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The Rise of Terrorists as Non-State Actors and Its Impacts on International Security

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of non-state actors (NSAs), particularly terrorist groups, on international security. Given the changing shifts in global politics, non-state actors have become increasingly influential, disrupting conventional security frameworks. This paper explored the rise of NSAs, their strategies, tactics, and their overall impact on international security. The study adopted constructivism as its theoretical lens. This perspective challenges the deterministic views of anarchy presented by realists, suggesting that anarchy's meaning and implications are socially constructed. Constructivism sheds light on how terrorist groups construct their identities, ideologies and norms; how these identities influence their actions, and how states perceive and respond to these threats. The study used a descriptive research design, with secondary data sources, and a content analysis method. The findings of this study revealed a many-sided evolution in international security. Non-state actors (NSAs) have emerged as powerful forces, exploiting state weaknesses and societal divides to embed themselves within communities and promote extremist ideologies. The findings of the study also show how NSAs use digital platforms to spread propaganda, coordinate activities, and disrupt critical government infrastructure. Findings also review that traditional warfare paradigms have been significantly disrupted, with NSAs engaging in urban warfare and launching indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations. The study recommended the need for international collaboration, strengthened state governance, and proactive measures to effectively counter the evolving threats posed by non-state actors (terrorists) to safeguard global peace and security.

Keywords: Non-state actors (NSAs); Terrorism; International Security; Global Peace

1. Introduction

The emergence and growth of non-state actors (NSAs) have significantly transformed the landscape of the international system, radically changing the old power dynamics and frameworks that have hitherto governed the processes of global politics and security (Finnegan & Rauta, 2022; Acharya, 2018). Non-state actors, notably terrorists, have altered the view of conventional warfare, security, and international relations (Akinyetun, 2022; Azubuike et al., 2023). Traditionally, states were seen as the primary actors in international relations, with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. However, globalisation, technological advancements, and shifts in international politics have empowered various non-state entities to exert considerable influence on global security (Ehdaee, 2024). These actors include terrorist organisations, insurgent groups, private military companies, and transnational criminal organisations, which often operate across national boundaries, evading traditional state control mechanisms. Their actions challenge the conventional understanding of sovereignty and pose threats to international peace and stability (Dzhyhora et al, 2024).

Terrorism, as a strategy employed by these non-state actors, has become a prominent security issue. Terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram use violence and intimidation to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives. These organisations have demonstrated the capacity to orchestrate large-scale attacks that result in significant loss of life and property, as seen in the September 11 attacks in the United States, the Paris attacks in 2015,

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and ongoing insurgencies in regions like the Middle East and Africa (Ismail & Mishra, 2019; Sfintes, 2020). The ability of these groups to exploit modern communication technologies and social media platforms for recruitment, propaganda, and coordination further complicates counter-terrorism efforts (Weimann, 2015; Borelli, 2023).

According to Khan (2024), the impact of terrorists as non-state actors on international security is multifaceted, extending beyond immediate physical threats to encompass broader geopolitical consequences. The destabilisation caused by terrorist activities can lead to prolonged conflicts, humanitarian crises, and regional instability. For instance, the Syrian Civil War, exacerbated by the involvement of various non-state actors, has resulted in millions of refugees and a significant loss of life, creating a ripple effect on neighbouring countries and the broader international community (Ghadbian, 2021). Moreover, the rise of cyberterrorism, where these terrorist groups engage in cyber-attacks to disrupt critical infrastructure and spread fear, represents a growing threat in an increasingly interconnected world (Lehto, 2022). The difficulty of combating these non-state actors is further highlighted by the diverse motivations and tactics they employ. These actors are not confined by geographic boundaries or conventional warfare rules, making them elusive and adaptable adversaries. Their funding sources are equally diverse, ranging from illicit activities like drug trafficking and arms smuggling to state sponsorship and donations (Pareniuc & Beda, 2023). This financial flexibility allows them to sustain prolonged campaigns of violence and adapt quickly to countermeasures, posing an enduring challenge to global security. Understanding these changes is crucial for developing effective counter-terrorism strategies.

In response to these threats, the international community has implemented various counter-terrorism measures, including military interventions, intelligence sharing, and policy reforms (Rosand et al., 2022). However, these efforts have often been met with mixed results. According to Shaiq et al. (2025), the resilience and adaptability of terrorist organisations highlight significant gaps in current counter-terrorism strategies. Also, political tensions, historical conflicts, and differing national interests complicate international cooperation, as seen in the strained relations between India and Pakistan following the Mumbai attacks in 2008 (Ashraf & Shah, 2021). Also, the resilience and adaptability of ISIS, even after significant territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, underscore the need for more robust and dynamic approaches to counter-terrorism (Zoli & Williams, 2021). Similarly, the continued operations of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, despite military interventions, show the difficulty of eradicating deeply entrenched terrorist networks.

Also, the global reach of these non-state actors and their ability to influence security far beyond their immediate regions poses global security challenges (Luitel, 2024). The 2019 Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, which were linked to ISIS, demonstrated the capacity of terrorist groups to inspire and orchestrate attacks across continents (Ahmed et al., 2022). Also, the resurgence of Taliban control in Afghanistan raises concerns about the country becoming a haven for various terrorist organisations, potentially destabilising the region and posing threats to global security. These cases illustrate the persistent and evolving nature of terrorism and how it consistently poses a threat to international peace and security.

This study aims to explore the changing nature of non-state actors, with a particular focus on terrorist organisations, and their impact on international security. The objective of the study is to provide an understanding of how non-state actors operate and influence global security dynamics. Secondly, to examine the specific tactics and methodologies used by terrorist organisations in different contexts and how these have evolved. Thirdly, to assess the effectiveness of current international and national counter-terrorism strategies in addressing these threats.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Terrorism

The concept of terrorism has been defined by several scholars in the field of security studies and international relations, each contributing distinct insights that underline the multifaceted nature of this threat. United States Department of Defence (2003) refers to terrorism as the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear: intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious or ideological. The definition provided by the U.S. Department of Defence emphasises the strategic and intentional nature of terrorism. It underscores that the acts or threats of violence are not random but are "calculated" with the specific intent to create fear. The ultimate aim of such acts is to exert influence or pressure on governments or entire societies. Gupta (2020) defines terrorism as the intentional creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence to effect political change. This statement concisely captures the intertwined factors of fear and political motive that serve as the foundation for acts of terrorism. In a similar vein, Schmid (2011) presents a more elaborate characterisation, delineating terrorism as a tactic that elicits dread through a series of recurrent acts of

violence. This strategy is utilised by covert individuals, groups, or state entities, each motivated by distinct rationales. According to Schmid (2011), the recurrent utilisation of violence as a means to induce fear is a fundamental attribute of terrorism, which sets it apart from alternative manifestations of political violence or criminal conduct. According to Hoffman (2017), there is agreement in the scholarly community that terrorism encompasses the intentional utilisation of violence or the explicit threat of violence targeting non-combatant individuals. Bar-Tal (2020) maintains that the overarching objective is to attain political goals by the propagation of fear among a broader spectrum of individuals, extending beyond the immediate targets. These definitions provide significant insights into the essential features of terrorism, its methods of operation, and its intended consequences, specifically, the creation of a climate of fear and the exertion of pressure for political transformation.

2.2. The Concept of International Security

The concept of international security has been thoroughly examined and discussed in scholarly literature. The term's complex nature has resulted in numerous definitions and interpretations, each offering insights into various facets of the concept and its consequences on a global scale. According to Dzhyhora (2024), the concept of international security encompasses the collaborative endeavours undertaken by states, international organisations, and non-state actors to confront various challenges that jeopardise the stability, order, and overall welfare of the global system. These challenges encompass a wide range of factors, including military, economic, and non-traditional threats. Buzan and Waeber (2003), esteemed scholars affiliated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, have exerted a substantial impact on the discourse around the notion of international security. Buzan and Waver (2003) contend that the concept of security should not be limited solely to military considerations, but rather should embrace a more comprehensive scope that includes political, economic, sociological, and environmental components. The adoption of a sectoral security approach recognises the potential for international stability to be compromised by a range of factors outside conventional military attacks. Slaughter (2017), in her examination of international security, highlights the shifting nature of security dynamics. Her work shows how non-state actors are influencing security outcomes. Uvere and Adiele (2025) argued in favour of a security governance framework that embraces a multi-stakeholder approach, wherein both state and non-state actors, like international organisations, engage in collaborative efforts. This viewpoint recognises the dynamic nature of security concerns and emphasises the importance of inclusive decision-making procedures. These scholars enhance the comprehension of global security by analysing a wide range of aspects, participants, and obstacles within the discipline. Hence, the international community must take into account non-traditional threats, cultural settings, the growing involvement of non-state players, and the evolving dynamics of global governance in pursuit of international peace and security.

3. Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted constructivism as the theoretical framework. Constructivism, as a theoretical framework in international relations (IR), offers a distinct perspective that differs from traditional theories like realism and liberalism. Unlike these theories, which often emphasise material power and interests, constructivism emphasises the significance of ideas, beliefs, norms, and identities in shaping international relations. International relations evolved in a world of our making, which emerged from contingent historical processes, contained in dominant ideological perspectives, and was always marked by continuity and transition (Onuf, 2013). The emergence of constructivism as a prominent IR theory can be traced back to the late 20th century. While the exact origins are multifaceted, the end of the Cold War and the subsequent transformation of the international system played a pivotal role in its ascendancy. Some of the key exponents are Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey (McCourt, 2022). However, Wendt (1992) was also a central figure in constructivist thought, and he asserted in his influential work "Anarchy is What States Make of It" that the nature of the international system is not inherently given but is constructed through the interactions and shared understandings of states. This perspective challenges the deterministic views of anarchy presented by realists, suggesting that anarchy's meaning and implications are socially constructed. Nicholas Onuf is often credited as one of the founding figures of constructivism. Dunne (2024) emphasised the role of rules in international relations and how they shape state behaviour.

Constructivism offers a nuanced understanding of these phenomena. Constructivism sheds light on how terrorist groups construct their identities, ideologies and norms; how these identities influence their actions, and how states perceive and respond to these threats. For instance, the narrative constructed by a terrorist group might resonate with certain populations, not just because of material grievances, but due to shared beliefs, norms, or perceived injustices. The global response to terrorism, from a constructivist viewpoint, is also influenced by prevailing international norms and shared understandings about the nature of the threat and appropriate countermeasures (Ma'sumah & Mawardi, 2024). Constructivism offers valuable insights and provides a comprehensive framework to understand the interaction of ideas, identities, and norms in international relations. Its application to the study of non-state actors and terrorism

underscores the importance of understanding the ideational underpinnings of these threats and the shared narratives that shape global security dynamics.

4. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design methodology, which aims to collect data to describe and interpret an established condition (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). The descriptive design offered a structure for effectively addressing the research topic, as well as identifying the specific objectives of the study. The data collected from secondary sources were analysed using a content analysis method. The methodology employed in this study ensured the synthesis and analysis of data obtained from secondary sources.

5. The Rise of Non-State Actors (Terrorists)

The rise and influence of non-state actors (NSAs) and the spectre of terrorism in the global arena have considerably reshaped the landscape of international relations in recent decades (Kaldor, 2013). Such entities, functioning outside traditional state structures, have harnessed the power of globalisation, technological advancements, state decentralisation, and media proliferation to influence international security dynamics and shape political discourse (Mishra, 2023). Globalisation, coupled with advancements in technology, has been instrumental in the rise of these non-state actors (Beccaro, 2023). The increasing interconnectivity and interdependence among nations have allowed these actors to transcend national boundaries, impacting the world stage in unprecedented ways. Globalisation has not only catalysed the dissemination of ideas, trade, and culture, but it has also played a role in the escalation of terrorism and transnational crime. National security agencies (NSAs) have utilised worldwide networks to access resources, gather intelligence, and seek support. Additionally, they have leveraged the internet and social media platforms to propagate their ideology, attract followers, and mobilise global support. (Weimann, 2015).

The shift of state power is a pivotal factor that has contributed to the ascent of NSAs (Luitel, 2024). The concept of decentralisation is distinguished by the dispersal of power from central governments to regional or local authorities, as well as non-state corporations. The concept of decentralisation is prominently observed in regions that are typified by inadequate or inefficient state institutions. This situation presents a favourable circumstance for non-state actors (NSAs) to step in and undertake responsibilities that the state is incapable of fulfilling. When examining the emergence of non-state actors and terrorism, it becomes evident that these entities have successfully exploited the many structural and systemic transformations within the global sphere. Nevertheless, the increasing importance and impact of these entities give rise to several crucial concerns that warrant careful consideration. According to Uvere and Adiele (2025), the presence of non-state actors, such as terrorist organisations, in global events has brought a level of difficulty that challenges conventional notions of sovereignty and statehood. NSAs have frequently demonstrated the capacity to erode state authority and contest the exclusive control of states over the utilisation of force, which is a fundamental component of the Westphalian system (Krasner, 2001). Within the domain of international security, this transition has significantly transformed the character of challenges, since the distinction between internal and external security has progressively become less distinct. Also, the inherent transnational characteristics exhibited by numerous non-state actors, particularly terrorist organisations, present distinctive obstacles for both nation-states and international entities. The activities of these groups are frequently conducted clandestinely and are spread across many countries, posing challenges for conventional security methods in terms of identification and elimination. This challenge is compounded by the use of the internet and encrypted technologies for communication and coordination. These tools offer an additional level of anonymity and security for terrorist entities (Weimann, 2015).

The rise of non-state actors and terrorism has necessitated a paradigm shift in the understanding of global security in the contemporary era. Emerging studies shed light on these evolving dynamics, illuminating new dimensions and trajectories in the contemporary world. A significant issue in the current landscape is the 'virtual caliphate' employed by terrorist organisations. They utilise digital platforms to propagate extremist ideologies, recruit, radicalise, and even orchestrate terrorist attacks, thus extending their reach far beyond physical territories (Conway et al., 2019). This underlines the evolution of the threat posed by non-state actors and their adaptability to exploit technology for their ends. Similarly, the complex and symbiotic relationship between NSAs and failing states has been increasingly examined. The breakdown of central authority in countries like Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan has created a fertile ground for non-state actors, including terrorist organisations, to flourish (Emig & Schumacher, 2024). Their operations further exacerbate state fragility, thus creating a vicious cycle of instability. Moreover, recent studies underline that non-state actors have adapted their strategies to exploit the socio-political disruptions caused by global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Hülka, 2022; Budiana, 2023). These crises often accentuate state weaknesses and societal divides, which NSAs capitalise on to strengthen their influence.

6. Case Studies

6.1. Al-Qaeda and the 9/11 Attacks (2001)

The 9/11 attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda on the United States marked a turning point in the understanding of global terrorism. This event showcased the devastating potential of non-state actors, revealing their capacity to inflict unprecedented harm on a superpower. In response to this audacious act of terrorism, the United States invoked Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which asserts that an armed attack against one or more NATO members is considered an attack against them all (Fedayee, 2024). This invocation shows the collective defence aspect of NATO and indicates the alliance's commitment to fighting terrorism together. However, the aftermath of 9/11 led to a controversial turn in international relations. The U.S.-led coalitions and subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 was justified on the grounds of eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) allegedly possessed by Saddam Hussein's regime (Simuziya, 2023). This decision was based on intelligence that later proved to be faulty, causing a significant strain on international relations (Simuziya, 2023). Koenig (2023) criticised the invasion, pointing out that it was driven by geopolitical agendas rather than genuine concerns about WMDs. This critique points to the dangers of political interests overshadowing the need for accurate intelligence and diplomatic prudence in international responses to terrorism.

6.2. Mumbai Attacks (2008), ISIS and the Syrian Civil War (2011-2019)

The Mumbai attacks in 2008 demonstrated the urgent need for enhanced intelligence cooperation between nations to counter terrorism effectively. Following the attacks, India asserted that Pakistani-based militant groups were involved, straining diplomatic ties between the two neighbouring countries (Ashraf & Shah, 2021). This incident underlined the critical role of intelligence sharing and collaboration between nations to prevent and respond to such attacks effectively. In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, there was an increased focus on intelligence cooperation. However, the collaboration faced significant challenges. Mistrust and historical animosity between India and Pakistan hindered a seamless exchange of information and hindered joint counterterrorism efforts (Sen & Dutta, 2017). This situation showcased the complexity of international responses to terrorism, where political tensions between nations often complicate sincere attempts at collaboration. It highlighted the necessity of addressing political disputes to enable effective international cooperation in combating terrorism, emphasising the importance of diplomacy alongside intelligence efforts.

The rise of ISIS amid the Syrian Civil War brought to light the failure of the global community to effectively address the conflict (Shamieh & Szenes, 2015). Military interventions, involving various international actors, were instrumental in pushing back ISIS forces (Ghadbian, 2021). However, this military action also pointed to the difficulties of balancing regional interests and international efforts in the Syrian conflict. The involvement of multiple stakeholders with divergent agendas, including the U.S., Russia, Iran, and regional powers like Turkey, revealed the challenge of coordinating unified strategies. This situation exposed the limitations of military action alone in resolving geopolitical issues and emphasised the need for diplomatic and political solutions alongside military efforts.

6.3. Boko Haram Insurgency (2009-present)

The Boko Haram insurgency began in July 2009, when the Islamist and jihadist group, Boko Haram, initiated an armed revolt against the Nigerian government. The violence arose within the overarching framework of enduring religious tensions between Nigeria's Muslim and Christian populations (Abah, 2021). Boko Haram aims to build an Islamic state in northern Nigeria, controlled by stringent Sharia law, and ultimately extend this across the broader area. Since 2009, the sect's actions have posed a significant security concern to the nation, becoming northern Nigeria, particularly the northeast, the most perilous location in which to reside. The terrorist activities of the sect have predominantly aimed against the government, its institutions and officials, churches, automobile parks, and occasionally mosques; numerous innocent Nigerians have suffered the consequences of Boko Haram's acts of destruction. The relentless bombings of churches in the northern regions, especially in the severely impacted states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (Shimawua et al., 2016). The sect's violent actions have taken on an international aspect, evidenced by the abductions and gruesome murders of several Europeans (Mustapha, 2014).

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria presents significant security concerns to the lives and property of individuals, hindering the nation's socio-economic growth. The causes of Boko Haram's grievances are often difficult to ascertain. Some contend that Boko Haram comprises discontented charlatans lacking a definite objective for their activities and inactions (Omomia, 2015). The insurgency of Boko Haram is driven by Nigeria's historical context, geopolitical framework, ethno-religious diversity, and socio-economic inequalities (Udounwa 2013). The Boko Haram insurgency,

initially a weak, disorganised, and loosely coordinated force, evolved to present significant challenges to national security.

The gang has also gotten increasingly ruthless and audacious in its methodology, scale of attacks, geographical scope, and target selection. The organisation has attacked government offices, places of worship, media establishments, security force facilities, commercial enterprises, and both national and international institutions. In August 2011, they executed a catastrophic assault on the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja (Onuoha & George, 2016). Since its inception in 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and the displacement of approximately 3.5 million individuals across Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (Chinonso, 2018). The group's violent campaign, characterised by suicide bombings, mass abductions, and village raids, has devastated hundreds of schools and healthcare facilities, precipitating a grave humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin (Nyelade, 2025). The 2014 abduction of 276 Chibok schoolgirls elicited international condemnation; yet, as of 2024, approximately 82 are still unaccounted for. From 2013 until 2024, more than 1,000 children were allegedly abducted, and numerous women and juveniles were coerced into suicide missions (Ajakaiye et al., 2021). Notwithstanding the loss of significant territory post-2016, Boko Haram and its offshoot, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), persist in executing lethal assaults, particularly in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, rendering the insurgency one of Africa's most protracted and lethal conflicts.

The Boko Haram insurgency in West Africa is an indication of the importance of regional collaboration in addressing transnational terrorism. The formation of the Multinational Joint Task Force, which comprised troops from affected African nations, demonstrated a significant regional commitment to countering Boko Haram's activities. Despite this collaborative effort, the persistent attacks and resulting humanitarian crises underline the challenges faced in eradicating deeply rooted extremist ideologies. The multifaceted nature of terrorism, intertwined with social, economic, and political factors, complicates counterterrorism initiatives. This difficulty, highlighted above, necessitates the need to address the root causes, strengthen regional cooperation, and engage in long-term development efforts to effectively combat extremist ideologies and ensure lasting peace and stability in the region.

6.4. Christchurch Mosque Shootings (2019)

The events of the Christchurch Mosque shootings in 2019 served as a poignant illustration of the significant influence wielded by social media platforms in the process of radicalisation and the perpetration of extremist acts of violence. The perpetrator broadcast the distressing incident in real time, resulting in a significant level of astonishment and instigating immediate deliberations over the obligations of digital platforms (Every-Palmer et al., 2021). The Christchurch Mosque shootings event is a reminder of the apparent simplicity with which extremist ideology might disseminate via digital platforms, hence eliciting significant apprehensions regarding the phenomenon of online radicalisation. Following the tragic Christchurch killings, the government of New Zealand expeditiously enacted modifications to its firearm legislation, exemplifying the nation's steadfast dedication to mitigating prospective instances of violence (Bell & Every-Palmer, 2025). Nevertheless, the Christchurch shooting also drew focus towards the difficulties entailed in policing hate speech and extremist content on the internet. The regulatory challenges posed by the internet's global character are exacerbated by the substantial variations in laws and regulations across different countries. The ongoing discourse surrounding the optimal approach to reconciling the preservation of free speech with the imperative of maintaining security continues to be a subject of considerable disagreement.

A careful analysis of these events indicates the diverse obstacles encountered by the international community while addressing terrorism. The challenges in developing efficient and all-encompassing answers arise from a combination of political factors, historical conflicts, and the difficult nature of governing internet platforms. To effectively tackle these difficulties, it is imperative to employ sophisticated and flexible techniques that transcend conventional security measures. A comprehensive approach necessitates the inclusion of not only strong law enforcement and intelligence endeavours but also diplomatic endeavours focused on resolving fundamental problems and mitigating socioeconomic imbalances.

7. The Impact of Non-State Actors on International Security

The emergence and widespread presence of non-state actors (NSAs) in the global arena have significantly altered the dynamics of international security (Uvere & Adiele, 2025). The prevailing notions of security in the past have predominantly focused on the state as the central entity, wherein sovereign states are considered the main actors, and the key risks are perceived to arise from conflicts between states. Nevertheless, the growing prevalence of non-state actors (NSAs), specifically those engaged in acts of terrorism, has fundamentally questioned these conventional concepts. The impact of non-state actors (NSAs) on international security is significant, complex, and extensive, hence

requiring a thorough evaluation of the techniques and processes utilised to uphold global peace and security. These factors encompass the weakening of the authority and autonomy of nation-states, the exacerbation of instability and conflict, the emergence of humanitarian crises due to extensive displacement, and the difficulties encountered by international legal and normative frameworks.

The techniques and tactics employed by non-state actors (NSAs), namely those involved in acts of terrorism, have had a substantial impact on the ever-changing field of international security (Elbahy, 2019). The modus operandi employed by this entity frequently combines conventional and novel methods, hence presenting a range of multifaceted challenges to global security. The utilisation of asymmetrical warfare by non-state actors (NSAs) serves as evidence of their ability to adapt in response to the overwhelming military capabilities possessed by state actors. This particular approach, wherein perceived flaws are exploited to attain advantages, has proven to be a transformative factor in present-day areas of conflict (Dayan & Pedahzur, 2025).

The technology aspect, as examined within the framework of National Security Agencies (NSAs), which engenders the utilisation of technology, has greatly facilitated worldwide interconnectedness. However, the exploitation of technology by intelligence agencies, particularly in the domain of encrypted communication, has presented considerable obstacles for security organisations (Pisaric, 2022). The phenomenon of transnational organised crime, its connections with international terrorism, corruption, and cybercrime, along with the erosion of state sovereignty by non-state actors, justifies the adoption of special operations to address both existing and emerging security challenges and threats faced by nations. The transnational operations of NSAs, as detailed in the discussion, present a paradigm shift in the challenges posed to international security. Romanova (2021) highlighted that the European security strategy's note on international terrorism as a strategic threat. The modern form of terrorism is particularly dangerous as it creates unprecedented combinations that combine non-state actors with powerful military and technical capabilities for mass destruction.

7.1. Exploitation of State Weakness and Societal Divides

Non-state actors (NSAs) strategically exploit vulnerabilities in state governance and societal divisions to further their influence. This exploitation is particularly evident in regions with fragile states characterised by weak governance, corruption, and inadequate service provision. NSAs often fill governance vacuums in fragile states by delivering essential public goods and services such as security, education, and healthcare. By doing so, they embed themselves into the social fabric, positioning themselves as alternatives to the state. This not only garners local support but also deepens their control over the population and territory. For instance, groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Taliban in Afghanistan have established administrative structures that effectively replace state roles in certain areas (Mehran et al., 2023). This strategy of 'state-building' or 'service provision' not only enhances the legitimacy of these actors but also presents them as de facto state entities, further complicating international security dynamics. Moreover, the intertwining of NSAs with local communities makes it challenging for states or international actors to target them without inflicting harm on civilians. This strategy fosters an environment of dependency among local populations, binding them to the fortunes of these actors and making it harder for states to regain control.

NSAs strategically manipulate societal divisions based on ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status to foster extremism and radicalisation. By perpetuating the narrative of 'us versus them,' they drive deeper wedges into societal fractures, exacerbating conflicts and undermining social cohesion. This manipulation not only bolsters their popularity among disaffected segments but also disrupts the social fabric, leading to prolonged violence and extremism (Montasari, 2024). The consequences of such exploitation extend beyond local contexts. Conflicts fueled by societal divisions can spill over national borders, disrupting regional stability and drawing in external powers. Such situations also provide a conducive environment for the spread of transnational terrorism, posing significant challenges to international security.

7.2. Heightened Conflict and Instability

One crucial dimension of the impact of NSAs is their contribution to heightened instability and conflict, especially in regions characterised by state fragility. The operations of these actors, in many instances, exacerbate existing societal divisions and further undermine the already strained capacity of weak states. The resulting power vacuums and social tensions provide fertile grounds for NSAs to propagate their agendas, further fueling the cycle of violence and instability (Kaldor, 2013). This heightening of conflict and instability is particularly prevalent in regions where the state apparatus is fragile and unable to effectively provide public goods or maintain social order. NSAs exploit these vulnerabilities, often establishing parallel systems of governance and security. Such dynamics not only undermine the authority and legitimacy of the state but also result in an entrenched state of conflict and instability, becoming a self-perpetuating cycle. Thus, NSAs, through their actions and influence, contribute significantly to instability and conflict, particularly in

fragile states. Their activities further weaken state capacity, exacerbate societal divides, and fuel violence, thereby posing a formidable challenge to regional and international security.

7.3. Loss of Sovereignty

The rise of non-state actors (NSAs) has fundamentally challenged the traditional concept of state sovereignty, blurring the lines between national boundaries and creating complex security challenges (Boeke & Broeders, 2023). Historically, states held exclusive authority over their territory and citizens, but transnational NSAs, especially terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, have operated across multiple nations, disrupting the conventional state-centric international security framework (Ferrag et al., 2023). This not only challenges individual states but also necessitates a shift towards a more comprehensive global approach, involving international organisations, NGOs, and the private sector, to effectively counter these threats (Krasner, 2001). In regions where state structures are fragile, NSAs exploit governance gaps, exacerbating local tensions and triggering larger conflicts. Examples include the Taliban's control in Afghanistan and ISIS's influence in parts of Syria and Iraq, leading to destabilisation not only within the nations but also in neighbouring countries. These conflicts often result in humanitarian crises, such as the Syrian conflict's global refugee crisis, underlining the urgent need for international cooperation and comprehensive strategies to address the multifaceted challenges posed by NSAs (Cunningham, 2014).

7.4. Globalised Threats

NSAs, with their transnational operations, have essentially globalised security threats (Luitel, 2024). Their extensive reach, specifically in the case of terrorist groups, surpasses traditional nation-state boundaries. Consequently, their threats are not limited to any one region but are a shared concern for multiple countries across the globe. This ability to operate and influence on an international scale complicates the task of addressing the issues they pose. As such, these NSAs represent a new breed of global actors, ones that challenge the very basis of traditional international security paradigms, which are predominantly state-centric. The ubiquitous and borderless nature of the threats they present makes them a shared problem for the global community. As a result, their activities highlight the interdependence of nations in the realm of security and underline the necessity for international cooperation. It has become abundantly clear that no single state, irrespective of its power and capabilities, can single-handedly manage or contain these threats. Effective countermeasures, therefore, require a global collaborative effort, incorporating not only states but also international and regional organisations.

7.5. Transformation of War and Conflict

The increasing prominence of NSAs in global security dynamics has catalysed a transformation in warfare and conflict. This transformation is most starkly evident in the rise of terrorism and the consequent shift in the locus of conflict. Traditional wars, typified by state-led armies engaging in battlefield confrontations, have been progressively overshadowed by irregular warfare tactics implemented by NSAs, particularly terrorist groups (Kilcullen, 2018). In many ways, NSAs have managed to redefine the battle space. The battlefield is no longer limited to remote or border areas but increasingly includes urban landscapes and civilian populations. NSAs have brought the 'war' to population centres, using cities as stages for their operations. This form of urban warfare, often conducted amidst civilian populations, has resulted in a stark increase in civilian casualties and infrastructural devastation. NSAs commonly employ tactics such as suicide bombings, hostage-taking, and guerrilla warfare, which are indiscriminate and primarily aimed at inciting fear and chaos (Kilcullen, 2018).

This transformation of war and conflict has posed significant challenges to states and international security apparatuses. Traditional strategies for warfare, predicated upon discernible opponents and clear battle lines, are ill-suited to address the realities of contemporary conflicts involving NSAs. The shift towards urban warfare and the indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations requires a comprehensive reassessment of strategic and tactical approaches to conflict. It further underscores the need to enhance mechanisms for civilian protection, strengthen urban resilience, and cultivate effective counter-terrorism strategies. It is worth noting that this transformation of war and conflict brought about by NSAs, particularly terrorist groups, has fundamentally challenged accepted norms and laws of warfare. The intentional targeting of civilians and the use of civilians as shields have placed NSAs in stark violation of international humanitarian law. This necessitates renewed international efforts to hold these actors accountable and to reinforce the commitment to upholding the laws of war, even in the face of such unconventional conflict dynamics.

8. Threats to the Future of International Security

The landscape of international security is likely to continue being shaped significantly by non-state actors and terrorism. The following are a few likely trends and potential shifts:

8.1. Proliferation of Cyber Terrorism

Indeed, as the world continues to digitalise, the landscape of international security is likely to be further reshaped by the proliferation of cyber-terrorism. The increasing reliance on digital platforms in both private and public sectors is a double-edged sword, enabling efficiency and convenience while simultaneously opening up new avenues for potential attacks. Non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups, have shown a propensity to adapt and exploit technological advancements to further their aims. This trend will likely continue and even escalate. Chawla (2023) refers to cyber-terrorism as the use of information technology by terrorist groups to further their ideological or political agenda. The manifestations of this phenomenon are diverse, encompassing a range of activities such as the targeting of networks and essential infrastructure, as well as the dissemination of extremist ideology and efforts to recruit individuals (Conway et al., 2019). In light of the growing interconnectedness of the world, the consequences of cyber-attacks might extend extensively, potentially causing disruptions to global businesses, governments, and civilisations.

The targets of cyber-terrorism encompass a wide range of entities and systems within the digital realm. The vulnerability of critical infrastructure, including energy grids, transportation networks, and healthcare facilities, is particularly noteworthy due to their indispensable functions within society and the significant ramifications that would result from any form of interruption. Disinformation campaigns, frequently propagated via social media platforms, have the potential to engender social unrest, distort public sentiment, and potentially instigate acts of violence. Moreover, the digital realm provides a certain level of anonymity, which enables the execution of these acts without fear of consequences. Consequently, it becomes very challenging to detect and prohibit such activities (Conway et al., 2019). Given these circumstances, it is important to regard the increased probability of non-state actors turning to cyber-terrorism as a significant concern for the future of global security. Addressing this potential danger necessitates the implementation of comprehensive and multifaceted approaches that incorporate not just technological safeguards but also educational initiatives, legislative measures, and international collaboration.

8.2. Increasing Influence of Transnational Networks

The globalisation of information and commerce has given rise to a complex web of transnational networks that crisscross the globe (Woods & Li, 2024). These networks can take many forms, from the digital connections of the internet to the physical pathways of trade and migration. While these networks have brought about unprecedented levels of interconnectivity and cooperation, they have also opened up new opportunities for exploitation by non-state actors. Non-state actors have demonstrated proficiency in leveraging these global networks to their benefit. Digital platforms can be utilised by individuals or groups to spread propaganda, recruit members, and coordinate various operations. This allows them to extend their influence beyond their immediate physical boundaries. In a similar vein, the physical networks associated with trade and migration can be utilised to engage in arms smuggling, traffic illicit products, and enable the transportation of individuals involved in covert operations. These transnational operations have profound implications for international security. By operating across national borders, non-state actors pose a shared threat to multiple nations. This globalised nature of the threat necessitates a corresponding global response. International cooperation and information sharing become critical in countering these transnational threats. Efforts to combat non-state actors must, therefore, incorporate strategies that foster international collaboration, harmonise legal frameworks, and enhance the capacity for cross-border intelligence sharing. Yet, this is easier said than done. Differences in national priorities, legal systems, and capabilities pose significant challenges to international cooperation. Additionally, the very nature of these transnational networks – diffuse, decentralised, and often obscured – makes them difficult to monitor and control. However, in light of the increasing influence of non-state actors in the international arena, the need for comprehensive and coordinated global responses has never been greater.

8.3. Adapting Tactics in Response to Counter-Terrorism Measures

Non-state actors, particularly terrorist organisations, are known for their adaptability in the face of counter-terrorism measures. As strategies evolve to counter their activities, so too do their methods evolve in response, reflecting a dynamic and constantly shifting threat landscape. In operational strategies, for example, terrorist groups have demonstrated an ability to innovate and adjust their methods based on the changing security environment. In the face of hard-line security measures, they have transitioned from large-scale, highly coordinated attacks to smaller, more dispersed forms of violence, such as lone-actor attacks. These are typically more difficult to predict and prevent, reflecting a strategic adaptation to heightened security measures.

The domains of communication and coordination also necessitate adaptability as a crucial attribute. In response to increased efforts by governments and tech companies to combat terrorist activity on mainstream online platforms, non-state actors (NSAs) have shifted their operations to encrypted platforms and the dark web, where discovery and surveillance pose greater challenges (Stoddart, 2022). Conway et al. (2019) have additionally devised advanced

methodologies for disseminating propaganda and enlisting individuals using online platforms, capitalising on the extensive reach and anonymity allowed by the digital realm. Recruitment strategies have also changed in reaction to counter-terrorism measures. There has been a transition from a strategy of widespread recruitment to a strategy that is more focused and selective, prioritising persons who exhibit a higher propensity for radicalisation. The utilisation of online platforms has played a crucial role in facilitating the ability to connect with and exert influence on individuals on a worldwide level (Fazil et al., 2024; Aondover et al., 2024). The adaptations mentioned above serve to highlight the intricate and enduring nature of the threat posed by non-state actors (NSAs) and terrorism. This is an indication of the necessity of implementing counter-terrorism measures that possess the qualities of flexibility and adaptability, enabling them to successfully address the ever-changing nature of the threat landscape.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The influence of non-state actors, particularly those engaged in terrorism, on contemporary international security is profound. These terrorist groups have reshaped the nature of conflict and posed challenges to state sovereignty. As entities that often operate transnationally, they challenge the traditional state-centric security paradigm, necessitating a reassessment of current strategies and the fostering of increased international cooperation. The non-state actors involved in these activities adopt techniques and tactics that are always evolving, taking advantage of technology innovations, vulnerabilities within states, and divisions within society. The individuals in question have effectively managed and employed these characteristics to sustain their dominance, resulting in a rise in both conflict and instability. The ascent of this phenomenon has brought about a profound alteration in armed conflict, as demonstrated by the increasing intensity of urban warfare and the occurrence of indiscriminate assaults on civilian populations. The ongoing assessment and modification of counter-terrorism measures are important in light of the dynamic nature of security threats. The implementation of these tactics necessitates a careful equilibrium between the attainment of security objectives and the preservation of human rights. This balance is of paramount importance in ensuring the long-term sustainability of peace and security.

However, the significant impact of terrorist organisations as non-state actors on state in international security will persist. The international security landscape is characterised by fluidity and uncertainty due to various factors, including the potential for increased cyber terrorism, heightened exploitation of societal divisions, and the emergence of new tactical responses to counter-terrorism measures. Maintaining a state of perpetual vigilance, agility, and a strong dedication to international collaboration, regulation, and adherence to the rule of law is vital. The impact of non-state actors and the development of terrorism will undeniably shape the course of global security in the foreseeable future. It is imperative for academia, policy-makers, and security practitioners to persistently engage in comprehensive research and analysis of these phenomena to develop efficient and enduring strategies to address the complexities they pose.

Based on the results and discussion of this study, the following policy recommendations were made.

- Efforts should be made to strengthen state governance, particularly in regions experiencing state fragility. By providing adequate public services and tackling corruption, states can minimise the space for non-state actors to operate.
- Policymakers should adopt a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that addresses not only the symptoms but also the root causes of terrorism. This involves addressing socioeconomic inequities, political grievances, and ideological extremism that often serve as drivers of radicalisation.
- Given the transnational nature of non-state actors and terrorism, states must enhance their international cooperation. This could involve sharing intelligence, harmonising legal responses, and collaborating on border controls.
- Any counter-terrorism measure should respect human rights and the rule of law. Abuses or violations can exacerbate grievances and potentially fuel further radicalisation. The UN's policy guidance on human rights compliance while countering terrorism provides a useful framework in this regard.
- Given the increasing threat of cyber terrorism, governments, in partnership with the private sector, should invest in enhancing their cybersecurity infrastructure and capabilities. This includes safeguarding critical infrastructure and countering online radicalisation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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