on the principle of confrontation, which is a positive step in this direction. However, these decisions require more mechanisms and means related to the issue of addressing rather than confrontation. It is noteworthy that all of the strong measures adopted according to confrontation mechanisms, which were adopted by the active international powers in the international system, as well as the regional and international organizations, have not achieved the strategic objectives of ending the threats and risks of these extremist terrorist organizations. Achieving these strategic objectives requires means and tools that differ from those strong means. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between the mechanisms and means of confrontation and the mechanisms and means of addressing. The prevailing opinion is that addressing should be based on the constructive school rather than the realistic school, as addressing requires knowledge of the deep intellectual and cultural causes of terrorism, not just its apparent behaviors, which can be clarified through the following table:

Types of treatments	The expected results	The required time period	Appropriate strategies	The means used to achieve the goals	Intellectual bases and foundations	The entity that performs the task
Confrontation and war	An apparent treatment of takfiri terrorism and armed organizations	A short or medium period of time	The principle of preemptive war	Military and economic hard power	Realism school	Allied regional and international political forces
processing	Real and effective treatment of Takfiri terrorism and armed organizations	a long period of time	The principle of preventive war	Soft power	Constructivist school	The United Nations, civil society organizations, regional organizations, the most important of which is the Organization of Islamic States, and moderate religious institutions and schools

Referring to the above, the best ways to confront extremist terrorism and armed organizations rely on strategies that avoid political exploitation of terrorism and adopt confrontation and treatment measures. Factors that contribute to the increasing risks of extremist terrorism and its spread lie in adopting the use of hard power, based solely on confrontation and war, along with the political exploitation of terrorism by conflicting or competing powers, as witnessed in the Middle East before 2014, which helped to announce the emergence of the (ISIS) organization.

After the emergence of ISIS and the threats and risks it posed regionally and internationally, the international reality witnessed the adoption of two valid methods: international consensus on avoiding political exploitation of extremist terrorism and armed groups, and the method of direct war and confrontation with that organization. However, the third method, which the allied countries did not take necessary steps towards, is adopting a treatment approach for those organizations.

This responsibility lies with international and regional institutions, most notably the United Nations, regional organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, civil society institutions that are far from politicization, moderate religious institutions, centers of thought and Islamic institutes that believe in tolerance and diversity and revise and correct their intellectual approaches, as well as educational institutions and research centers that attract researchers and thinkers with humanistic orientations that embrace the principles of tolerance, moderation, and human values.

Global Terrorism Index "The Ranking of the Middle Eastern countries on the terrorism index for 2016"

Conclusions

The international system has witnessed significant developments, especially in the field of computer and digital communication technologies, and other sciences that have been employed in various political, military, economic, security, cultural, and media fields. All of these important developments have resulted in new patterns of threats in those fields, especially in the field of threats posed by armed, extremist, and terrorist organizations worldwide. These changes and the threats they have produced have forced political powers to reconsider all the foundations and principles of the international system in all economic, political, and security fields, and to seriously consider the means and mechanisms necessary to achieve security and stability at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Since extremist and terrorist organizations have posed the greatest challenge to international security, peace, and political stability for many countries, especially in the Middle East region, it is necessary to search for mechanisms to confront and address these organizations in order to reduce their risks and threats, or eliminate them completely. There are rules and mechanisms for confronting and addressing these threats that active political powers and decision-makers must pay attention to in order to achieve the required strategic goals in combating terrorism. It is likely that achieving the elimination of these extremist and terrorist organizations requires a task that must be recognized, which can be clarified as follows:

● Warning against the political employment of these extremist, terrorist, and armed organizations in regional and international conflicts as was done in the past, and activating the role of regional and international organizations, especially the United Nations, in monitoring and punishing any country that does so or assists in it.

● Emphasizing that the scope of confrontation is limited according to the risks and threats posed by these extremist and terrorist organizations, according to the principle of preemptive war rather than preventive war, and according to the realist school's adoption of the use of hard power.

● Emphasizing the importance of addressing as the best and most successful strategy to confront expected or potential risks and threats posed by extremist and terrorist organizations, by addressing their root causes and working on developing comprehensive strategies that aim to address these causes.

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